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Shifting State Plans and the Politics of Street Food Vending in Cuba

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Anthropology

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Abstract

This dissertation examines evolving private sector-state relations in Cuba in the realm of food commercialization through a case study of ambulatory street food vendors known in Cuban parlance as *carretilleros*. The street food vendor job category, authorized by the Cuban government in 2010, is one among a number of newly legal entrepreneurial activities that have been slowly expanding since 1993 when the Cuban government began to experiment with various market reforms. While the incremental legalization of private entrepreneurial activity (or self-employment) in Cuba signals important changes to Cuban employment modalities, street food vendors in particular also suggest a significant shift away from the centralized and redistributive functions of the state as regards food provisioning.

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2016 in Pinar del Rio, Cuba, this research draws on data derived from participant observation, and 84 interviews with *carretilleros*, other food vendors, inspectors, farmers, agricultural cooperative members, agricultural and economics researchers, government bureaucrats, and consumers. This research interrogates the extent to which state policies that are reconfiguring provisioning practices, as well as new entrepreneurs operating within food commercialization (such as street vendors) reflect a shift in not only socioeconomic relations at large among the Cuban populace, but also in the moral contract between the state and citizens in the alimentary realm. Specifically, this work explores the way in which Cubans' perceptions about *carretilleros* illuminate ongoing contradictions between a national morality that foregrounds the collective good and posits the socialist state as the guarantor of redistributive justice, and a market morality, which emphasizes personal (as opposed to collective) advancement and well-being and is theoretically at odds with such justice.

This work shows that *carretilleros* occupy a paradoxical position: they are encouraged as legitimate workers and food distributors, yet heavily restricted by state regulations, as well as publically criticized for the speculative prices they charge for food. As private entrepreneurs, *carretilleros* are critical of state practices that restrict their profit and freedom. They often feel unfairly persecuted by the state, whose failures, in their view, they have helped to mitigate. For all the critiques that Cubans in my study expressed about *carretilleros*, much evidence suggests that despite ongoing tensions between private versus state food commercialization (and private practices and aspirations versus public and state

expectations) *carretilleros*, akin to other “new” private entrepreneurs, have become an integral part of everyday life and discourse in Cuba.

The street vendor case study, finally, provides an opportunity to explore unresolved tensions and practical challenges associated with implementing private sector reforms in the field of food commercialization, a field that continues to be of strategic importance to the Cuban socialist system.

Keywords

Cuba, Socialism, Food, Self-Employment, Street Vendors, Entrepreneurship, Illegality, Citizen-State Relations, Moral Economy, Anthropology of the State.

Dedication

For my family.

Acknowledgments

Many people and institutions played an integral role in the development of this research project. First and foremost, I acknowledge the research participants whose willingness to share their lives and experiences, knowledge, and time is invaluable. The sheer breadth of ethnographic material that has brought life to this text and rigor to this analysis is due to their contributions.

The evolution of my project follows a trajectory of 5 years that began with a chance meeting in an ecological living and learning center in rural New Brunswick in 2012. Brought together by a mutual interest in permaculture, it was at this center that I met a fellow enthusiast who became my Cuban University mentor, guide and friend. From carting me around to different research sites on his motorbike to practically holding my hand when I finally ventured out on bicycle to navigate what seemed to be chaotic and disorderly streets in Pinar del Rio, I am eternally grateful for his support. Among the many other professors and administrative staff at the Universidad de Pinar del Rio who facilitated this research, I must also sincerely thank those in the Faculty of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences, the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences, and International Relations.

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Lastly to those in Cuba, I express my heartfelt thanks to my extended Cuban family who welcomed me into their homes, helped me to navigate not only daily struggles but also social nuances, and provided matter-of-fact information when I found myself simply confounded by any number of circumstances.

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Chapter 1

1 The Changing Contents of the *Canasta Básica* (basic food basket)

On a stifling, hot afternoon in late July 2015, ten months into my fieldwork, I sat and talked casually with a street vendor in a small urban neighborhood in Pinar del Rio, Cuba. As we made small talk, a woman in her late 60s or early 70s came walking, limping slightly, across the street toward us. Eyeing the large wooden cart loaded up with fresh fruits and vegetables, she told the vendor to weigh ten pesos (CUP) worth of cassava, and that she would buy one pound of lemons. When he suggested that she buy two pounds of lemons instead of just one she responded, “No, you’re the assassin! You should give me a pound for free!” The street vendor and I both had a little chuckle at the woman’s bluntness as she gamboled haughtily away with her goods. This exchange between consumer and street vendor was indeed mildly humorous, even to the woman who smirked at her clever metaphor as though the vendor were killing her with his elevated prices. It is also consistent with many exchanges I observed between street vendors and consumers in Cuba, who often express a certain ironical sense of humor regarding daily struggles, such as purchasing food at prices that are increasingly unsubsidized. This exchange and others like it not only signal Cuba’s shifting food policy, that of late has placed more of the onus of provisioning onto individuals, but also the controversial nature of Cuba’s street vendors. Notably, this controversy is intimately linked to the ambivalent way in which not only consumers and the populace at large, but also the Cuban state considers small entrepreneurial activity, particularly within the food distribution sector.¹

¹ *Comercialización* (commercialization) in Cuba refers to both marketing and distribution; thus, I use the terms distribution and commercialization interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

In 2010, the Cuban government legalized the street vendor job category (known as *carretillos* in the Cuban context)² as one among a suite of newly legalized entrepreneurial activities that has been rolling out in spurts, so to speak, since 1993. While the incremental legalization of entrepreneurial activity (or self-employment) in Cuba signals important changes to Cuban employment modalities, street vendors are also indicative of a gradual shift away from the centralized and redistributive functions of the state as regards food provisioning. Officially, the *objeto social* (social purpose)³ of street vendors is to facilitate the distribution of food whereby they are permitted to sell a selection of domestically produced fruits and vegetables privately, at prices set by supply and demand. This service provided by street vendors is complementary to food services offered by the state and fits within national policy linked to food security, which fundamentally revolves around access to food. The business of street vending, the private sale of food, however, has also been linked to emerging inequities. Wilson (2014, 23) ties such inequities in general to shifting state responsibilities: “the increasing number of workers employed ‘*por cuenta propia*’ (literally, on one’s own account; also called *particulares*) have escalated inequalities, redirecting the power of allocation from the state to individuals.” As *cuentapropistas*, then, street vendors represent a gradual and not seamless move away from what Wilson (2014, 23) describes as a national moral economy that revolves around principles of collectivity and redistributive justice. In this way, street vendors occupy an in-between or perhaps frontier space within a society that has introduced some market mechanisms but remains ambivalent as to the consequences of such changes. Given this transitional situation characterized by food policy reform and the increasing private sale and distribution of food, the general objectives of this dissertation are to examine perceptions regarding food privatization (by focusing on

² In the Cuban context, various types of street vendors sell food, such as both ambulatory and stationary vendors of prepared foods and drinks, and fresh produce. However, for the purposes of this dissertation “street vendor” and “*carretillo*” are used interchangeably to refer particularly to self-employed ambulatory vendors of fresh, domestic produce.

³ The concept of *objeto social*, or social purpose in the context of Cuba’s socialist Revolution revolves around framing particular social phenomena (initiatives, programs, laws, employment, etc.) in terms of the collective, or the benefit it has for society at large. This concept is illustrative of the extent to which the social collective is valued over the individual in Cuban socialism.

street vendor entrepreneurs) that may illuminate how Cubans are processing changing citizen-state relations; and to explore the extent to which comparing state and nonstate⁴ food provisioning outlets (in both material and discursive terms) can provide insight into the evolution of Cuba's private sector. Ultimately, I argue that both state policies that are reconfiguring provisioning practices, as well as new entrepreneurs operating within the food distribution sector reflect a shift in not only social-economic relations at large among the Cuban population, but also in the moral contract between the state and citizens.

In what follows, I first position my research within relevant historical and contemporary events, and explore debates regarding Cuban economic reform as a prescription for the transition to capitalism. Next, I outline the relationship between the moral economy of the socialist state and policy reform, and also deal with the concept of the state as it emerges in this text, which is intimately linked to the way Cubans understand and talk about it. The following section provides a brief description of Pinar del Rio as the field site for this project, and delves into the link between my positionality, methodology, and challenges to interpretation that ensued from conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the unique Cuban context. Finally, I provide a short sketch of each of the four ethnographic chapters that comprise this text.

⁴ Cuba's official nonstate sector refers to licensed entrepreneurs (including the self-employed and non-agricultural cooperative workers/ members), private and cooperative farmers, and joint venture employees.

1.1 Reforms of the Revolutionary Government



Revolutionary slogan: "Revolution is to change everything that should be changed," Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015⁵

Since Cuba's 1959 Revolution, the country has been successful in institutionalizing "a massive social welfare program," which has been partly reliant on the centralized food system (Brotherton 2012, 113). The Cuban government implemented *Acopio* as the main food collection enterprise, as well as rationing in 1962. Cubans and the government alike refer to the list of rationed items (usually available on a monthly basis) as the *canasta básica* or the basic food basket, to which every Cuban has equal rights. The centralized food system has been touted as the "cornerstone of the Cuban model, providing subsidized food items for all households" (Riera and Swinnen 2016, 414). The extent to which the early rationing system was able to fulfill Cubans' needs is debatable.

Nevertheless, Benjamin, Collins and Scott (1986, 56) claim that by the late 1970s the Cuban government fulfilled the citizenry's basic needs. It is not unrelated that by 1972, Cuba's link to the Soviet Union was in a sense cemented by their integration into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA)⁶. Subsequently, Cuba's small island

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all translations within this dissertation are my own.

⁶The CMEA was a trading network formed by the Soviet Union in 1949 (Cuba became a member country in 1972) with the purpose of coordinating economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and member countries (Kapcia 2008, 37). It is also important to stress that the CMEA was not Cuba's sole means of

economy became highly dependent on this trade network for oil, manufactures and other goods, such as food imports. The dissolution of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991, then, ultimately plunged Cuba into an economic crisis that the Cuban government euphemistically dubbed *el período especial* (the Special Period) as a result of the wartime economic measures it necessitated. Highlighting the magnitude of the collapse, Kapcia (2008, 157) notes that, “CMEA imports plummeted by over a half in two years, affecting everything in an economy that, since 1972, had relied on [the] CMEA.” Food imports dramatically declined, as did domestic food production, which had been “integrated into international chains of production that necessitated certain imports like fertilizers, pesticides, and petroleum for farm machinery” (Castiñeiras García 2013, 152). To cite only a few of the most staggering impacts, daily caloric intake reportedly dropped from “3,100 calories in 1989 to fewer than 1,800 in 1993,” food rations were “severely curtailed,” and nutritional deficiencies resulted in an epidemic (optic neuropathy) that affected over fifty thousand people causing temporary blindness (Brotherton 2012, 18, 194n.1; Hernandez-Reguant 2009). Indeed, the anecdotes detailing Special Period scarcity often hinge on livelihood strategies of raising pigs or chickens in small apartment bathrooms or balconies in order to deal with extreme food shortages (Premat 2012; 2005; personal communication, agricultural extension worker, *Sanidad Vegetal*, 2012), or more outrageous stories of substituting *el plato fuerte* (literally the strong plate, or protein component of meals) with the rinds of grapefruit, seasoning and frying them.⁷ Thus, in line with the revolutionary government’s continued commitment to food security, strategies to address food shortages revolved around adapting dietary habits, in addition to transitioning to a low-input form of agriculture, and

trade; Wright (2009, 58), for example, provides a long list of European trading partners, other than those belonging to the CMEA.

⁷ The anecdotal nature of such stories is debatable. For example, Hernandez-Reguant (2009, 4) writes that, “To address the emergence of malnutrition-related illnesses, the media sought to reeducate the population’s eating habits, promoting such recipes as sweet potato leaf salad, mashed banana peel, and *fried grapefruit peel*” (my emphasis). In addition, Nitza Villapol is a well-known Cuban chef who, through cookbooks and television, showed “how to cook with a drastically restricted set of ingredients during and after the economic crisis of the 1990s” (Garth 2014, 359).

boosting domestic food production (Funes et al. 2002, 7). Moreover, measures to improve Cuba's economic independence and efficiency were implemented.

The first wave of economic reforms were largely initiated in 1993, and revolved around small scale market liberalization and privatization, albeit with different implications for the external and domestic spheres⁸. External market reforms have revolved around opening to foreign investment and technology,⁹ and authorizing joint ventures; and the decentralization of trade, in terms of ceding foreign firms the right to freely negotiate deals (Quiñones Chang 2013, 100; Mesa-Lago 2006, 160; Eckstein 1997, 140). More recently, and consistent with the move to attract foreign capital, in 2014 the Cuban government backed with funds from Brazil's National Economic and Social Development Bank, began development of *el Mariel*, a commercial port located in Havana.¹⁰ Despite the commercial and symbolic significance of opening *el Mariel*, the event that incurred most media coverage during my fieldwork involved what has been dubbed *la normalización* (the normalization) of relations between Cuba and the U.S.¹¹ As part of this process, the Obama administration eased travel and trade restrictions on Cuba, and removed it from an official list of terrorism sponsors, and both governments reopened their embassies. While the U.S. embargo initiated in 1960 remains intact and continues to limit Cuba's capacity to trade, such changes signal Cuba's evolving geopolitical position that has implications for the island's trajectory of economic development.

⁸ While the external and domestic economic spheres are not exclusive, I distinguish between them here for analytical purposes.

⁹ More recently and the subject of much media discussion throughout my fieldwork, in 2014 Decree-Law 118 was passed with the intention of slackening controls on foreign investment, in order to attract foreign capital (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2014).

¹⁰ *El Mariel* was made famous as the site of a mass emigration of Cubans to the U.S. in 1980 when Fidel Castro made a public demonstration of allowing Cubans who wanted to leave to do so freely. Given this history, the symbolic significance of *el Mariel* as a commercial port reflects a potential shift in mentality of the current government under Raúl Castro.

¹¹ The initiation of normalization coincided with Raúl Castro's public announcement in December 2014 that the remaining three of Cuba's five heroes had been returned to *la patria* (the homeland). The five heroes were convicted of espionage in 1998, and detained on U.S. soil.

With reference to the domestic economy, reforms have partly revolved around providing entrepreneurial opportunities tied to the private ownership and sale of property, goods and services, and decentralizing agricultural lands. In terms of the former, between 1993 and 1995 the range of permitted self-employed activities expanded quite substantially and in terms of the food service sector, included private restaurateurs and café owners (Ritter 1998, 77; Scarpaci 1995). More recently, as of 2010, self-employed job categories have expanded to include 201 permitted activities. Other reforms essentially removed the intermediary role of the state by facilitating direct contact between producers and service providers, and consumers. State enterprises, and those of the Ministry of Internal Trade (*Ministerio de comercio interno*, MINCIN), local enterprises, and independent producers were permitted to rent space in designated market areas to sell their products (Ritter 1998, 70, 79). By 1994 free farmer's markets were opened, and more recently as of 2013 farmers producing for the tourist sector are no longer obliged to sell only to state enterprises but can make contracts to sell directly to hotels (Wilson 2014, 165; personal communication, hotel manager, July 2013). In terms of the agricultural commercialization sector, various reforms that revolve around developing the nonstate sector have been implemented, such as new models of management whereby the state no longer holds a monopoly on food distribution. With reference to decentralizing lands, in 1994 the Cuban government initiated a land redistribution process with the purpose of putting idle lands to agricultural use in both rural and urban sectors; these new smallholders are commonly referred to as *parceleros*. In 2008, the law was revised to also include independent and cooperative farmers as eligible recipients of state lands should they wish to increase the size of their productive lands (Wilson 2014, 158; González 2012, 82). In short, there has been a decentralization of the Cuban food system and a diversification of economic actors (state and private) permitted to participate in the production and sale of food.

1.2 Updating Socialism



“Update its [Cuba’s] economic model to be more socialist,”
Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2014

Cuba’s development of a mixed economy that integrates market features with central planning has often been linked to deterministic debates regarding economic transition. Thus far, the literature that interrogates the likelihood of the island’s transition from socialism to capitalism tends to trace the state’s penchant for reform and reversal, a veritable battle between Cuba’s historically vulnerable geopolitical position that has necessitated market reform, and the desire to maintain a socialist economy (Morris 2008; Mesa-Lago 2006; Corrales 2004; Cruz and Seleny 2002). This cycle of market reform and reversal, or of economic opening and closing, is reflected in Cuba’s history of permitting and restricting (or at times outlawing) private economic activity in the agricultural and self-employment sectors. Until the early 1980s, private agricultural and entrepreneurial activities operated under strict limitations and were highly contained as a result of revolutionary policies that sought to correct and eliminate the “capitalist mentality” from Cuban society. Nevertheless by 1980, and due to consumer pressures for greater access to higher-quality goods with more variety (Benjamin, Collins and Scott 1986, 59), restrictions on the private sale of products, artisanal as well as agricultural, were conditionally lifted and free agricultural markets were opened (Ritter 1998, 70; Pérez-López 1995, 92). At the markets, “private farmers, cooperatives, state farms, and owners of small pieces of land [could] sell their surplus (above state quotas) directly to

consumers” (Ritter 1998, 70). The subsequent closure of these markets in 1986 for a variety of reasons, such as unreasonably high food prices, coincided with the Cuban government’s launch of what it deemed a process of Rectification. This process was geared at righting “errors and negative tendencies” associated with an emerging “trend toward mercantilism and economism” (Eckstein 1994, 61; also see Chomsky 2011; Pérez-López 1995). It is telling that Cuba’s Rectification campaign coincided with Mikhail Gorbachev’s endorsement of economic and political liberalization, which ultimately led to the break-up of the socialist bloc (Eckstein 1994, 60). Thus, Cuba began to diverge from its historic counterpart, the Soviet Union by stressing more orthodox policies revolving around “moral incentives, an expansion of the state’s role in the economy, and collective and voluntary labor” (Eckstein 1994, 60). Although the *periodo especial* derailed Cuba’s efforts at Rectification, the contradictory pull between reform and reversal continued, and is inevitably linked to the consistent endeavor to perfect or update the Cuban socialist system in the face of economic challenge.

Parallels have been drawn between China’s state-centered reform process and Cuba’s approach, despite that Cuba’s Special Period reforms “did not reach the scope and depth of reforms in China and Vietnam, and even less so those in Eastern Europe” (Mesa-Lago 2006, 161). What distinguishes the cases of Cuba and China from that of Russia is the extent to which government intervention drives reform: “In China the party-state has made possible the decentralization of property relations... whereas in Russia the disintegration of the party-state has led to privatization” (Burawoy 1996, 1105; see also Guthrie 2010). According to some scholars, Cuba’s Special Period invoked a level of state withdrawal that has been interpreted as an indication of a weakened state apparatus.¹² Routon (2010, 4) writes for instance that, “Facing the threat of total economic ruin, the Cuban state was forced to momentarily suspend its micromanaging of the domestic economy as it struggled to find new sources of revenue. As the state faded into the background of everyday life, so did much of the socialist ethos it had spent the

¹² Several scholars are critical of what Brotherton (2012, 8) refers to as “the dyadic model of the transition from the strong state to the weak state,” which reinforces notions that the state is monolithic and static (see also Painter 2006, 755; Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 996).

better part of three decades trying to cultivate in the populace.” On the contrary, and specific to the private sector, others point out that the fallout of reforms implemented in the 1990s further entrenched Cuban state power (Premat 2012; Corrales 2004; Cruz and Seleny 2002). In this sense, it was assumed that the introduction of market features would reduce the level of regulation in (post)socialist countries,¹³ yet many scholars report stricter regulations within the context of economic reform and opening (Caldwell 2009; 2002; Dunn 2009; Jung 2009; Mincyte 2009; Corrales 2004; Cruz and Seleny 2002; Humphrey 1999; Ritter 1998). The current historical juncture at which Cuba sits is complex in that the move toward decentralization is state-driven; yet, the extent to which decentralization will erode the socialist state system is difficult to predict. It is notable that unprecedented changes such as the normalization of Cuba-U.S. relations forecast a new era for the island, in addition to Raúl Castro’s decidedly more pragmatic approach to economic reform than his brother’s (Ritter and Henken 2015). Nonetheless, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s recent visit to the island (November 2016) during which Raúl Castro insisted upon a slow and steady reform process, suggests the Cuban government’s commitment to the maintenance of a socialist economy. It is important to stress that my intention is not to fall into deterministic thinking regarding the Cuban economy, nor to take a position on the likelihood of transition to capitalism. Rather I align my thinking with Gold (2015, 4) who notes that, “Understanding Cuba as a society in transition portrays the island as inevitably moving toward a more democratic, capitalist, market-driven economy. However, in the short history of the Cuban Revolution, there is hardly a period of stability longer than five years.” She (2015, 4) goes onto explain that the Revolution should not be simply understood in terms of a “change of government, but rather as an ideology of change,” as can be garnered from the slogans represented in photos herein (“Revolution is to change everything that should be changed”). From this perspective, the Cuban state’s adaptability to evolving local and global contexts becomes

¹³ In using the term (post)socialism, my intention is not to fall into the implied logic that countries like Cuba are inevitably bound to become market capitalisms, nor to imply that “a ‘postsocialist’ cultural form is somehow distinctive and definitive” (Caldwell 2009, 3; also see Thelen 2011). Rather, I follow Caldwell (2009; 2002) and Wilson (2014) and use the term “(post)socialism” for the sake of simplicity, and to encapsulate the many other terms used to describe countries like Cuba (state socialism; market socialism; hybrid socialism; late socialism).

the focus of analysis (Wilson 2014, 25 and Brotherton 2012, 185 make similar points, as does Eckstein 1994 regarding the Cuban state's pragmatism).

1.3 Food and Socialist Morality in Cuba



Consumers wait in line to purchase eggs, *Mercado Ideal* (state subsidized market), Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

The Cuban state's ambivalence toward economic reforms has been explored in terms of a contradiction between moral economies: a national morality tied to the socialist tenet of redistributive justice, and the morality of the market, which is theoretically at odds with such justice. To this point, Wilson (2014, 21) contends that "The national moral economy that structures (rather than determines) systems of provisioning in Cuba stands in direct contrast to liberal economic thought, which treats food as a commodity accessible to anyone with enough hard cash, regardless of their moral standing." It is not unrelated that food is central to the "socialist form of political engagement" (Caldwell 2009, 5; see also Osokina 2001; Verdery 1996). As Caldwell (2002, 298) explains, "One element common to Soviet-style societies was that the state established itself as the provider for citizens' needs by owning and operating all aspects of production and distribution." Moreover, Klein, Jung and Caldwell (2014, 9) argue that the "moral commitment of the communist party-state to provide adequate sustenance to the people... was absolutely key to the

relationship between state and people throughout the socialist world and underpinned the food systems of these countries.” Indeed, the centralized food system is deeply embedded within the social and ideological fabric of Cuba’s socialism, and is the backdrop against which one can begin to understand the ramifications of food policy reform and the politics of street vending. Throughout my fieldwork, I stood in many line-ups for hours, waiting to buy restricted foods like eggs and meat, only to find on various occasions that products ran out before everyone in line was served; each line-up confronted me with the experience of depending on the state for distribution of scarce items. People in line with the misfortune of not being served were often disgruntled, understandably so, and tended to place blame on not only scarce state resources but also the lack of state intervention to prevent consumer “hoarding,” or purchasing in bulk (as illustrated in the photo below).



One person who has purchased six flats of eggs (216 eggs),
Mercado Ideal, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

Parallel to Thompson’s (1971) work on food riots in 18th century England, such consumer “outrage” is equally linked to Cuba’s prevalent moral economy of food as it is to “actual deprivations” (1971, 79). In this context, part of the emotionally charged situation surrounding street vendors is tied to incremental changes to the state’s

responsibility as main food manager, which is in part interpreted among the citizenry as further reducing equal access to an already limited food supply (rather than augmenting it, as is the intention of reforms).

In the (post)socialist context, scholars have argued that as a result of the introduction of market mechanisms, a moral dilemma between collectivism and individualism (Klein, Jung, and Caldwell 2014) or as Wilson (2014, 153) terms it, between “welfare and market circuits... of value” emerges. Wilson (2014, 10) argues that the quotidian experience of Cuba’s evolving economy is characterized by contradiction between these circuits of value. Such contradiction hinges on the re-emergence of inequalities and some re-stratification of society reminiscent of Cuba’s pre-Revolutionary period as a result of economic reforms, and differential access to the market and “dollars”¹⁴ (Wilson 2014; Brotherton 2012; Suárez 2011; Weinreb 2009; Roland 2006; Berg 2004). Unlike academic emphasis on the dollar economy, the street vendor case study I present, and the contradictions I seek to unveil pertain to the peso economy.¹⁵ Street vendors, for the most part, operate in Cuban pesos given that domestically produced food is still predominantly sold in this currency. Nevertheless, the introduction of market mechanisms within food distribution means that many Cubans are not able to purchase unsubsidized foods consistently, regardless of the currency in which they are sold. As Wilson (2014, 19) highlights,

Food is politically important because differential access to food is experienced as an embodied form of exclusion. Food is a special kind of object in both its commoditized and non-commoditized forms. As a commodity – something with an exchange value or price – it stands in stark contrast to other commodities like

¹⁴ In 1993, during the full wake of the economic crisis, the Revolutionary government implemented a dual currency system legalizing possession and use of foreign currency. In 2004, as a result of various negative impacts on the economy and emergent structural inequalities, the circulation of foreign currency was banned and the Cuban Convertible (CUC) Peso was introduced (all foreign currency must now be converted to CUC) (Rodríguez 2013, 40-2).

¹⁵ Notably, this project also makes a contribution to social science research regarding small food entrepreneurs in Cuba, which to date has been relatively sparse (Torres et al. 2010, 75; Scarpaci 1995, 2009).

tablet computers. It is not only physiologically essential, but also a powerful symbol of social conditions such as ‘luxury and lack’ (Mansvelt 2005, 95), dependence and autonomy... As such, food is an important lens through which socio-political relations may be studied.

Thus, I argue that food policy reforms linked to the decentralization of food commercialization not only shift livelihood strategies more decisively onto the individual and away from the state, but also reveal unresolved tensions between market reforms and socialist ideals in the realm of food. Experimentation with free agricultural markets is not new within the revolutionary context; nevertheless, market principles such as “supply and demand” applied particularly to food are nascent in Cuban society, and result in many consumers, such as the woman figured in the opening anecdote, feeling as though they are somehow being cheated. In this sense, mistrust of the emergent private sector in food evidences the citizenry’s emotional stake in the Cuban state’s continued responsibility and role as manager of food distribution.

1.4 *El Estado*

In practice it proves exceptionally difficult to determine what people mean by the term state (Krupa and Nugent 2015, 2).

In order to unearth the significance of the citizenry’s emotional investment in the state as guarantor of food security, an understanding of how Cubans generally consider *el estado* is relevant. The way in which mention of the state emerges in this text unequivocally reflects Cubans’ perceptions on the subject: for Cubans, *el estado* is a dominant, monolithic entity that not only acts with intentionality but is also erratic and unpredictable at times. Indeed, as an anthropologist immersed in the Cuban context for months at a time, I came to share to some extent the quotidian experience of the state as omnipresent. To this point, Painter (2006, 757) aptly argues that “Reified understandings of the state are extremely persistent” and as such “are socially significant.” This research project, then, explores how people come to local understandings of the state in Cuba. In order to do so, Abrams’ (1988, 82) thinking on the distinction between the state-system

and the state-idea, what he calls the “claimed reality of the state,” is a useful starting point. Abrams (1988, 82) postulates that “There *is* a state-system... a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centered in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society... There *is*, too, a state-idea, projected, purveyed and variously believed in different societies at different times.” People come to an understanding of the state-idea through their experiences with the state-system and state agents, as Auyero (2012, 6) argues: “institutional forms, organizational structures, and capacities are indeed important, but so is what the state *means* to people who inhabit it. And these meanings are constituted out of ‘files, orders, memos, statistics, reports, petitions, inspections, inaugurations, and transfers, the humdrum routines of bureaucracies and bureaucrats’ encounters with citizens’.”¹⁶

Recent scholarship draws attention to a lacuna in the ethnographic literature regarding how people come to know and imagine the state (Krupa and Nugent 2015; Ferguson 2006; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gupta 1995). Ferguson and Gupta (2002, 983) note for example, that “understanding of the social practices through which... images [of the state] are made effective and experienced is less developed” in the academic literature. With the intention of contributing to the development of such understanding, I follow scholars like Ferguson (2006), Ferguson and Gupta (2002), and Krupa and Nugent (2015, 6) who endorse close attendance “to the social space of lived governmental and nongovernmental encounters... to ask about the conditions that (may) make the state appear present in everyday social relations.” Such attendance may provide insight into “how the state is apprehended—how it is granted objective, known status, is ‘seen’ and experienced as such—by governed and governing populations” (Krupa and Nugent 2015, 6). It is notable that through close attention to such encounters, what Painter (2006) terms

¹⁶ Please note that my intention is not to fall into what Painter describes as the “institutional approach” to thinking about the state. Painter (2006, 756) explains that, “State theory has typically posited the state either as an organizational actor in its own right, or as a set of organizational resources through which other agents (such as classes or elite) act. In both cases, the state is seen as consisting of a more or less coherent matrix of institutions.” This institutional approach limits the state to “a set of organizations that are conventionally understood to make up the state” (Painter 2006, 756). Rather what I am interested in is exploring how people come to envision, understand and have an “idea” about the state, part of which happens through interactions with institutions and state agents.

“prosaic practices,” the multifarious nature of the state emerges: “Understanding states in terms of prosaic practices reveals their heterogeneous, constructed, porous, uneven, processual and relational character” (Painter 2006, 754; see also Gupta 1995). Ultimately, by exploring encounters between state agents and street vendors in the context of shifting private-state sector relations, this research project provides insight into the way in which state institutions and agents are experienced as representative of a monolithic, albeit contradictory, state.

1.5 Field Site and Activities



Capital city Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2014

Unfolding over several fieldwork sessions from 2013 to 2016, the research for this project took place in the city of Pinar del Rio, Cuba located in the island’s western-most province (also named Pinar del Rio).¹⁷ Among Cuba’s sixteen provinces, Pinar del Rio

¹⁷ My familiarity with the Cuban context also derives from the MA research I conducted in the province of *Sancti Spiritus* in 2010 and 2011, in addition to my participation as an international development intern at a project in Pinar del Rio from August to December 2012. Notably, it was through this internship experience

has the ninth largest population at 589,664 compared with the national population of 11,238,317 (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014). According to the living memory of *Pinareños* (locals of Pinar del Rio) resources historically flowed from Santiago to the capital city of Havana (east to west) and stopped short of Pinar del Rio, last in line after Havana. To this day, Pinar del Rio is rumored to be one of the least developed provinces on the island, and even the urban center has a decidedly small-town, parochial feel to it. The fact that Pinar del Río is considered an agriculturally specialized province in tobacco production, which was not prioritized during Cuba's heyday of sugar production (during both the colonial period and the early days of the socialist Revolution), also apparently contributed to its neglect. The emphasis on tobacco production, resulting in a lack of specialization in food production, is often highlighted among municipal agricultural authorities and farmers as one of the factors impacting low food production levels and shortages in Pinar del Rio. Nevertheless, recent statistics reflect a downtrend in tobacco production and an upward trend in certain foods, such as vegetables in both state and nonstate sectors, and root crops, black beans and fruits in the nonstate sector (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014). It is also worth noting that proportionally speaking in 2014 Pinar del Rio produced 65% of the national domestic production of tobacco, 22% of that of seasonal vegetables (*hortalizas*), 8% of that of both rice and root crops, and 3% of that of fruits (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014).¹⁸ It is notable that foods that are not produced in Pinar del Rio, such as potatoes, impact the frequency with which, and the quantity in which, they are available from the state centralized mechanisms of procurement and distribution; given that they are linked into out-of-province food distribution networks, street vendors are perceived as one means to fill the gap in a sense. Parallel to the increase in certain food crops produced within the nonstate sector, in terms of food distribution, among the

that I came to know my Cuban mentor and friend who facilitated my research in Pinar del Rio. All of my combined experiences amount to roughly 24 months living in Cuba.

¹⁸ Please note that these proportions are based on my own calculations done using statistical functions in Excel.

majority of Pinar del Rio's 19,974 registered self-employed workers are those that work in the elaboration and sale of food, and street vending (Chiralde López, 2015; Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014). As of December 2014, the municipality of Pinar del Rio had approximately 340 street vendors, and it was estimated that seventy percent of these work within city limits (interview, employee, municipal Department of Labour and Social Security, December 2015). As such, they constitute a visibly dominant group of economic actors, having to walk usually only a few feet from one's front door to encounter one. Certainly the sheer volume of *carretilleros* in Pinar del Rio made it relatively easy to access them; however, other factors made it difficult to build friendships and rapport with them, which I expand upon below.

I employed an ethnographic methodology that principally included unstructured and semi-structured interviews, participant-observation and photography, and the collection of regional newspapers in print (Gupta 1995, 377 highlights the methodological utility of the newspaper as a “widely distributed cultural text”).¹⁹ To a lesser extent, I also did archival research, and collected participant diaries from average Cuban consumers.²⁰ I anchored this project around street vendors as self-employed actors

¹⁹ In terms of reading regional newspapers, it is well-known that Cuban media outlets are not governed by the concept of free press. Nonetheless, systematically reading a series of regional newspapers (*Granma* that is published daily, *Juventud Rebelde*, *Trabajadores*, and Pinar del Rio's local paper *Guerrillero* all three of which are published weekly) was methodologically beneficial for a number of reasons. Reading the papers allowed me to stay up to date on current events; provided a measure of corroboration for some of the information I was receiving from study participants; allowed me to assess the validity of some gossip (*chisme*) that is characteristic of small towns, such as Pinar del Rio where information is often passed verbally; and allowed me to trace state-legitimated and condoned discourses regarding economic and food policy changes.

²⁰ Archival research took place in Pinar del Rio's public library, and a smaller library dedicated to law resources (known as *la casa de la jurista*, or the house of the jurist). Between these two libraries, I gained access to dated regional newspapers, and law documents detailing recent and historical reform laws. Given that access to local media and policy reports from outside the island can be difficult, my general purpose in conducting archival research was to trace the history of permitting and restricting entrepreneurial activities. In addition, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of consumer provisioning practices I asked a select number of consumers to keep a week-long diary of where and when they bought food, the specific items, and prices (see Davidson and Krull 2011 for an anthropological example of the use of this method). While my goal was to assess the relative importance of street vendors for provisioning purposes, the diaries did not prove to be informative for various reasons that include, low level of participation (of the 30 participants I recruited to keep diaries, only 21 followed through); I also became aware that one week does not accurately reflect provisioning practices because, for example, rations are not necessarily available on a strict weekly schedule.

that signal changes to the previously dominant state sector (in terms of both employment, and the partial decentralization of food procurement and distribution) but also sought to include as diverse a set of perspectives and voices linked with the Cuban food system as possible. While I was cognizant of the people I might like to interview (in terms of their professions, for example) I used a snowball sampling technique. The majority of my sample is comprised of 24 street vendor participants with whom I typically conducted two interviews each lasting between 45 minutes to an hour, and also interacted with on a regular basis as most of them were located within my regular commute patterns. I also conducted interviews with agricultural cooperative presidents and producers,²¹ and agricultural market vendors, and collected food diaries from consumers. In addition, I sought out low level bureaucrats, including employees from the municipal Ministry of Agriculture (MINAG) office, the local president of the state collection enterprise *Acopio*, the local Director of the various crops enterprise (*Empresa de Cultivos Varios*), the municipal president of the Association of Small Producers (ANAP),²² and agricultural market administrators. I also spoke with an employee in the municipal Department of Labour and Social Security (*Dirección Municipal de Trabajo y Seguridad Social*), a local union representative, a general inspector (*Dirección de Supervisión Integral*), and an employee of the local Urban Planning office (*Planificación Física*), which provided insight into administrative and regulatory processes regarding private workers, and street vendors in particular.²³ Finally, I interviewed professors at the Universidad de Pinar del

²¹ The farming cooperative presidents and producers in my sample belong to Credit and Service Cooperatives (CCS). In the CCS model, producers typically own their land or hold it in usufruct, are able to sell excess produce freely once they have complied with state contracts, and profit individually (after they pay a certain fee to the cooperative) for produce sold.

²² Please note that Cuba's Association of Small Producers (ANAP) is not technically a state organization but is a non-governmental organization. Nevertheless, in the context of civil society- state relations in Cuba, organizations like ANAP are generally considered "arms" of the state apparatus; thus, I include the ANAP president I interviewed as a low-level bureaucrat here for the sake of simplicity (Dilla and Oxhorn 2002; Hearn 2008; and Kpcia 2008 explore civil society-state relations in Cuba).

²³ In terms of the low-level bureaucrats in my sample, I was usually only able to gain access to one informant per organization. Thus, there is the potential that their perspectives as reflected here could bias the results of this research. In order to prevent bias, I endeavored to substantiate information provided by these informants through media and legal documents, and also considered their perspectives complementary to other groups of participants wherein the sample was larger (the local president of the state collection enterprise *Acopio* and cooperative presidents, for example).

Rio (UPR) in the Faculty of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences, and the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences in order to obtain professional perspectives on trends that I was witnessing and exploring. Although it is difficult to quantify fieldwork activities given that one is immersed in the study population, in total I worked with 88 participants, and conducted 84 formal interviews with 67 of those participants. In terms of their demographics, it is useful to group them as such: street vendors (24 participants), low level bureaucrats (17 participants), professors (6 participants), consumers (21 participants), farmers (10 participants) and farming cooperative presidents (4 participants), and agricultural market vendors (6). Over half of my informants were males (58 of 87), the majority of whom were middle-aged (42 of 58), with the exception of consumers and street vendors. The majority of consumers (19 of 21) were females that ranged in ages (from 16 to 76 years old) and educational background (from middle school graduates to university graduates). Street vendor participants were mostly male (22 of 24) that ranged in age from 20 years old to 70 years old, with a median age of 31 years old. The two female street vendors I worked with were 26 and 46 years old. The fact that I encountered only one other female street vendor during my field research helps to confirm Gold's (2015, 79) observation that the division of labour in Cuba's self-employed sector is often gendered (the ratio of women to men, however, may differ depending on the sector).

Akin to the diversity of participants that comprise my sample, participant-observation activities were varied. More structured activities revolved around consistently visiting *carretilleros* as they worked, visiting the state agricultural market on a weekly basis, and standing in lengthy line-ups for centrally distributed products, in addition to visiting other local markets on a less frequent basis, traveling with MINAG staff on field visits to farms, and participating in university events within the faculty of Agronomy and Forestry Sciences, such as farmer's markets that took place monthly, and gender awareness workshops in a local farming community. I had originally conceived of shadowing *carretilleros* throughout their daily routine (sourcing merchandise, travelling around the city for sales, and end-of-day storage of unsold merchandise) in order to understand the organizational logic of their distribution networks from their perspective (Mincyte 2009). It became clear, however, that I was not going to be able to shadow

carretilleros for several reasons (logistical and a general hesitancy expressed on the part of *carretilleros*). Nevertheless, I was able to gain an understanding of their business organization and practices by conversing with them regularly. Moreover, by conducting consistent observations with street vendors, at the state agricultural market and other nonstate markets, I was able to record products and prices with the purpose of comparing state and nonstate commercialization outlets.

1.6 Positioning the Researcher

My fieldwork experiences were partly shaped by the various ways in which I was perceived in Cuba: rich tourist, young Caucasian female, Canadian with a Cuban partner, and foreign researcher to name a few. It is the latter two of these statuses that I will explore in depth, given that they have most resonance in terms of positioning my research. First, I met my partner, a Cuban from Pinar del Rio, during the summer of 2012 while I was participating in an international development internship. My status as a woman with a Cuban “husband” (*esposa/o* or wife/husband are the terms usually applied to partners who live together, as opposed to simply *novia/o* or girl/boyfriend), living in a typical Cuban home afforded me a certain level of trust among the locals. In fact, when discussing hardships considered as unique to the Cuban context, informants often conceded to me, “*Tu vives aqui, tu entiendes*” (you live here, you understand). I was considered as somewhat integrated into the daily social fabric of life in Pinar del Rio, which allowed locals to open up to me. Additionally, based on gender norms in Cuba I often mentioned my status as in a relationship with a Cuban man to provide neutral ground from which to approach street vendors (given that the majority of my street vendor informants were young men). Such norms, then, circumscribed the interactions I had with street vendors (and other male informants) to an extent. In this sense, if I had personally invited street vendors into my home, or even to a public place to record interviews, such behavior could have been misconstrued as signifying something other than simply a work meeting. In confronting gender norms, my partner provided advice on how to approach street vendors, suggesting locally appropriate ways (often colloquial) of introducing myself and my research topic.

Second, similar to other foreign social scientists that do research in Cuba, my project was conducted through an exchange with the Universidad de Pinar del Rio. My mentor and friend, a professor in the Biology department at the *universidad* and someone I worked with during the same internship that I met my partner, negotiated the terms of my student exchange. In this sense, my mentor was both a key gatekeeper and informant who facilitated nearly every step of the research process (Berg, Bruce L. 2004). Gatekeeping practices in Cuba are particularly nuanced as a result of the political environment. For example, Wright (2009, 47) maintains that, “it was easier to access grassroots and lower-level authorities than central government,” which articulates with my own experience despite going through official channels. In terms of challenges related to gatekeeping faced by researchers, Ballamingie and Johnson (2011, 713) argue that, “discussions about power relations in research are based on the (generally unstated) assumption that the researcher is the more powerful partner in the relationship, and must be highly sensitive to the needs of the less powerful research subjects.” Throughout their article, though, these authors (2011, 715) explore the underside of such power assumptions by detailing experiences of, for instance, “restricted access to key social actors.” In this way, researchers are also vulnerable, whereby their capacity to conduct research is delineated by both individual and institutional gatekeeping. Quite frankly, without the intervention of my mentor, his assurance that I was properly inserted into a university project, and the discrete flash of his university identification, I would have been denied access to many official spaces, such as local government offices.

In a related sense, Cuba’s social context is constituted by unspoken rules that govern appropriate behavior, as well as acceptable topics for conversation (this is not unique per se given that every social context is replete with implicit rules). However, such rules in Cuba are in part tied to the tradition of informing, or “community surveillance,” that was bred within the revolutionary context (Brotherton 2012, 131). As Weinreb (2009, 11) relates: “In order to conduct ethnographic research in Cuba, one has to make concessions. I had to build trust with informants who realized that I, like anyone they met, could be a government informer, international spy, or reporter, and that a piece of recorded data could be used against them” (also see Rosendahl 1997). Although I am hesitant to overstate the case, the extent to which “informing” is generalized as a sort of

common practice among the populace is demonstrated in the fact that friends and colleagues of my mentor would tell him where I was at particular times of the day, the person or people I was speaking to, and the topic of conversation. Nevertheless, my experience was on par with Brotherton (2012, xix) who notes that as a foreign researcher, he was aware that,

The socialist government had demanded over the years that various social scientists, among other researchers, leave Cuba for carrying out what government officials believed was “questionable research practices.” As if reading from the pages of George Orwell’s novel *1984*, I did have fleeting thoughts of the omniscient Big Brother state watching and controlling my every move and action and that of the populace. For the most part, this was not my personal experience of Cuba, although some individuals did interact with me in ways that reinforced rumors that the populace was being watched and followed by a ubiquitous state.

Perhaps the most disconcerting experience I had in terms of mistrust of me as a foreign researcher took place with a street vendor, Gerardo, that I had interacted with on several occasions since my first visit to Pinar del Rio in 2012. When I formally approached Gerardo (65 years old) for an interview, he expressed concern about talking to me as a foreigner, and told me that the consequences could be grave for doing so. He could lose the ability to work as a *carretillero*, or he could disappear (*desaparecido*) he said to me more than once. He was willing to converse with me but asked me to put away the little pad and pen I had come accustomed to using, to not record anything, or publish his name. He repeated this to me twice before I left. He said he had lived “this,” the current regime, since he was a little boy, a regime that has been at times less tightly controlled than others. He used a hand gesture to suggest control, even suffocation: two fists closing and pulling together (field notes, March 2015). Although this was an isolated experience, and no other street vendor expressed the same concern about conversing with me, on other instances I was confused with a foreign journalist, as well as a bureaucrat of the local Urban Planning (*Planificación Física*) office. These were among the most explicit experiences that conveyed mistrust of me either as a foreigner, or as some type of

authority. However, in addition to these more obvious experiences, there were many tacit experiences that deeply impacted the subject matter I felt I could discuss with study participants in general, but also with closer acquaintances and friends. I strayed from asking direct questions about the state or the government; I rarely recorded interviews opting to take detailed notes and to write them up at the earliest possible convenience following the interview; and I endeavored to read nuances and be attune to situations that made participants uncomfortable, for while I might presume a certain line of questioning to be innocuous, there were times that it became clear to me that the participants did not feel that way. Furthermore, my acute awareness that the “invisible hand” of the Cuban government could put an end to my research at any time solidified for me the importance of participant anonymity regardless of their status or affiliation (Weinreb 2009, 71). For this reason, I use pseudonyms for all participants, including professionals. In the case of professionals, I have opted to selectively include their place of work and title based on personal discretion (despite obtaining consent to do so).

1.7 Plan of Dissertation

Street vendors are representative of a larger group of self-employed economic actors whose legitimacy as small entrepreneurs within the labour force and socialist system, in general, is relatively novel. In the context of the changing role of the state, there exists the perceived need to ensure that self-employed actors remain contributing members of Cuba’s hard-won socialist society. To this point, Gold (2015, 87) notes that “The many mechanisms employed by the state to incorporate *cuentapropistas* into the project of the Revolution reveals its concern with keeping the Revolution socialist” (also see Kapcia 2008; Gropas 2006). Chapter 2 explores this “incorporation” in terms of the legitimization of the self-employed sector as a viable, formal option for work, and sets the stage for this discussion by briefly tracing the Revolutionary government’s historical endeavor to provide employment security to the populace. In this context and since 2010 opportunities for self-employment have grown steadily and there appears to be a more accepting attitude among top political cadres toward the private sector (although some resistance to Raúl Castro’s reforms has also been noted in Ritter and Henken 2015, for

example). Nevertheless, this chapter conveys a complex and at times contradictory dynamic between the state's position on reforms to the labour force, and the way in which this position is lived and perceived by street vendors. What emerges is a veritable disconnect between official discourse and objectives to formally recognize the work of the self-employed and the precariousness that street vendors experience in their work.

Just as street vendors signal important changes to the Cuban economy and labour force, they are also representative of food policy reforms that have brought about the partial privatization of the food system. Chapter 3 proceeds by briefly detailing reforms to the commercialization of domestic agricultural products in order to place street vendors in the context of the broader food system. I examine both the potential and challenges associated with commercial diversification by first, tracing the organizational logic of one private food distribution network within which street vendors are implicated; second, exploring three different management modalities of agricultural markets currently operating in Cuba: private, state and mixed markets; and third, comparing price and quality of privately sold versus state sold produce. While private and state markets do not exclusively operate within the same distribution networks, they experience similar challenges associated with shifting state plans regarding food distribution. Thus, there is continuity between such modalities that provides insight into the complexity of integrating the private and state sectors in food, as well as the state's ambiguity regarding food policy and economic reform.

Chapter 4 complements Chapter 3 by primarily engaging with the perspectives of social actors whose work associates them with the centralized food system, such as state actors (employees of the state collection enterprise ACOPIO, and the Ministry of Agriculture, MINAG), and actors that may be considered "integrated civil society"²⁴ (NGO staff, farming cooperative presidents, and farmers). Generally such actors (as represented in my sample) express a moral notion that food should be diverted away from

²⁴ The use of the term "integrated civil society" refers to actors that work within organizations that are not part of the formal state apparatus but are nonetheless linked to the state, or often considered "arms" of the state apparatus, such as farming cooperatives and NGOs like Cuba's Association of Small Producers (ANAP).

private distribution in order to supply the appropriate socially-oriented destinations for food (namely, state agricultural markets). This chapter argues that emergent food policy that decentralizes the management of food procurement and distribution and permits intermediaries, like street vendors, has ultimately undermined a moral economy that revolves around the right to subsidized foods provided by the state. As intermediaries, street vendors are considered to prevent food from reaching state agricultural markets, and as such are seen as contributing to food scarcity. On the contrary, as this chapter also shows, street vendors perceive the importance of their work as tied to lacking state resources; in this sense, the service they provide addresses rather than augments the failings of the state. This chapter captures competing voices on the current state of redistributive justice and food access in Cuba.

Finally, Chapter 5 delves more deeply into the way in which street vendors are both encouraged to exist by the state but also limited by government restrictions on their use of public space. Their marginal position within the mainstream economy is reflected in their being relegated to the periphery of the city center. While the need to access public space as a livelihood strategy makes street vendors vulnerable to dominant notions regarding the appropriate commercial use of public space, they also capitalize upon their ambulatory status to avoid regulations on their whereabouts. In this way, their encounters with state agents (general inspectors are the main agents responsible for regulating street vendors) unveil the way in which street vendors insert themselves into dominant space, reserved for state commercial activity.

The analysis presented in the outlined chapters shows how the street vendor case study provides an opportunity to illuminate key contradictions, tensions and advances made in the privatization of a field of activity (food commercialization) that continues to be of strategic importance to the Cuban socialist system.

Chapter 2

2 Legitimizing the Self-Employed and the Precariousness of Street Vending



"We continue to defend the Revolution," Havana, Photo source author, 2015

The State, as the collective power of the people and at the service of the people, guarantees that no man or woman who is able to work will lack the opportunity to obtain employment, in order to contribute to both the objectives of society and the satisfaction of his or her personal needs (Morales Cartaya 2013, 11).

The pillars of Cuba's Revolutionary social policies have consistently revolved around equal opportunity to work, and equitable access to healthcare and education (Castiñeiras García 2013, 142). Two of the principal goals of Cuba's socialist Revolution, then, were "the establishment of employment security and the reduction of inequality" (MacEwan 1981, 53). These goals were largely achieved by guaranteeing employment, improving income distribution, and expanding state ownership of property, which functioned to eliminate the wealth (and speculation) of individual property owners (Rodríguez 2013, 26). It is notable that the Revolutionary government has stayed true to such initial

objectives as illustrated in the 2011- 2015 economic plan: “The prevalent economic system of our nation continues to be based on socialist property relations whereby the people as a collective own the basic means of production governed by the socialist principle of distribution ‘to each according to his ability; to each according to his work’” (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 9).²⁵ Nevertheless, within the context of economic reform, in particular under President Raúl Castro the Cuban state’s role as sole employer is evolving to allow space for the emergent private sector, including the self-employed (Ritter and Henken 2015). For instance, since 2010 self-employment (*cuentapropismo*, or literally on one’s own account) has been promoted as a viable option for work; such viability represents a shift away from self-employment that developed in the 1990s as a temporary measure to deal with the island’s slumping economy (Ritter and Henken 2015, 3). Ritter and Henken (2015, 5) point out, though, that “despite making a significant ideological break from his elder brother’s antagonistic approach to the private sector, Raúl has been careful to stress that his changes to the Cuban economy constitute an ‘updating’ or ‘perfecting’ of the island’s socialist economic model, not wholesale economic ‘reform’ or a transition to capitalism.” While the Cuban state’s approach to self-employment is decidedly less antagonistic than previously, it remains cautious. In a sense, antagonism has given way to ambivalence, an ambivalence that revolves around the sort of frontier space that *cuentapropistas* occupy. That is, they are encouraged as legitimate workers yet resisted as contrary to the socialist *conciencia* (which emphasizes the collective good over individual benefit or profit). The purpose of this chapter is to explore this apparent contradiction as it is revealed in the experiences of street vendors as self-employed workers. In particular, I examine the discrepancy between official discourse that legitimates the work of the self-employed and the precariousness that street vendors in Pinar del Rio associate with their work.

I proceed by briefly sketching the employment context that ushered in the Revolution, and the state’s efforts to maintain employment security in the context of a

²⁵ The 2016- 2021 guidelines reiterate that socialist property relations will continue to dominate Cuba’s economic system, but also note that cooperative, mixed and private property relations (and economic sectors) will “all interact together” with the dominant state socialist economy (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2016, 6).

historically vulnerable economy. It is beyond the purview of this chapter to trace employment rates from the time of revolutionary reform onwards; however, the achievements of the revolutionary government regarding employment security and income distribution are the backdrop against which the state's ambivalence toward the private sector can be partly understood. Next, the chapter moves to a discussion regarding the development of self-employment as a legitimate option for work, and the appropriate formalization of the self-employed within the dominant socialist economy as represented in official documents and national media sources. The chapter then ethnographically interrogates such legitimating discourses via the street vendor case study. Specifically, I document certain practices of street vendors, and their personal perceptions regarding their work in order to flesh out their perceptions about the possibilities and limits of street vending as a self-employment option (that is, as a form of nonstate work). Ultimately I argue that despite such contradictions, the street vendor case study illustrates a shift toward the de-stigmatization and growing acceptance of self-employed workers within the socialist economy.

2.1 Cuba's Full Employment Policy

Prior to the 1959 Revolution, with a per capita income of \$350 (according to the 1959 U.S. dollar value) Cuba fared among the richer Latin American nations (MacEwan 1981, 83). Such aggregate statistics, though, were not accurately representative of the vast inequalities that existed within Cuba's pre-revolutionary society (Castiñeiras García 2013; Brotherton 2012; MacEwan 1981). Contextualizing the worst of such social inequalities, Castiñeiras García (2013, 141) notes that "the wealthiest 20 percent of the population received 58 percent of the income, while the poorest 20 percent received only 2 percent... 24 percent of the working-age population was unemployed" and "around 60 percent of wage-earning and self-employed workers earned less than the low minimum wage then in effect." The general employment policy of the revolutionary government, then, "was one of proscribing lay-offs, absorbing the unemployed in new programs,

raising minimum salaries, and placing upper limits on salaries for new appointments” (MacEwan 1981, 84). As a result of the policy, unemployment rates²⁶ were reduced to “9 per cent of the labour force by 1962, 8 per cent by 1963, and continued downwards thereafter” (MacEwan 1981, 84). Despite the positive effects of the revolutionary employment policy, by 1993 within the full wake of the *periodo especial*, unemployment and underemployment began to rise:

With the severe economic contraction in the early 1990s, many State enterprises, the overwhelming majority of the non-agricultural sectors, no longer had productive work for many of their employees. Large numbers of workers were retained, albeit very underemployed, while others left their jobs to seek alternative means of obtaining income or goods. Cuba had always had a few tens of thousands of self-employed workers outside the agricultural sector, but this sector rapidly expanded after September 1993, when the government opened more than one hundred mostly service occupations to legal self-employment (Rodríguez 2013, 44).

Additionally, fuel shortages further impacted the situation by limiting transportation to workplaces, as well as industrial and agricultural production. Reforms to the labour force continued in 1994 when the government initiated a process of “reducing the seriously inflated workforce in the State’s huge ministerial structure. The State’s central administrative bodies were cut from fifty to thirty, with a corresponding reduction in personnel” (Rodríguez 2013, 45). Nearly a decade later in the period from 2000 to 2003 unemployment within the formal sector continued to mount. Nevertheless, the Cuban government continued (and continues) to take strides to ensure employment security, and recent statistics demonstrate that unemployment rates are once again improving.²⁷ For example, 2014 figures show that 2.7 percent of the active labour population are

²⁶ In contrast to Castiñeiras García’s (2013, 141) estimate that the unemployment rate was at 24 percent, MacEwan (1981, 84) cites the conservative estimate of between 12 and 16 percent during the 1950s.

²⁷ Castiñeiras García (2013, 148-49) points out, however, that “adhering to the full employment policy during the Special Period and the recent economic slowdown that began in 2008 has delayed efforts to increase the real wages of various labour groups.”

unemployed, a rate that is down from 3.2 percent in 2011, 3.5 percent in 2012, and 3.3 percent in 2013 (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014). Recent figures from 2014 also show that of the 5,105,500 Cubans that comprise the working population (that is, both employed and unemployed workers), 4,969,800 are actively employed (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014).

While current processes of labour reform parallel the revolutionary employment strategy to an extent (proscribing lay-offs, absorbing the unemployed in new jobs, raising minimum state salaries, and implementing various measures tied to increasing both the economic efficiency and autonomy of state enterprises in a process known as *perfeccionamiento empresarial*, literally business improvement) there is also a greater emphasis on the validity of employment within what the Cuban government refers to as the nonstate sector (which includes cooperative and private forms of employment). Cuba's 2011- 2015 economic plan implemented a process of labour restructuring (*reordenamiento laboral*) with the aim of reducing the state sector, apparently "bloated by more than a million redundant workers" (Ritter and Henken 2015, 2; Kinoshian 2016). State workers whose jobs are eliminated are offered another position, and in the case that they are not interested in or qualified for the position also have the opportunity to receive training, or enter the private sector (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 25; personal communication, Biology professor, October 2014). It is important to not underestimate the magnitude of this process, which Victoria Burnett (2011, 2) refers to in a *New York Times* article as "the biggest remodeling of the State-run economy since Fidel Castro nationalized all enterprise in 1968."

Notably, the expansion of legal self-employed job categories in 2010 parallels the *reordenamiento laboral*, whereby it is expected that self-employment will absorb a certain percentage of state workers left unemployed by the labour reform (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 26). Historically, and during the period of Fidel Castro's administration, self-employment was considered a temporary response to the sudden onset of unemployment during the *periodo especial*. As Rodríguez (2013, 44) maintains,

Albeit important, the effects of the emergency self-employment measure must not be overestimated. The number of self-employed workers peaked at about 208,000 in 1996, then soon fell to about 150,000 and remained at about that level, registering 141,600 in 2008. Although these workers earn about two or three times the average salary, they constitute only about 3 percent of the labor force. Thus, although an important policy of the Special Period, there was never any illusion that this magnitude of reemployment would be the solution to Cuba's economic difficulties.

It is also important to point out that *cuentapropistas* contribute a small percentage to the State's budget: "Of the near 500,000 self-employed actors registered in the National Office of Tax Administration, who declare and pay taxes, in the case of Pinar del Rio, *cuentapropistas* contribute no more than 4% to the state's budget, and no more than 6% nationally. State enterprises, joint ventures, and state workers contribute the most to the state treasury" (interview, Economics professor, February 2015). Nonetheless, since 2010 *cuentapropismo* has been on the rise: 2014 statistics show that 1,147,000 Cubans are privately employed, and of those workers 483,400 are self-employed, a number that has risen steadily from 157,000 in 2010 to 391,500 in 2011 to 404,600 in 2012 and 424,300 in 2013 (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014).²⁸ In the city of Pinar del Rio alone, there were 15,018 registered self-employed workers in 2013, which rose to 19,974 in 2014 (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014). Thus, there has been an uptrend in self-employment, which may help to explain shifting perceptions regarding the need for self-employed labour. As Ritter and Henken (2015, 18) highlight, today the entrepreneurial sector in Cuba is seen as integral to the "economic recovery" of the island (also see Gold 2015). Nonetheless, while the employment policy of the revolutionary government has continued to revolve around providing measures for job security and income equality, the feat is becoming increasingly more complex in the context of *reordenamiento laboral* and the evolving relation between the state and private sectors.

²⁸ According to the most recent publicized numbers I have seen, 567 982 Cubans are self-employed, which comprises 12% of the active labour force (Puig Meneses 2017).

2.2 Integrating *Cuentapropistas*



Revolutionary and Labour Day Slogans: “The Revolution is invincible” (above),
 “May 1st United in the construction of socialism” (below),
 Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

The current move to broaden the private sector has been identified as potentially more “pragmatic” than previous Special Period reforms (Ritter and Henken 2015, 4, 7; Gold 2015). A case in point is the Cuban government’s reliance on the private sector to absorb at least some state workers laid-off by the *reordenamiento laboral*. While this move suggests that this sector could be afforded greater latitude to develop, self-employed workers have historically been considered economic actors with the potential to develop civil society associations that could disrupt the socialist state agenda (Dilla and Oxhorn 2002, 26). The Cuban state’s antipathy regarding “the growth of an independent economic sector” has been linked to the potential for this population of workers to disengage “from the official labor network,” thereby becoming “more self-reliant economically” (Azicri in Ritter and Henken 2015, 19). Moreover, the creation of opportunities for private commerce has been achieved in part by legalizing activities that were previously deemed illegal. In fact, Ritter and Henken (2015, 304) note that “new regulations have allowed many, perhaps even the majority of Cuba’s previously clandestine entrepreneurs to exit the underground, obtain a license, and operate within the

law.” Given the association of entrepreneurs with clandestine activities, the legalization process has been accompanied by official anxieties tied to the appropriate formalization and disciplining of private economic actors. Official concerns revolve around influencing self-employed actors to register within the formal licensing system, to pay taxes, and to accurately report accounts. When asked to provide insight into such concerns, an Economics professor I worked with on a number of occasions provided the following account:

There are about 500,000 registered self-employed workers but there could be as many as 500,000 unregistered. The economic activity of these close to half-million unregistered workers is likely quite high, but we don’t know at this time. Another issue is that about 90% of self-employed workers are not required by law to keep accounting records. Self-employed workers that gross less than 50,000 pesos (CUP) monthly are not required to record their accounts, nor declare their gross profit at the end of the year. Only about 10% or 12% of self-employed actors gross more than 50,000 pesos (CUP) monthly, and statistically, we can only collect the data of those workers (interview, February 2015).²⁹

Additionally, there exists a certain level of resistance to formalization, which speaks to the extent to which the private and self-employed sectors are not well developed nor well understood among the populace:

An understanding of the way the economy functions is not well developed among average Cubans. Many people do not understand that paying social security, for example, is not about just paying the state but it’s about future retirement. They think about using money in the moment, not in the future. And there is little pressure from the system for unregistered workers to register themselves. They

²⁹ Kinoshian (2016) cites similar statistics, and notes that Cuba’s private sector “includes roughly 500,000 licensed entrepreneurs, 600,000 unlicensed or part-time entrepreneurs, 575,000 private farmers and those working in cooperatives, and 50,000 joint venture employees.” It is also notable that based on the average monthly income that a street vendor likely earns (detailed below) they would not be required to keep accounting records.

are informal workers by choice. It's incredible because informal workers struggle all over the world to be formalized within the system but not in Cuba. Everyone wants their work to be recognized but in Cuba, they see it as a nuisance to be registered; they see taxes and other fees as simply a drop in their profits (interview, Economics professor, February 2015).³⁰

In a sense, then, this tension between formalization and informality reflects the extent to which Cuba's self-employed sector has yet to be wholly integrated within the socialist economy.

While many self-employed workers may question the advantage of registering with the state, the official perspective links formalization with concrete benefits (that extend beyond the pension plan mentioned in the interview excerpt above) for both society and the state in the curtailment of illicit activities. For instance, in September 2013 18 new job categories were permitted within the self-employment sector (Cuban Gaceta oficial, 2013a). Announcing this legislation, an article in a local newspaper read: "As the President of the Council of the State and Ministers of the National Assembly stated on December 18, 2010, it corresponds with Party and government policy to facilitate management of the self-employed sector, and to avoid stigmas or prejudices against them by promoting strict compliance with the law and tax system, as well as to motivate this sector to reject illicit practices" (Cuban Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2013).

Other debates as captured in the Cuban media center on fostering the conditions wherein collective and private interests are not at odds, and stress that the societal and/ or economic alienation of private actors would foster the continued subversion of socialist principles and the illicit enrichment of a few at the expense of the greater good (Molina Pérez, 2015). This call to de-stigmatize *cuentapropismo* has also been publicly endorsed by *cuentapropistas* themselves. An article in the *Juventud Rebelde* (the official

³⁰ Please note that while not all self-employed actors are required to report on their accounts (that is, keep and produce for review accounting records), all do pay a monthly licensing and social security fee (Decree-Law 113 provides details regarding Cuba's tax and social security system). Also, despite the perspective of this Economics professor, workers in other countries also no doubt resist taxation.

publication of Cuba's Young Communists Union, UJC) for example, features a UJC member who makes the following plea: "We know that the subversive political-ideological actions of the private sector continue to hover in the rear-view mirror, but now is the moment to ask that the country's leadership have confidence in us [self-employed workers], who like state workers also want to contribute to the advancement of the Cuban economy" (Yaniel Díaz in Boza Ibarra, 2015). Street vendors in my sample echo a similar sentiment to that of this UJC member. For instance, I asked Yoel if he considered self-employment a good opportunity for young Cubans:

Yoel: For sure. Jobs are scarce, and this is a normal job. We're not robbing anyone.

Lina: What do you mean?

Yoel: That I buy products for a specific price and sell them at a slightly higher price. It's a normal job (interview, Yoel, 31 years old, June 2015).

This excerpt is nuanced in that Yoel uses a common refrain for describing perceptions of the current state of employment in Cuba: *los trabajos estan perdidos* (jobs are scarce). Moreover, his insistence that he is doing a "normal job" not only subtly underscores his right to gainful employment (as has been endorsed by the revolutionary government) but is also congruent with the official stance that de-stigmatizes *cuentapropismo*. Although it is outside the scope of this chapter, it is also worth noting that Yoel's comments index the intermediary practices of street vendors who profit off the sale of food in particular, a controversy that I delve into in the following chapter.

Additional signs of the social integration of the self-employed are evident at well-attended official events, such as the Labour Day parade celebrated on May 1st. The parade usually involves the participation of members of all work centers (*centros de trabajo*) and unions (*sindicatos*), whereby marching (*desfilando*) is taken as a sign of allegiance to the Revolution. It is telling that the 2015 Labour Day parade in Pinar del Rio included for the first time a section devoted to *cuentapropistas*: "As a special feature this year, a group of 1,000 self-employed workers will be parading, representing the more

than 10,000 self-employed people” in the province (Alemany Gutiérrez, 2015). According to Gold (2015, 87), in Havana, the self-employed took part in the parade as early as 2013. The symbolic significance of highly stylized events, such as the Labour Day parade in Cuba is not dealt with in this chapter; suffice to say that failure to parade is often criticized as unpatriotic and antisocial.

Further emphasizing the de-stigmatization of the self-employed, social programs endorsing *cuentapropismo* as a valid form of labour are also emerging. One program based in Havana, for instance, touts community development and integration of Cuban youth into the labour force through a course that teaches participants how to become private restaurateurs (Ruiz Malagón Franchi-Alfaro and García Acosta, 2015). While the program was initiated by community members, the Cuban Federation of Culinary Associations (*Federación de Asociaciones Culinarias de la República de Cuba*), a state body, supports it by providing the educational component. Self-employment has also been endorsed as a viable means of disciplining and re-socializing convicts. According to one source, in the province of Sancti Spiritus thirty percent of work-release prisoners are self-employed (Gómez Guerra, 2014). The article highlights that whether the offender is employed by the state or not has no bearing on the exercise of control, influence and attention paid to the process of rehabilitation. The article promotes self-employment as an opportunity to “change your past by inserting yourself into the new rhythm of Cuban life” (Gómez Guerra, 2014). There are multiple indications, therefore, that the self-employed are becoming more understood as legitimate workers within the socialist system not only from the official perspective of the state but also in the view of the general populace. Such a shift in perspective, however, does not necessarily indicate that the self-employed feel they have gained the security or respect granted to other members of the Cuban workforce. As I elaborate upon below, in the case of street vendors, their work is constituted by a sort of counterbalance of benefits and quotidian challenges.

2.3 Street Vending: Benefits and Challenges



Empty *carretillas* (carts), Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

By rough estimates, as of 2014 there were 340 street vendors operating in Pinar del Rio (70 percent within a 5 kilometer radius of the city proper and the other 30 percent in suburban and rural areas) (interview, employee, Municipal Department of Labour and Social Security, December 2014). Licenses to work in the self-employed sector are administered by Cuba's National Office of Tax Administration (*Oficina Nacional de la Administracion Tributaria*, ONAT). Street vendors pay a monthly license fee of \$100 CUP, in addition to \$87.50 CUP for social security. The basic materials that *carretilleros* need to start-up the business include a cart and a scale for weighing produce, in addition to capital to invest in purchasing product. In terms of materials, street vendors typically build the carts themselves, buy them already constructed, or in some cases rent them. Regarding start-up capital, investments and profits, many street vendors in my sample were hesitant to divulge exact information. Nevertheless, two vendors shared that they invest between \$3000 and \$5000 CUP to purchase merchandise on a weekly basis, and make a net profit of anywhere from \$165 to \$400 CUP daily. Based on a typical 6-day work week, that equals roughly \$990 to \$2400 CUP (interview, Juan, 20 years old, December 2015; Julio, 20 years old, December 2015). Another vendor who was not comfortable providing exact numbers related that his profit margin was usually around thirty percent, depending on sales (interview, Vladimir, 20 years old, August 2015). *Carretillero ayudantes* (helpers), who work the cart for the owner on a full-time or part-time basis, and provide support in picking up merchandise, more willingly divulged that

their “bosses” paid them a daily rate of anywhere from \$30 to \$50 CUP (between \$180 and \$300 CUP weekly). This suggests then, that a street vendor’s monthly income in Pinar del Rio could reach between \$3960 and \$9600 CUP, and that of a helper’s between \$720 and \$1200 CUP. In comparison to monthly state salaries that average at \$584 CUP across the island; \$601 CUP in the province of Pinar del Rio; and \$595 CUP in the province of Havana, a street vendor’s income is substantially higher (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014).



Carretilla showing scale, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

In comparison to working for the state, several street vendors remarked that they preferred to be self-employed. This preference revolves around the opportunity to make a higher income, as well as to find employment that does not require professional training, among other perceived benefits such as the freedom associated with being an autonomous worker. When asked if they felt the income they earned was sufficient, the following excerpts illustrate the perspective of the majority of street vendors in my sample:

It's better than working for the state because no state job pays 50 pesos (CUP) a day. That's what I make a day but it's never enough even though I work 6 days a week (interview, Manito, 33 years old, November 2014).

It's not like a fixed salary but it pays enough to live (*da para vivir*)... more than a state salary (interview, Vladimir, 20 years old, January 2015).

Lina: Do you live well from your work as a street vendor?

David: Well? No. Nobody lives well here. But it's better than a state salary (interview, David, 23 years old, July 2015).

Manito (first excerpt), is a street vendor helper, which accounts for his daily income of \$50 CUP. While the cost of living in Cuba remains difficult to manage for street vendors, it is relatively more manageable as a result of the income they make as self-employed workers. Also, in terms of current employment opportunities in Cuba, street vendors typically expressed the notion that self-employed job categories “fill the gap.” This is a positive in a sense, given that this sector provides means to work for non-professionals, people who have elected to not pursue a higher education, retirees looking to supplement their pensions, in addition to people left unemployed by the *reordenamiento laboral*. When I asked Leidel, a retired 70-year old street vendor working to supplement his pension, if he felt the reform to broaden employment opportunities was positive, he responded, “Yes, because it's created many jobs, there are more options, employment and sources of income for the population. Not just in street vending, but also in gastronomy, the transportation cooperatives, and others” (interview, May 2015). Among younger *carretilleros*, the majority in my sample also opted for employment in street vending as a

result of their level of education (many had only completed grade nine or ten).³¹ In this sense, self-employment is valued as an alternative option to that of state employment.

The decision to work in the small entrepreneurial sector, however, also means that street vendors face various constraints that impact the profitability of their work. Despite providing a higher income than what state salaried workers earn, various business-related expenditures, such as transportation costs, liability due to loss of produce, construction and material costs were emphasized as cutting into profits. I met Geraldo, a 65 year-old street vendor in 2012 and as of my last visit to Cuba in September 2016, he was still street vending. When I asked Geraldo if he felt street vending to be a rewarding employment option, he responded, “It’s not that profitable. It provides enough to go out from time to time, to have something (*para tener algo*). It’s expensive to buy pieces to maintain the *carretilla* (cart), a piece of equipment could cost you a fortune! You have to buy from other *cuentapropistas* because the state usually doesn’t have such supplies (*del estado no hay*)” (interview, October 2015). Although this is anecdotal information, it was rumored that many *carretilleros* obtain materials for constructing carts informally by, for example, stealing the wheels off street side dumpsters. During my fieldwork, a street vendor I interacted with on several occasions suddenly stopped working; it was rumored that his cart had been confiscated by *inspectores integrales* (general inspectors, the main state agents responsible for monitoring the self-employed) based on the allegation that the wheels were stolen state property.

It is not unrelated that some scholars have observed that strict limitations on the entrepreneurial sector in Cuba make it “difficult for self-employed workers to survive without occasionally going outside the law or into complete clandestinity” (Ritter and Henken 2015, 13). In the case of street vendors, in addition to material limitations,

³¹ Ritter and Henken (2015, 12) argue that the “survival-oriented activities” associated with Cuba’s self-employment sector is conducive to a political aim of the government to restrict this sector to unskilled labour and from professional trades, which ultimately limits its development. On the contrary, Gold (2015, 76) maintains that the demographic make-up of Cuba’s self-employed is evolving to include younger, university educated Cubans who have “turn[ed] to the private sector in an expression of dissatisfaction with state employment.” Although I cannot confirm or contest this apparent trend, I will note that of the 24 street vendor informants I worked with, only one was university educated.

restrictions revolve around merchandise they can sell, location, and size of the business. Street vendors are restricted to selling only a selection of domestically produced fruits and vegetables that have been liberated from state subsidies, although many do not abide by this restriction in order to cater to consumer demand. Street vendors are also prohibited from travelling or selling on central streets in Pinar del Rio but often feel compelled to break this rule to make a living. Likewise, they are permitted to employ a helper (*ayudante*) but are not permitted to legally operate more than one cart. I was told by a government official though, that some street vendors do operate more than one cart in order to make their business more viable (interview, employee, Municipal Department of Labour and Social Security, December 2015).³²

As regards restrictions, street vendors assert that the most onerous of business expenses are fines received from general inspectors for breaking the above mentioned rules:

I make enough to live. There's nothing else [in terms of jobs]. Between 700 peso (CUP) fines, the cost of the license, and produce that goes bad, I only make enough to live modestly (interview, Manuel, 35 years old, November 2014).

I make enough to be able to survive, to live. What I'm left with at the end of the week is a middle-range income. It's not really a *negocio* [a business that yields high profits.] Also, if you get stuck with a fine, 700, 1500 pesos (CUP) then you spend the whole week working to pay it off (interview, Juan, 28 years old, December 2014).

Infractions for which street vendors are typically fined involve parking the cart for extended periods of time, being on prohibited streets, selling prohibited items, not

³² Although I cannot confirm nor contest this suspicion, I did observe on one occasion two street vendors, with their own respective carts, working side by side; when I asked them about the potential to lose profits given this physical proximity, they told me that for pragmatic purposes they work together (share the task of sourcing merchandise and share profits) although they technically have their own individual street vendor licenses (interview, Juan 28 years old, Reinier 31 years old, December 2014).

carrying their license, and working without a license. Fines range from \$700 to \$1500 CUP but if the fine is paid within 3 business days it is cut to half of the original penalty fee (similar to fine for parking violations in Canada, for example). According to local media, within the province of Pinar del Rio in 2014 there were 33,802 inspections, 5,724 recorded violations, and \$2,600,000 CUP collected in fines from *cuentapropistas* overall (Chiralde López, 2015). When compared against the number of *cuentapropistas* in Pinar del Rio for the same year (19,974) these numbers indicate an average of 1.7 inspections per worker in 2014, which does not seem overly excessive (Cuba. National Office of Statistics and Information. 2014)³³.

Nonetheless, it is widely opined among street vendors that state agents like general inspectors use the tactic of harassment through, principally, administering fines as a means of disciplining the self-employed workforce and eliminating the population of street vendors in particular. When asked if their opinion was that self-employment was in fact increasing, the following interview excerpts represent well what many street vendors said:

It would increase even more if it weren't for this persecution that we experience [slowly closing his left hand into a fist to signal the stifling or snuffing out of self-employed workers] (interview, Pedro, 50 years old, November 2014).

Yes, it has grown, and it has helped the economy but the inspectors have also eliminated many self-employed workers because of heavy fines, new laws, etc. A friend of mine, also a *carretillero*, was working with an expired license, and the inspectors confiscated it although he had already submitted papers to renew it. So he wouldn't lose what he had already invested in merchandise, he went out the next day to sell what produce he had left. He got caught by the inspectors, who confiscated his cart, his scale, everything. You know, they [the state] do not give

³³ The aggregate statistics do not break down which type of self-employed job category received most inspections and/ or fines, which makes it difficult to appropriately assess the perspective of *carretilleros* that they are targeted more heavily than other self-employed workers.

any kind of support [financial or subsidies] to *cuentapropistas*, but then they [the inspectors] come back to see if you stole a bit of flour, or are selling something prohibited so they can confiscate everything and shut you down (interview, Franco, 42 years old, November 2014).

At the end of the day, there's no escape, between the fines and the taxes (interview, Juan, 28 years old, December 2014).

Franco's excerpt underscores how *carretilleros* feel that they are treated less than fairly, even persecuted by state agents. His statement also subtly underscores a moral sentiment among many Cubans that the state is somehow responsible for providing support in any number of capacities. It is certainly well-documented that the Special Period initiated a level of realization among citizens that the state could not continue to fulfill the all-benefactor role (Premat 2012; Brotherton 2012; Kaptcia 2008). Yet vestiges of this expectation among the citizenry persists, which highlights the contested terrain of evolving state responsibilities, and the gradual move away from state assistance under Raúl Castro's administration. Juan's comments also indicate the extent to which *carretilleros* perceive that they are provided little chance to thrive, given the increase of not only the license and social security fees that they pay (\$187.50 CUP) but also the minimum fine (\$700 CUP) that inspectors can administer for infractions. Finally, Pedro's reference to "persecution" also points to state regulations that cut into street vendors' profits and livelihoods. In short, the tendency to control the profitability of street vending taps into a historical legacy, whereby allowing the generation of excessive private wealth is considered contrary to a socialist *conciencia*. In a related sense, street vendors perceive that the basic objective of inspectors is to create obstacles to running their small businesses, which I contend more broadly speaks to tensions around the emerging private sector. While, as shown in the previous section, the self-employed have gained considerable ground in Cuba over the last years, it is evident that in the view of *carretilleros*, obstacles to their development as small business owners remain substantial.

2.4 Querying the Employment Security of *Carretilleros*

Cuban scholars emphasize that work in the self-employed sector is formal and more stable than similar jobs that would be considered informal in a global context. Morales Cartaya (2013, 226) stresses that small-scale self-employment in Cuba “lacks the informality, precariousness, and lack of social protection that characterizes such employment in other countries.” In theory, the Cuban state’s commitment to social protection and justice also extends to the nonstate sector, as the same Economics professor I came to know explained,

The “informal employment” category does not apply to registered *cuentapropistas* in Cuba because they pay taxes and social security, they accumulate pensions, and they also pay tax on their employees if they hire more than five. They also have the same rights as all Cubans, free healthcare and education. Those who are not registered, yes you can apply the “informal” category because they don’t have the same rights and protections. From the perspective of the labour force, and according to the Economic Sciences, the formality of the registered self-employed, although they are not state workers, is guaranteed by law (interview, Economics Professor, February 2015).

Cuentapropistas can also join unions should they want to, although when asked, street vendors typically described labour unions as promoting token membership with little capacity to pursue or resolve grievances.

Despite that Cuba’s self-employment sector does not wholly parallel other global contexts, wherein jobs like street vending are considered informal and unstable forms of work, *carretilleros* typically express a generalized sense of job insecurity. Such precariousness can be partly attributed to the Cuban state’s historical propensity for “cracking down” on the self-employed sector. To this point, Ritter and Henken (2015, 13) contend that “the often arbitrary actions of the government bureaucrats charged with regulating” the self-employed, foregrounds the extent to which this sector “has lacked

true ‘legitimacy.’”³⁴ It also points to Cubans’ understanding of the state’s considerable power over their lives, even when their livelihood is no longer directly dependent on the state. Premat (2012, 82) observes this understanding of the state among independent producers in Havana and explains that some,

Producers turned their commentaries about the instability of their urban agriculture endeavors into a broader criticism of what they understood to be the general *modus operandi* of the government, which they characterized as whimsical, irrational, and prone to drastic reversals. Their explicit complaint only underscored the overall feeling of many producers who, despite their relative independence in production, recognized that the State still held the ultimate trump card over their lives and livelihoods.

That the state could “swoop in” and take away their work whenever they feel like it (*cuando les da la gana*) manifested itself among street vendors in Pinar del Rio in the rumour that the street vending job category would be eliminated, or the lesser concern that *carretilleros* would be obliged to work as vendors in marketplaces (which would require them to rent a stall in an official space). The rumour has validity given that as of 2014, the administration of new street vendor licenses had been indeterminately suspended in Pinar del Rio (although the helper license was still being administered); and as of the same year an important wholesale market in Havana, *el Trigal* where many *carretilleros* in Pinar del Rio source their merchandise, had also been indefinitely closed.³⁵ To get a sense for the potential impact of the elimination of this job category, I asked street vendors what effect it would have on Cuban society. The following two interview segments are typical of many responses:

³⁴ It is notable that such instability is not necessarily characteristic of the self-employed sector in particular, but, in part, can be attributed to the governance of the Cuban state in general (as such, employment within the state sector can also be construed as unstable and subject to sudden change.)

³⁵ As of August 2017, it has been confirmed that no new street vendor licenses will be issued in Cuba, although those who already have a license are permitted to continue to work in street vending, and to develop their businesses (Puig Meneses 2017).

Well it would affect society in every sense. There are many of us who only know this job. I've only completed grade nine, and before this I worked for a little while as a mail carrier. But street vending is all I know (interview, Juan, 28 years old, December 2014).

What about the young people who don't have work? Where are they going to work? (interview, Martin, 27 years old, January 2016)

Many vendors also conceded that should the state prohibit street vending that they would figure something out (*inventar algo*), which taps into livelihood strategies in Cuba in general. That is, the need to navigate material and resource constraints often through relationships, and illegal dealings, strategies that several scholars have explored in terms of its instability (Wilson 2014; Brotherton 2012; Premat 2012; Pertierra 2011; Weinreb 2009). Ultimately, there is an apparent contradiction between official discourse and objectives to formally recognize the work of the self-employed and the precariousness that street vendors experience in their work. This contradiction is complex: in part it reflects the extent to which the agenda of general inspectors in Pinar del Rio, as state agents, is not always congruous with official objectives; it also revolves around the uncertain relationship between the state and private sectors, which is manifest within the everyday experiences of self-employed workers.

2.5 Conclusion

The recent move to create more flexible opportunities for employment while simultaneously working to correct inefficiencies associated with Cuba's inflated state sector through *reordenamiento laboral* has opened the door to self-employment as a viable option for work (not simply an emergency response to a dovetailing economy). Despite that self-employment has been steadily on the rise since 2010, Ritter and Henken (2015, 19) point out that: "the depth of change in bureaucratic and cadre mentality and the extent to which mutual trust between entrepreneurs and the state has been

consolidated” remains to be seen. Part of legitimizing the private sector revolves around a commitment to formal employment enacted through the licensing and tax system. Given that many self-employed workers choose not to register, it would seem that such official systems are not yet well understood or perhaps accepted among the Cuban populace. Indeed, the perceived benefit of being a part of this system for street vendors in Pinar del Rio is uncertain.

For the most part street vendors prefer their work to the alternative of being a state employee because it affords them a higher income. However, there is also a widespread perception among this population of self-employed workers that general inspectors, the state agents responsible for monitoring and regulating compliance with official bylaws, purposely create obstacles for their small businesses. In this sense, *carretilleros* rarely understood the fines they received as legitimate punishment for committing a particular infraction; rather they considered fines to be a tactic of harassment and of controlling their profits. Furthermore, street vendors’ narratives regarding encounters with general inspectors evoke feelings of employment instability linked to broader social anxieties about self-employment as a private business endeavor. Essentially, this chapter unveils a complex and at times contradictory narrative that weaves together the state’s official position on reforms to the labour force, the complicated enactment of these reforms by state actors like inspectors, and the way in which state policies and regulations are lived and perceived by street vendors. In the next chapter I move from the narrow ethnographic spotlight on street vendors to a broader picture of reforms to agricultural commercialization, within which street vendors are implicated as one node in an emerging private food distribution network.

Chapter 3

3 Food Policy Reform: State versus Private Distribution

In the context of Cuba's emerging private sector, food policy reforms have created alternative, legal channels for food distribution that are not subject to state centralization or oversight. While private (or supply and demand) farmers' markets have had a history of opening in 1980, closing in 1986 and re-opening in 1994, and there has always existed a small population of independent farmers in socialist Cuba (that is indeed growing³⁶) commercial outlets for the sale of both fresh and processed food items are becoming more diverse. Officially this diversification is tied to the objective to improve not only economic efficiency but also efficiency in provisioning through decentralization of the state sector, a broadening of spaces wherein the private sector can operate, and the reduction of state subsidies, particularly in terms of the food supply (Castiñeiras García 2013; Bu Wong and Domínguez 2013). Some estimates indicate that as of 2006, subsidized foods "accounted for 64.1 percent of total caloric intake and 62.7 percent of protein" consumption by the populace (Castiñeiras García 2013, 152). Nevertheless, since Raúl Castro assumed the presidency in 2008, the Cuban government "has been giving clear indications that it intends to sharply reduce, and perhaps eventually even totally eliminate, such subsidized distributions because of the inefficiencies involved" (Castiñeiras García 2013, 152). The objective of economic efficiency is manifest in a number of recent policy reforms outlined in Cuba's 2011- 2015 and 2016- 2021 economic plans, the specifics of which are detailed below. This chapter examines the potential of and challenges to commercial diversification in the food distribution sector by first, tracing the organizational logic of one private food distribution network, and second exploring three different management modalities of agricultural markets currently operating in Cuba. Essentially, looking at this broader context of reform to agricultural commercialization positions street vendors as illustrative of changes to the previous labour regime, and centralized food system.

³⁶ The number of independent farmers is growing as a result of the *parcela y patio* movement, in addition to the state's conveying of idle lands in usufruct to individuals who will use it to produce food since 2008.

This chapter proceeds by first outlining reforms to the commercialization of domestic agricultural products; given the breadth of reforms currently underway in Cuba, I only explore those that have relevance to the particular case study presented here. Next I provide a synthesis of ethnographic data collected regarding four markets: one in Havana; two within the city of Pinar del Rio proper; and one located in a suburb of Pinar del Rio. In examining private food distribution in Pinar del Rio, it became clear to me that certain markets in Havana and Pinar del Rio are linked through their use by street vendors. Thus, two markets explored are nodes within the private distribution network observed here; the other two markets are state-run, and provide a useful comparison of state and nonstate commercial outlets in terms of product availability, quality and pricing. Despite that private and state markets are not officially implicated within the same distribution network, their histories demonstrate a certain continuity that links them into not only the broader state project of economic reform, but also the state's ambiguity regarding such reform.

3.1 Reforms to Agricultural Commercialization

Cuba's 2011- 2015 economic plan introduced a number of important changes to the agricultural sector, many of which are also consistent with the 2016- 2021 plan. In order to foster growth in the private sector, new models of management that prescribe a lesser role for the state are being adopted. These models "delimit state and enterprise functions in order to foster greater autonomy for producers, increase efficiency, and make possible a gradual decentralization towards local government" (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 26).³⁷ The goal is to move away (if ever slightly) from centralized planning of finances by vesting more authority to local decision-making within the agricultural sector. In addition to such changes at the state enterprise level, the economic plan prescribes managerial autonomy to cooperatives and "the gradual development of local agricultural services cooperatives" (so that the state is no longer the sole service

³⁷ Policy 178 in the 2011- 2015 Economic Plan is maintained as policy 148 in the 2016- 2021 plan.

provider³⁸) (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 26). Other policies relevant here revolve around creating a less centralized (and thereby less constrictive and inefficient) commercialization network. The goal is to “Transform the system of distribution and commercialization of agricultural products through more flexible mechanisms that contribute to reducing losses by simplifying the links between primary production and the final consumer, including the possibility that the producer can access the market by their own means; and expand the scope of profitable activity to improve the quality of the products on sale” (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 26-27). The directive to improve the agro-commercial chain is linked to allowing more economic actors to participate in the sale of agricultural produce (“expand the scope of profitable activity”) and facilitating better service via more direct contact between producers, markets and consumers. The goal is to foster a less onerous process of food distribution and provisioning by freeing it from the cumbersome centralized system that inhibits such contact. Finally, the economic plan commits to: “Adjust agricultural production in line with demand... and limit the centralized distribution of product lines... allowing competitive mechanisms to play a more active role in” commercialization (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 26).³⁹ This is a significant policy change; it not only reduces state subsidies (by limiting the centralized distribution of food) but also opens the door to allowing market mechanisms (competition) to contribute to both agricultural production and commercialization, as opposed to only the directives of a detailed and often restrictive economic plan. Such high-level policies have different manifestations within the agricultural sector, and are implemented through more specific Decree-Laws.

In terms of commercialization, such new models of management as non-agricultural cooperatives and wholesale market spaces have been authorized albeit as

³⁸ Policy changes such as this one have precursors, such as the development of the Basic Units of Cooperative Production (Unidad Basica de Producción Cooperativa, UBPC), which began in 1993.

³⁹ Policy 181 in the 2011- 2015 Economic Plan is not explicitly present in the 2016- 2021 plan, and policy 183 (2011- 2015 plan) is not reproduced as a single policy in the 2016- 2021 plan but is covered by other policies.

experimental in nature, a tag that leaves room for the state's revocation of such forms at any time. In December 2012, non-agricultural cooperatives in various service sectors, such as construction and transportation were legalized [as captured in Decree Law (from now on DL) 305] (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2012). Until 2012, farming cooperatives were the only form of this economic model in operation. Subsequently in November 2013, DL 318 was passed with the distinct objective of creating more flexible avenues for the commercialization of agricultural products. The experimental law, applicable within only three of Cuba's sixteen provinces (Havana, Mayabeque and Artemisa⁴⁰) delegates new authority to the provincial administrative councils to create agricultural markets, among other actions; delineates that prices are set based on "agreement" (that is, they are not fixed by Cuba's Ministry of Finance and Prices but in accordance with principles of supply and demand); and, circumscribes which entities are authorized to sell products as wholesalers or small-scale retailers (which is significant given that historically, the Cuban state has held a monopoly on wholesale activity) (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2013b). In comparison with DL 191, which authorized the opening of supply and demand farmer's markets in 1994, DL 318 details a wider variety of retail outlets: agricultural markets with state administration and management (includes markets that sell subsidized products and those that sell products according to supply and demand); agricultural markets managed by non-agricultural cooperatives; and private markets operating under property leased from the state (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 1994; 2013b). This chapter explores each of these management modalities that essentially evidence the integration of the state and private sectors in food commercialization.⁴¹

The flexibilization of food commercialization also parallels in part the government's objective of reducing food subsidies by providing a more diverse array of provisioning options for consumers. Castiñeiras García, (2013, 152) however, notes that

⁴⁰ The intention is to roll out the experimental reform to the remaining 13 provinces if it is deemed successful.

⁴¹ It is important to qualify that each of these market modalities exist to varying degrees across the island; however, the distinctive features of DL 318 are that it delegates greater authority to local management (provincial administrative councils), and also permits the wholesale of agricultural produce by nonstate entities.

“The slow progress to date on this goal is connected to the difficulty of designing a system that will eliminate the subsidies but at the same time continue to fulfill Cuba’s promise of guaranteeing food to all its citizens.” In any case, alongside high-level policy changes regarding commercialization, there has been a differentiation of retail outlets that sell food. Consistent with the general increase of self-employment job categories, within the food service sector there are ten self-employed categories as of writing. Six of these jobs involve the sale of processed or elaborated food items (through restaurants or home-based cafeterias for examples) and the remaining four deal with the sale and transport of agricultural produce; *carretilleros* fit within this latter category (Cuban Gaceta Oficial, 2013a, 256-66).

3.2 Private Food Distribution: Havana to Pinar del Rio

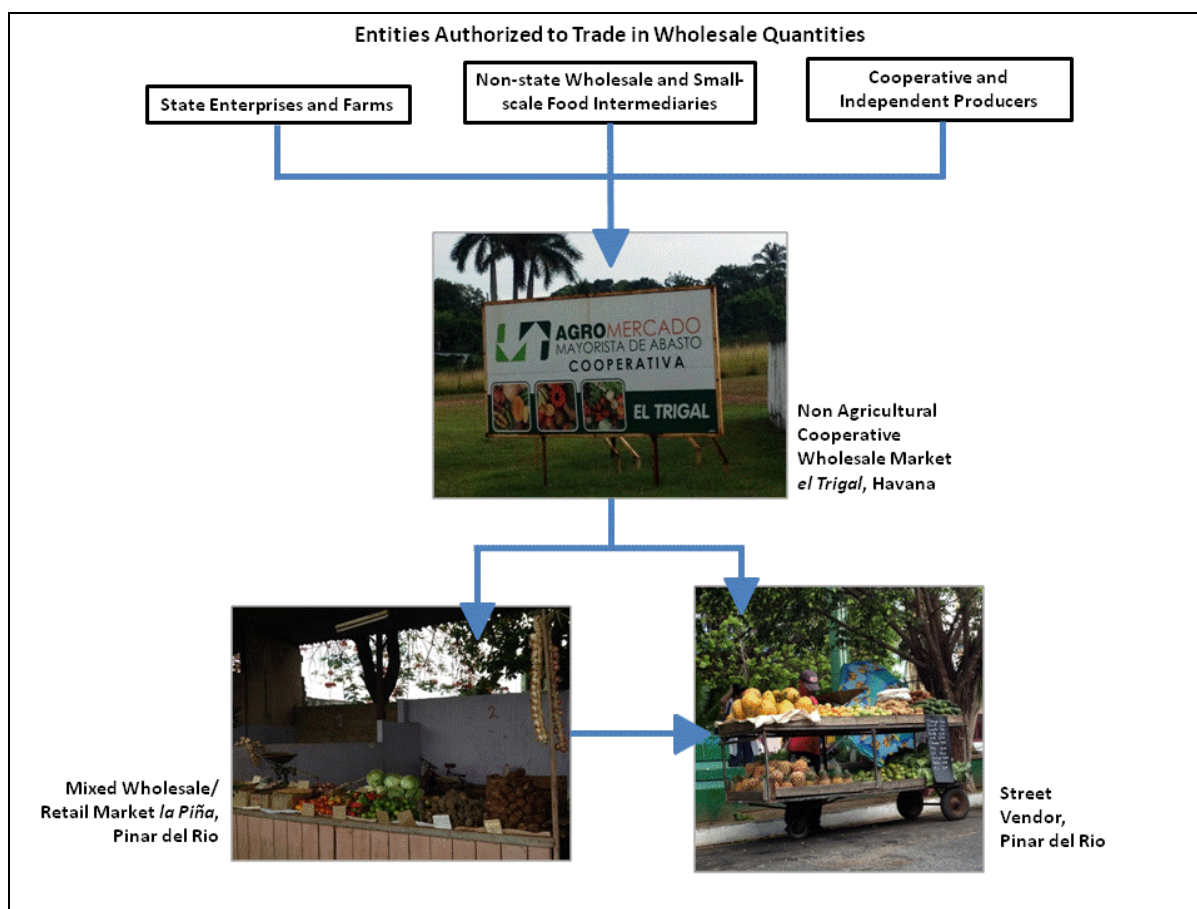


Figure 1: Organizational Logic of Food Distribution, Havana to Pinar del Rio

Such changes to food policy have allowed for a diversification of food commercialization beyond state centralized mechanisms of procurement and distribution. The above figure provides a snapshot of one distributional network that street vendors in Pinar del Rio participate in. While it certainly provides a schematic and limited vision of the complexity of food distribution channels that are a mix of state centralized, illegal (or informal), and now novel and evolving private avenues, it helps to position street vendors and provides a window onto the Cuban state's experimentation with new models of management. In brief, domestic produce is transported from provinces across Cuba to *el Trigal* market in Havana where food intermediaries trade in merchandise, both purchasing and selling usually in wholesale quantities. As Figure 1 demonstrates, both state and private entities are permitted to trade at *el Trigal*. Within the broad category of private entities are intermediaries that comprise a variety of self-employed workers, such as wholesalers and retail food vendors (that, for example, have licenses to sell produce privately from a fixed kiosk), street vendors, and truck drivers authorized to transport cargo. Next, some of these intermediaries⁴² transport their merchandise to *la Piña* market in Pinar del Rio, where street vendors and other private food retailers purchase produce that is then funneled out into Pinar del Rio or other surrounding areas. Theoretically, each step within this process takes place free of state intervention, including the sale and purchase of food according to principles of supply and demand.

⁴² It is likely that the majority of these intermediaries transporting cargo to Pinar del Rio for re-sale would be wholesalers rather than small-scale retailers or street vendors (although theoretically small-scale food retailers and street vendors can also purchase merchandise from *el Trigal*).

3.3 *El Trigal* Wholesale Market



El Trigal Market (closed on this day), Havana, Photo source author, 2015

El Trigal is a wholesale retail market that falls within the new commercial structures authorized by DL 305 and DL 318 (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2012; 2013b). The market is located on the outskirts of Havana province in the municipality of *Boyeros*, approximately fifteen kilometers from *Centro Habana* and twenty-one kilometers from the popular tourist destination of *Habana Vieja*. Opened in 2013, *el Trigal* operates as a non-agricultural cooperative and rents space from the Provincial Enterprise of Agricultural Markets (of Havana). In addition to the goal of decentralization for purposes of economic efficiency, official reasons for opening a market like *el Trigal* parallel policy 183 outlined above, and include facilitating a wholesale space that can be frequented by both state and private economic actors, cutting out intermediaries, and gradually reducing food prices (*Cierran Temporalmente el Mercado*, 2016). Notably, the absence of wholesale markets from which local economic actors can purchase merchandise has been a topic of public debate. In terms of food, popular concerns revolve around the fact that private actors buy up large quantities of the local food supply, which adversely affects equality of distribution among the populace; they also charge higher prices as a result of not buying wholesale. Street vendors (and other self-employed workers) also highlight that lack of access to wholesale markets constitutes a hindrance to the functioning of their small businesses. Likewise, some scholars consider the willingness to permit wholesale markets as an indication of the state's commitment to economic change (Ritter and

Henken 2015). It is interesting that when I visited *el Trigal* in July 2015, administrative staff confirmed that an illegal wholesale market had already existed at an informal space along the highway from Havana to Pinar del Rio. When authorities observed that they could not eliminate the illegal space, the decision was made to institutionalize it by creating an official market. Although I was not able to substantiate this information, the anecdote does follow suit with the state's current move to broaden nonstate economic spaces partly by lifting prohibitions on previously illegal activities (interview, Economics professor, February 2015). In the same vein, in describing the history of self-employment, Ritter and Henken (2015, 252) observe that "the Cuban government decided to legalize large sectors of the expanding informal economy because it realized that these clandestine activities were filling the gaps left behind by [the] dwindling and insufficient state sector."

As the administrative staff explained, there are thirteen members that manage *el Trigal* and that have come together for the explicit purpose of doing business. The administrator affirmed that while the market does fulfill the *objeto social* (social purpose) of facilitating the commercialization of agricultural products at reasonable prices, it is indeed a business, and that all profit after taxes, rent and other logistical fees is divided among the thirteen cooperative members. Incumbent to DL 318, state enterprises and other entities that primarily produce food for self-consumption, state farms, cooperative farms, independent producers, wholesale and small-scale retailers of agricultural products are permitted to trade (buy and sell) at the market (Cuban Gaceta Oficial, 2013b). Traders are contracted by the cooperative and pay 120 pesos (CUP) daily to sell at the market, in addition to a 3 pesos (CUP) entrance fee, regardless of how much merchandise they bring to sell. In addition, all self-employed workers pay a licensing and social security fee to the National Tributary Office (ONAT), the amount of which depends on the job category. Given that the majority of sellers and consumers that frequent *el Trigal* operate in wholesale, it would not likely be difficult to recuperate operating costs and licensing fees. Retailers from all provinces are permitted to sell in the market, and staff shared that they had seen traders from as far as the province of Guantánamo, 923 kilometers from Havana province. The majority of out-of-province traders, however, come from Mayabeque,

Artemisa, Matanzas, and Pinar del Rio (54 kilometers, 56 kilometers, 104 kilometers, and 186 kilometers from Havana province, respectively).⁴³

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, the relative importance of this market as a node within private food distribution appeared to be growing, and was frequently referenced by the sample of *carretilleros* I worked with as the original source of their merchandise. Nonetheless, in May 2016 the wholesale market was temporarily closed due to apparent, “Irregularities, crime and other illegal situations, lack of control and non-compliance with the object for which it was created” (*Cierran Temporalmente el Mercado*, 2016). The administrator, as well as a few traders I informally talked with also confirmed that the market was chaotic and that many instances of theft were occurring despite the employment of area guards. As a measure to curb the disorderly situation, management had changed over from a nocturnal to a daytime schedule of hours of



Pick-up of merchandise by private vendor, *el Trigal* Market,
Photo source author, 2015

⁴³ Although prices set by the traders are established by principles of supply and demand (described in official documents as “according to agreement”), cooperative farmers are obliged to charge prices that have been set within their cooperative (interview, *el Trigal* Market Vice-President and Administrator, July 2015).

operation. However, such measures were not sufficient to maintain operations. Ultimately, *el Trigal* as an experiment in wholesale commercialization was deemed unsuccessful: the market did not help to diminish soaring food prices or simplify food distribution by effectively cutting out, or at least cutting down on, middlemen. Moreover, the unchecked and disorderly situation that was considered to contribute to soaring food prices, evidences the complexity of lacking state regulation within a context wherein the state until recently has held a monopoly. In sum, the experimental formalization of this market and its subsequent closure reflects the difficulties of implementing changes associated with the decentralization of food distribution without the organization of the state apparatus. It also demonstrates the state's continued ability to intervene in order to control illegalities and ensure fair prices for food.

3.4 *La Piña* Mixed Market



La Piña Mixed Market, Day-time schedule, Photo source author, 2015

*La Piña*⁴⁴ is located about 2 kilometers from downtown Pinar del Rio, on the outskirts of a *barrio marginal* (marginal neighbourhood) or slum as *Pinareños* refer to it. This market

⁴⁴ There was no signage denoting the name of this market, and it was colloquially referred to by the street name on which it is located. For the purposes of this text, I “named” the market *La Piña*.

is an example of a mixed-modality in that it functions as a commercial distribution site for private food retailers, but is managed by the state. Similar to *el Trigal*, both wholesalers and small-scale private vendors frequent the market and trade in prices set by supply and demand, while the market space itself is leased from Pinar del Rio's Municipal Enterprise of Commerce and Gastronomy (*Empresa municipal de comercio y gastronomia de Pinar del Rio*). Unlike *el Trigal*, *la Piña* is not a cooperative and the three state employees that manage the market do not share directly in the profits of the private vendors. There is no official signage denoting that the market is there, and indeed if one did not know of it, would likely pass by without seeing it. Nonetheless, it is an official marketplace that I first visited early one morning before dawn. Only a few fluorescent lights illuminated small pockets of the scene, and the dense smell of fresh pineapple filled the open-air market. I observed several cargo trucks squeezed into the small space where men were carting large mesh sacks or orange crates of produce, making deals, and negotiating prices in a way that did not seem to follow any particular order. Outside the market, men were also bustling about carrying merchandise to their various forms of transportation, old cars, bicycles, pushcarts. I observed one older gentleman who I assumed to be an intermediary of some sort, carting sacks of onions first, then several bushels of carrots, then a large crate of tomatoes, all of which he stacked in a dark corner against the dilapidated outer fence of the market (Field notes, 2015). *La Piña* operates according to two different schedules; this scene takes place once, sometimes twice, a week in the early morning hours when wholesalers come from out of province (some who have purchased merchandise at *el Trigal*), from Pinar del Rio's various municipalities, or from local farming cooperatives to sell agricultural produce. The second schedule operates from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. during which time the market is no longer a trading venue for wholesalers, but is a typical retail outlet for consumers (as portrayed in the photo above). Stalls line the outer walls of the space, wherein private vendors sell root crops, vegetables, fruit, and grains like rice and beans. In contrast to the disorderly mornings when wholesalers are busy making deals, the day-time marketplace was often nearly empty. Akin to *el Trigal*, wholesalers who visit *la Piña* and vendors that operate during daytime hours are self-employed and pay a licensing and social service fee. In addition, daytime vendors pay a ten percent cut of their daily profits to the

Municipal Enterprise of Commerce and Gastronomy as a renters-fee (interview, market administrator, 2015).

According to the administrator, *la Piña* previously functioned as a state agricultural market (managed by the state with subsidized prices set by the Ministry of Finance and Prices). The switch-over of this market to “supply and demand,” where prices are set freely has resulted in a surge in intermediaries, such as wholesalers and *carretilleros* that not only use the market to trade merchandise but also operate within private food distribution in Pinar del Rio in general. All of the *carretilleros* I spoke with source much or all of their merchandise from *la Piña* and the administrator confirmed that *carretilleros* are the largest consumer of goods at the market. As he sees it, the increase in food intermediaries and *carretilleros* in particular, has negatively impacted the number of consumers that visit the market during daytime hours. That is, rather than go directly to official marketplaces like *la Piña*, consumers buy more often from *carretilleros*. As a result of the apparent decrease in consumers, the administrative staff that the market employs has been cut from eighteen to three state workers. The administrator’s concern for *la Piña*’s current lack of clientele and dwindling state workforce is expressed in terms of a general shift away from the state as manager of food commercialization. Throughout the conversation, the administrator repeated a refrain I heard several times that “The state no longer produces food, the ‘independents’ [or self-employed] do (*ya el estado no produce, los particulares producen*).” My experience in addition to that of consumer informants I worked with confirms that marketplaces in Pinar del Rio were rarely bustling with consumers. However, both state and private markets were experiencing this trend, which demonstrates the challenge in linking it to the state’s diminishing responsibilities regarding food. Rather this trend suggests that the state’s objective to diversify food sources for the populace has been relatively effective. In any case, the administrator’s refrain ties into a broader social discourse around the increasingly lesser role that the state plays in managing food distribution, which is accentuated by the decision to convert *la Piña* to a mixed-modality market that prioritizes private food commercialization. This decision, moreover, further underscores increased acceptance of the private sector, as explored in the previous chapter.

3.5 Mercados Agropecuarios Estatales (MAE)



Stalls at a *Mercado agropecuario estatal* (State Agricultural Market, MAE), Photo source author, 2014

Pinar del Rio's main *mercado agropecuario estatal* (state agricultural market, MAE that is managed by the state, employs state workers, and sells subsidized foods) is located about half a kilometer from downtown Pinar del Rio. While technically the market is on the fringes of a *barrio marginal* (marginal neighbourhood), its location is more central and more easily accessible than *la Piña*. Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited this market on a weekly basis, and often observed that there was limited merchandise for sale, in comparison to *la Piña* and street vendors (and, it stands to reason, few consumers in comparison to the business that street vendors received). In order to understand this seeming lack of produce and clientele (for I have no historical record to compare with), I asked the administrator what the largest obstacles to commercialization in the market were. His response was that, "Independent producers don't make it to the market because they have another route through which they can sell [*carretilleros* and other private intermediaries]. *Carretilleros* buy up produce directly from the farmers and pay them in cash. If the farmers sell through *Acopio*, it's a whole process just to get paid: they have to submit an invoice, wait for a check, go to the bank to cash it, etcetera" (interview, market administrator, July 24, 2015). The administrator's point is that farmers prefer to sell to private intermediaries than to the state collection enterprise because of the convenience and better pay, a position that foregrounds the inefficiencies of the state centralized

system. The administrator also claimed that ninety percent of food supplied to the market originated from other provinces, highlighting Pinar del Rio's history of lacking agricultural specialization. Market vendors with whom I spoke regularly also reinforced the administrator's comments regarding barriers to commercialization and the current prioritization of the private sector. As Fernando, a 60 year old vendor who has worked at the state agricultural market for over 15 years, explained:

Fernando: It has to do with the prioritization of retail outlets. The state market is stocked when there is sufficient supply of products but if there isn't much of a particular product, surely it is provisioned to other retail outlets. They prioritize the private market.

Lina: Who prioritizes the private market, the state?

Fernando: Well the private market is authorized by the state, and farmers also prioritize the private market because it pays in cash on the spot, and at better prices (interview, February 2015).

In line with Cuba's social and economic policy guidelines that stipulate a transition to nonstate productive forms with a greater emphasis on local governance (policy 178), it was also rumored that the structure of Pinar del Rio's MAE was set to undergo a transformation to either a cooperative model similar to *el Trigal* or a mixed model similar to *la Piña*. According to the administrator, "If this change happens, producers will come to sell directly in the market because they'll be paid in cash, and this will also reduce intermediaries. Although the prices of the products will no doubt rise because they will be guided by supply and demand, the quality will be better as well" (interview, market administrator, July 24, 2015). However, as of my last visit to Pinar del Rio (September 2016), the market continued under the same state management.



Peppers and onions, main *Mercado Agropecuario Estatal* (State Agricultural Market, MAE), Photo source author, 2015

A second MAE is located in a nearby suburb of Pinar del Rio about 2.5 kilometers from the downtown. Akin to the downtown state market, this suburban market often had little diversity of merchandise; when I interviewed the market administrator, the only products for sale were sweet potatoes and green onions, and he confirmed that the market often had limited stock:

Administrator: It costs 7 pesos (CUP) for one pound of cassava from the *carretilleros*, but the people have to buy from them because the state markets are empty. How do the private vendors have products that the state doesn't? Notice the contradiction: what is produced in Pinar del Rio is brought to Havana, peppers for example because they [intermediaries and private producers] can charge a higher price there, can make a better profit. In all of the eight years that I have worked as administrator in this market, we are living the most critical period and the people are not in agreement with what is happening.

Lina: Do you think the situation will improve?

Administrator: It's a problem of the state. We just have to wait and see what happens (interview, October 2015).

The administrator's comments reflect that he interprets the transition from a centralized distribution system to one that is more guided by market principles as contradictory; that is, food that is produced in Pinar del Rio by independent producers and/ or purchased by private food retailers is shipped to Havana because of the potential to make better profit. Moreover, as Figure 1 above demonstrates, food transported from Pinar del Rio to Havana (*el Trigal* for example) could well be transported back to Pinar del Rio.



Boniato (sweet potato), Suburban Mercado Agropecuario Estatal (State Agricultural Market), Photo source author, 2015

Meanwhile, the public of Pinar del Rio is suffering from lacking diversity of subsidized products in addition to the seemingly ever-increasing prices for non-subsidized products. According to the administrator, this suburban market shares a similar experimental trajectory to each of those explored thus far; the market was private until three or four years ago the state made the seemingly arbitrary decision to convert it to state management. On one hand, then, the state has allowed for new models of management, such as that evidenced by *el Trigal*, and also converted state markets to mixed-modalities like *la Piña*. On the other hand, the state has simultaneously reverted private retail outlets to state management, such as Pinar del Rio's suburban MAE explored here. Thus, this

back and forth between state and private management is in part reflective of the Cuban government's project of integrating the state and private sectors, which is unfolding in a gradual and at times contradictory way.

3.6 Quality and Cost of Produce



State Agricultural Market,
December 2015,
Photo source author



Street Vendor,
December 2015,
Photo source author

Exploring differences in the cost and quality of produce available through state centralized versus private distribution channels provides further insight into how differently positioned actors view the diversification of agricultural commercialization. Variations in the quality and cost of produce at state and private outlets were readily observable. On many occasions, produce sold through the private distribution chain

appeared to be of higher quality than that available at the MAEs. Street vendors in Pinar del Rio attribute vagaries in quality to the fact that they hand-pick their merchandise, and have better quality control than the “impersonal hand” of the centralized distribution system (a position that echoes that of the administrator of Pinar del Rio’s central MAE as noted earlier). The photo above shows papaya sold on the same day in December 2015 at a MAE and from a street vendor. The state sold papaya is overripe and moldy whereas the street vendor’s papaya is fresh and free of bruises, a difference in quality that is consistent with what I observed at *la Piña* market as well. However, it is not fair to claim that produce sold in state markets is always of poorer quality, and I certainly observed occasions wherein Pinar del Rio’s central MAE had good quality produce and at times, items that were not being sold by street vendors on those particular days. Furthermore, despite that street vendors’ merchandise often appeared fresher, rumours frequently circulated that *carretilleros* (and other food intermediaries) inject produce with illegal (unregulated) chemicals to accelerate the maturation process. Although I cannot substantiate the validity of these claims, it speaks to a generalized mistrust of not only private food retail outlets, but also of the process of partly shifting the responsibility of commercialization onto private economic actors.

The cost of produce available through state centralized versus private distribution also differs (state markets sell at subsidized prices set through the Cuban Ministry of Finances and Prices, whereas private vendors set prices freely). The table below displays ten foods that are typically consumed in Cuba and their price depending on the designation of the outlet. It is important to qualify, however, that certain of the more expensive items are not regularly within reach of many Cuban families. While the cost of some products (garlic, black beans, sweet potato, and cassava) is relatively similar, the cost of others is vastly different (red onion, tomato, cabbage, pineapple, papaya, and rice to a lesser extent).

Category	Product ⁴⁵	State Market (pesos)	Street Vendor (pesos)	Private Market (La Piña) (pesos)
Seasonings (cooking)	Garlic (small)	2/ head	5/ head	3/ head
	Red Onion (small)	3- 4.5/ lb	12- 15/ lb	12- 15/ lb
Vegetables	Tomato	2- 3/ lb	3- 10/ lb	7- 8/ lb
	Cabbage	3/ head	10- 15/ head	10/ head
Fruits	Pineapple	3- 5/ fruit	10- 15/ fruit	12- 15/ fruit
	Papaya	1.8/ lb	6-7/ lb	6-7/ lb
Grains	Rice	3.5/ lb	6/ lb	6/ lb
	Black beans	11- 12/ lb	10- 14/ lb	10- 12/ lb
Root vegetables	Sweet potato	1.5/ lb	3/ lb	2.50/ lb
	Cassava	3.5/ lb	5- 6/ lb	5- 6/ lb

Table 1: Common Foods in the Cuban Diet and Price Comparison

In general, factors that impact prices charged at private retail outlets revolve around market principles of supply and demand. In this sense, in Cuba, many products are in demand as a result of low agricultural productivity, and the fact that certain products are only seasonally available.⁴⁶ As the prices for tomatoes evidence, private prices for seasonal vegetables (known in Cuban Spanish as *hortalizas*, such as tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbages, carrots, lettuce, and green beans) fluctuate dramatically based on supply, a situation that intermediaries like *carretilleros* capitalize upon. The soaring price of onion, an important item in Cuban cooking, was also a high profile topic of public concern during my fieldwork, often debated in Cuban media forums such as *Cuba Debate*

⁴⁵ Prices are in Cuban Pesos (CUP). Also, *el Trigal* is a wholesale space, and I did not collect (for the most part) wholesale prices; however, public debate as represented in the media and the fact that *el Trigal* was shut down speaks to the fact that the prices were considered too high.

⁴⁶ It is also notable that the state stocks the *mercados agropecuarios estatales* (state agricultural market, MAE) with certain items at fixed prices in order to curb price speculation by private food retailers.

and *Mesa Redonda*. Concern (at times outrage) typically revolved around the fact that it was a bold example of not only the unjust profiteering of food intermediaries, but also lacking state intervention. Enrique Valdés Machín, for instance, in a *Cuba Debate* article on December 25, 2016 discusses the lack of agricultural supply to state markets, and highlights that as a result, “many people are forced to resort to the so-called supply and demand markets where prohibitive and abusive prices are divorced from the reach of the average Cuban's pocket.” Noting that intermediaries, such as *carretilleros* are essentially the main retailers of products like onion, he concludes that “the consent of the administration and the lack of serious and effective state inspection conspire against the pockets of consumers.”

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid out food policy reforms that have effected a gradual decentralization of agricultural commercialization, within which street vendors are implicated. I have sought to ethnographically ground food policy reforms in two ways: by exploring the organizational logic of private food distribution from *el Trigal* to *la Piña* to street vendors; and by documenting the potential and drawbacks of four markets that illustrate three different management modalities currently operating in Cuba.

Investigating the diversification of agricultural commercialization from this ethnographic perspective provides insight into the complexity of integrating the state and private sectors, in addition to tensions associated with creating a more heterogeneous economy. For example, the state's experimentation with wholesale markets like *el Trigal* and *la Piña* has addressed a common complaint: that the lack of access to wholesale markets for *cuentapropistas* is a government tactic to restrict the economic activity of the private sector. Yet, the opening of such markets has not been a seamless process as evidenced by the closure of *el Trigal*. In this sense, the seemingly unpredictable decisions made by the state regarding private versus state management of markets unveils a level of ambiguity associated with economic reform but also practical challenges of implementing such changes. It is an experiment that no one knows how will end, as my mentor succinctly put it: “Things in Cuba happen really quickly because everything is an experiment,

everything changes and it's difficult to predict the results" (interview, Biology professor, October 2015). Finally, a comparison of the quality and cost of produce available through state centralized versus private food distribution channels allows for a more in-depth understanding of the difficulties faced by the Cuban populace in part resultant from the transformation of the food system. The next chapter further explores such difficulties in terms of a moral economy of food as it is associated with the centralized state apparatus.

Chapter 4

4 The Moral Authority of the Centralized Food System

The private and state markets are not in conflict. Both are part of the process of commercialization but with different objectives (interview, MINAG employee, 41 years old, January 2015).

In a capitalist context, political discourses that are critical of intermediaries in the food chain often hinge on catch phrases, such as “just prices” and “food justice.” Although Cubans do not necessarily use these terms, they are engaged in similar arguments regarding the unfair and rising cost of food for average citizens. This situation is partly predicated by food policy reform that has reconfigured food distribution, and allowed for intermediaries to operate legally within the food chain. This chapter unfolds as a complement to Chapter 3 and primarily represents the perspectives of actors who work within the centralized food system; generally, their critical response to decentralization revolves around the moral notion that food should be diverted away from private distribution and food intermediaries, regardless of its legality, in order to stock the appropriate socially oriented “destinations” for food (namely, state agricultural markets). In an article that examines a historical food riot in Chile, Orlove (1997, 242) argues that underlying the weeklong event was “not only a divergence of economic interests between groups that benefited and those that lost out from the new forms of marketing and control, but also a more profound conflict of cultures or mentalities between a newly emergent market economy and a well-established ‘moral economy.’” In a similar vein, this chapter argues that emergent food policy that decentralizes the management of food procurement and distribution and permits intermediaries like street vendors, has ultimately undermined a moral economy that revolves around the right to subsidized foods guaranteed by the state (Wilson 2014).

The chapter proceeds by further explicating the difference between centralized and private food distribution, which in part hinges on agricultural products that are designated as liberated or non-liberated.⁴⁷ Street vendors are permitted to sell agricultural products that have been liberated by the state. The chapter then goes on to explore the perspectives of social actors that work within the centralized food system and who are largely dependent on the state for their livelihood (such as low-level bureaucrats, including agricultural market vendors, farming cooperative presidents, and farmers).⁴⁸ These individuals prescribe to a moral notion that associates food with the state market, and within-reach prices. Within the uncertain context of reform, street vendors as food intermediaries are considered to divert food from the centralized food system, and to ultimately contribute to food insecurity. With this point in mind, the chapter then moves to a case study of the potato whereby I ethnographically trace its circulation to illustrate the extent to which street vendors do in fact undermine the centralized food system yet also complement it. Moreover, the service they provide is increasingly necessary given the context of commercial decentralization; thus the chapter ends by exploring street vendors' perspectives regarding such decentralization and the role they consider themselves to play. Fundamentally, they express a popular discourse that revolves around "filling the food gap" that is increasingly growing as a result of shifting state plans.

⁴⁷ The term liberated refers to products that are not rationed.

⁴⁸ As noted in the Introduction to the dissertation, I interviewed 17 low-level bureaucrats (13 of which work within an agriculture/ centralized food system-related field), 6 agricultural market vendors, 4 farming cooperative presidents, and 10 farmers.

4.1 Liberated Product Lines



Delivery of potatoes to neighbourhood state market (*placita*), Pinar del Rio,
Photo source author, 2015

Revolutionary social policies and programs were predicated upon the central distributive role of the state; thus, to this day, most food in Cuba (both produced and imported) is funneled through the centralized system of food distribution that, in turn, revolves around three commercial destinations: *consumo social* (literally social consumption); the industrial food sector; and what is broadly referred to as “the state market,” despite that each of the three destinations technically comprise the state market (interview, MINAG employee, 41 years old, January 2015). *Consumo social* refers to food supplied to public institutions, such as hospitals, schools and daycares, orphanages, old-age homes, and prisons.⁴⁹ The industrial food sector refers simply to processed foods for the domestic or export market. The state market has various outlets for food distribution that range from domestic state agricultural markets that sell subsidized foods to state dollar stores

⁴⁹ The two concepts of the *destino social* (social destination) of food and *consumo social* (social consumption) are linked and revolve around the moral sentiment that the first priority of the state should be to stock the state markets with food, including public institutions such as schools and hospitals. These concepts are distinct from that of *objeto social* (social purpose), which frames particular social phenomena (initiatives, programs, laws, employment, etc.) in terms of the collective, or the benefit it has for society at large. All three concepts are illustrative of the extent to which the social collective is valued over the individual in Cuban socialism.

(*Tiendas de recuperacion de divisas*) that sell imported goods. Notably, within the state market category are neighbourhood retail outlets for fresh produce and processed foods where citizens purchase rations, in addition to other subsidized and unsubsidized products. Known in common terms as *la placita* and *la bodega*, these neighbourhood outlets conform to other community level plans (such as the community doctor plan) initiated through Revolutionary policies to address social issues by providing greater local access to needed services (such as the supply of food in this case) (Castiñeiras García 2013, 153; Benjamin, Collins and Scott 1986). The majority of food that is produced in Cuba for the domestic market, then, makes its way to the Cuban population through these three commercial venues.

In addition, both domestically produced and imported produce in Cuba is divided into that which is liberated and that which is not liberated from the centralized food distribution system. In general, food that is not liberated is designated for rations, which spans a variety of products (such as rice, beans, eggs, vegetable oil, sugar and coffee for examples). Government decision-making regarding the liberation of certain product lines is complex, and not only revolves around centralized control of food procurement and distribution, but is also delineated by agricultural zones that specialize in the production of particular crops. In the case of potatoes for instance, they are produced in specific areas across the island that have the appropriate soil and microclimatic conditions for potato production. The state invests a certain amount of resources in the production of scarce items, such as potatoes, and it is my understanding that the return on this investment is intended to stay within the state sector (interview, Director, *Acopio*, May 2015). The distinction between liberated and non-liberated foods affects private economic actors, such as street vendors, because it restricts the products that they can sell to those that are liberated: “*carretilleros* cannot sell grains, rice, beans, meat, products that are controlled by the state and that are destined to satisfy the different destinations, such as *consumo social*, the state agricultural market, industry. These are contracted products and have fixed prices” (interview, MINAG employee, 41 years old, January 2015). Nevertheless, many street vendors do typically deal in some products that are exclusively within the realm of state control and distribution.

4.2 Moral Perspective on Food Distribution: State Actors

Agriculture is now in the hands of the people (interview, Director, *Acopio*, May 2015).



Producer delivering long beans directly to *carretilero*, Pinar del Rio,
Photo source author, 2014

Despite the declaration that agricultural production in Cuba is increasingly in the hands of the people (and less so in the hands of the state), social actors directly implicated in the centralized food distribution system often endorse the position that domestically produced food should supply the designated social “destinations” of the state market. An employee of the Ministry of Agriculture’s municipal office in Pinar del Rio best illustrates this moral position that is intimately linked to the Cuban food system. When I asked him what he considered to be the social purpose (*objeto social*) of street vendors, he gave the following account:

The *objeto social* of the *carretillero* is to bring food directly to peoples' homes if for whatever reason they are not able to go to the market. *Carretilleros* are supposed to source the products they sell in the state markets but they generally don't, for various reasons. The state market doesn't have much to offer at times (*no tiene oferta a veces*) so *carretilleros* often buy directly from farmers, although they are not supposed to. This is a problem because a lot of domestic agricultural produce does not arrive to the appropriate market destinations, the reasons for which are complex. All the same, it is understandable because farmers also need money to live and to sustain the farm. This also does not mean that farmers do not fulfill their contracts (*cumplir el contrato*) with the state because there are consequences for not doing so. If farmers consistently do not fulfill their contracts, MINAG can fine them, expropriate their farm if they own it, or take the land away if they hold it in usufruct. But it means that farmers might reserve part of their yield to be sold privately, which diverts food from the state system. In order to improve the situation, we must increase the level of food produced so that state markets have a more abundant supply, and we must provide better, more stable salaries to farmers, a more secure state market so to speak. You cannot simply get rid of *carretilleros* or food intermediaries but you can improve the system that allows them to profit, and they will eventually disappear (interview, MINAG employee, 41 years old, January 2015).

This account frames Cuba's lacking food supply in terms of insufficient levels of domestic production, which is linked to the inefficiencies of a centralized food system that fails to pay farmers fairly, and in a timely and direct fashion. The inefficiencies of the state apparatus not only lead to fewer supplies at the state markets but also open the door for *carretilleros* to take advantage of the food market. It is notable, however, that once farmers fulfill state contracts, they are legally permitted to sell surplus produce freely to whomever. This MINAG employee's argument that street vendors *ought to* buy from the state markets (although they are not legally obliged to) rather than bypass official channels hinges on the moral economy of food as established by the revolutionary government.

In addition to new food policy that allows farmers to trade with various nonstate entities, wholesalers such as the state collection enterprise *Acopio*, are legally allowed to enter into contracts with private food retailers: “As an organization, *Acopio* was not created to supply independent [private] markets or *carretilleros*. What happens is that the *carretilleros* are unionized, they are Cuban workers and so it can be done” (interview, Director, *Acopio*, May 2015). The Director’s comments here pick up on themes explored in Chapter 2. In this sense, although he does not endorse doing business with *carretilleros*, the rationale for doing so relies on their official recognition as formal, legal workers. He goes on to contend that while, “*Acopio*’s system of food procurement and distribution is improving, the best way to ensure continued progress is through organizational control of production units [state and cooperative farms] and of agricultural production. That is to say, we need to work to ensure that contracted produce arrives at the appropriate commercial destinations, and is not diverted from them; this is the fundamental role that *Acopio* plays in Pinar del Rio, and in the country” (interview, May 2015). The Director’s point revolves around the historical role that *Acopio* plays in ensuring that agricultural produce is not diverted into private or illegal channels of food distribution. He goes on to say that, “*Acopio* has always been considered a balance (*balancista*), the balance of all food in the country. All products that go to the markets and the various destinations in each province are weighed by *Acopio*’s ‘scale.’ That is to say, it’s a reliable scale, which is very important to keep in mind, it’s a reliable scale. Why is it reliable? Because it’s a certified scale, invoices, protected prices, information on which the country can rely and the people can trust” (interview, May 2015). Akin to the MINAG employee, the *Acopio* representative acknowledges the shortcomings of the state apparatus, but believes in the state centralized system as the best “guarantee.” In this view, despite that street vendors are legal food distributors, they lack the institutional procedures that are linked to control and reliability, and ultimately the public’s trust.

It is ironic that just months before this interview in March 2015, the *Granma* newspaper announced that more than eight million eggs, amounting to \$8,907,562 pesos (CUP) (approximating \$336,135 CUC⁵⁰) were diverted from state designated points of

⁵⁰ References to Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC) in this dissertation are based on a conversion rate of 26.5

sale, and re-sold on the black market (Castro Morales, 2015). Reportedly, 19 citizens who worked for the *Acopio* and Eggs Distribution State Enterprise, and the Provincial Commercial Enterprise of Havana city were involved, and charged for the crime. Prosecutors asked that the defendants receive sentences of between 8 and 20 years imprisonment (Castro Morales, 2015). Siphoning off of public goods for illegal re-sale is not a novel phenomenon in Cuba or any other socialist country. What this incident does highlight is the importance allotted to food given the penalties applied to the perpetrators. Furthermore, there exists a complex moral association between the illegal economic actor that steals from public stores to personally profit and the novel status of the food intermediary in part represented by *carretilleros*.

4.3 Moral Perspective on Food Distribution: Integrated Civil Society

Common perspectives among actors that belong to what might be considered integrated civil society⁵¹ also reinforce the moral authority of the centralized food system. For instance, the President of Cuba's Association of Small Producers (ANAP, municipal Pinar del Rio office) provided the following account when asked about the organization's role in food commercialization:

ANAP contributes to the commercialization and distribution of food in a political sense because other than tobacco, our cooperatives commercialize all food-related agricultural produce, sweet potato, cucumber, tomato, beans, everything you plant, cassava, mango, everything you plant our members [producers] sell. Our main social objective is to facilitate that all agricultural produce is delivered to

CUP to 1 CUC (which was the rate on November 12, 2017).

⁵¹ The use of the term "integrated civil society" refers to actors that work within organizations that are not of the state but are nonetheless linked to the state, or often considered "arms" of the state apparatus, such as farming cooperatives and NGOs like Cuba's Association of Small Producers (ANAP).

Acopio. Although farming cooperatives can sell directly to the agricultural markets [private and state], our political intention is to ensure that agricultural goods produced in the cooperatives make it to the state market, and are not diverted to private food retailers. Ultimately, it's the same thing, food makes it to the plate, but the *objeto social* is that the state markets are well-stocked with food to feed the Cuban population (interview, June 2015).

Agricultural cooperatives (such as the Credit and Service Cooperatives, CCS) belong to ANAP, and operate within the realm of the state market; they are mandated to fulfill state policies regarding food production and commercialization (as opposed to non-agricultural cooperatives that the state began to experiment with in 2013 and that are technically autonomous). ANAP's official mission is to defend the principles of the socialist Revolution over and above class interests. Part of this mission revolves around doing what the organization refers to as "political-ideological work" with peasant farmers to ensure that they act in accordance with the *conciencia socialista*; in other words, to ensure that domestically produced food reaches the commercial destinations prioritized by social welfare policies (the state market as opposed to the private market). This political mandate has been reiterated in the context of the 7th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, wherein part of ANAP's political-ideological project revolves around food security and sustainability. The political aspect of food security as espoused by ANAP is deeply embedded in the notion of national security: "Without food there can be no Revolution (*sin alimentación no hay revolución*)" (interview, ANAP President, Pinar del Rio, June 2015). The words of ANAP's President reiterate the strategic importance of food within the context of the Cuban Revolution.

Akin to the stance of ANAP's president, several informants from Pinar del Rio's farming community express a certain moral distaste associated with selling to *carretilleros*, as this cooperative president illustrates when asked if they sell to *carretilleros* or other private intermediaries:

No, it's prohibited. All produce goes directly to *Acopio*. We could draw up a contract with a private vendor but we need the permission of *Acopio*. You have to be conscious of the fact that agricultural produce should go to the population at

modest prices. With *carretilleros*, the prices rise by 2 or 3 times and so we try to make sure that the produce makes it to *Acopio*. Besides, *Acopio* pays better. For example, *Acopio* will pay 8.37 pesos (CUP) for one pound of long beans but the *carretilleros* only pay 7 pesos. *Acopio* supports us in this sense. They pay well (Remy, cooperative president, interview, May2015).

An important caveat is that throughout my fieldwork, contradictory positions regarding which entities provided the highest prices for produce emerged. A common perspective, illustrated by the MINAG employee quoted above, is that the state collection enterprise, *Acopio* does not provide sufficient “salaries” to farmers, which contributes to Cuba’s lacking food supply. Yet, others espouse that in comparison to the private market, *Acopio* pays higher prices for produce than private intermediaries regardless of the inefficient pay system.⁵² Street vendors, moreover, also often claimed that they not only pay higher prices than the state, but also directly in cash. Each of these positions is relative; for instance, recent increases to state prices paid to farmers for produce were being implemented at the time of my fieldwork (with the intention of improving farmer salaries and simultaneously curbing the tendency to sell to private intermediaries, including street vendors). Also, while street vendors might typically pay higher for particular items, *Acopio* might pay higher for other items.

Despite his insistence that it is prohibited to sell to *carretilleros*, when asked if he felt that they serve a social purpose in Cuban society, this same cooperative president went onto say, “From one perspective, yes. For people who live in the city, or when there’s no food in the *placita* (neighbourhood state market) people have the option to buy from *carretilleros* but they charge high prices, so one benefits and the other doesn’t” (Remy, interview, May 2015). Other farming cooperative presidents had similar things to say: Self-employment in the food distribution sector “is another source of employment, which is important given all of the necessity and need in this country. It’s a help in one

⁵² *Acopio* pays the agricultural cooperative that takes a percentage of the farmer’s profit, depending on the size of the production sold, and then pays the farmer by cheque (not in cash). This system is often criticized as cumbersome, whereby farmers have to wait months to be paid.

sense but it also makes the prices more expensive; the prices go up because *carretilleros* are just one more intermediary” (Olivier, interview, June 2015). Note that this perspective falls in line with official discourse regarding the legitimacy of self-employment as an option for work within the socialist system yet is critical of the role of the intermediary in increasing retail food prices.

A common opinion within the farming community echoes the sentiments of the MINAG official cited above, who suggests that intermediaries are temporary and will naturally be eliminated should the state system become more efficient. Illustrative of this position, when asked if he felt a moral obligation against selling to street vendors, Roni (a cooperative farmer) responded:

Well, there isn't much morality involved. When you need money you sell to whomever. Part of the problem revolves around transportation that affects the commercialization of produce to the population. Because of the distance it has to travel, agricultural produce doesn't always make it to the market; it is intercepted by intermediaries. But if Cuba produced more food, this would force the *carretilleros* to simply disappear from food distribution (interview, Roni, 52 years old, July 2015).

Roni's account points to the sobering reality of economic difficulty that undermines the moral economy of food in Cuba (farmers also have to make a living). He alludes to informal market activities: the tendency for some farmers to sell contracted produce to intermediaries, and thereby fail to fulfill their quotas to the state, which is construed by some state agents, consumers, and other actors as a social problem that needs addressing. Roni suggests that the source of Cuba's food problem resides in lacking agricultural productivity; with higher agricultural yields, supply and demand would find a more easy balance, thereby reducing the ability of intermediaries such as street vendors to take advantage of the market.

Exemplifying a more proactive approach to eliminating intermediaries in food distribution, there has also been a movement among organizations such as ANAP to endorse localized commercialization. The following newspaper article, for instance,

celebrates the efforts of a local Pinar del Rio farmer who supplies his own juice bar at a local hospital with fruit grown and processed on his farm. The article notes that the farm has “made a huge social impact through efficient conservation and commercialization, a promising example of reducing food prices by avoiding the presence of intermediaries” (Molina Pérez, 2014). In short, the moral authority of the centralized food system associated with equitable distribution and fair prices continues to hold great sway among actors linked directly to food production and distribution. No doubt, this moral position can be partially attributed to the fact that these actors are ultimately dependent on the state for their salaries, and needed resources. Premat (2012) makes a similar point with regards to the level of dependency that independent producers in Havana have on the state and state-like institutions.

4.4 Illegal yet Complementary: the Case of Potatoes



Consumers wait in line to purchase subsidized potatoes, State agricultural market, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

Despite the desire by some to uphold the moral superiority of the state centralized food system (as opposed to private food distribution), it is evident that it does not operate exclusively from private distribution. Although street vendors are restricted to dealing in

liberated products, the majority of those with whom I worked not only sold prohibited foods (when they had access to purchase them) but also maintained that products most in demand are indeed those that are supposedly exclusively within the realm of state control and distribution. While the potato is not produced in Pinar del Rio, and as such is distributed solely to *Pinareños* through the state centralized market, it is a typical example of a non-liberated food item that is commonly funneled illegally into the private market in Pinar del Rio. Tracing its circulation outside the state sector provides insight into the dynamic relation between the state and private markets, the latter of which are illegally stocked with restricted items periodically. For instance, during fieldwork I managed to purchase scarce produce like potatoes quite frequently from street vendors, an experience I recorded carefully:

Today when I walked by a *carretillero*, I saw that he had a few potatoes displayed on his cart, and I asked if I could buy potatoes from him. He asked me how many pounds I wanted, and then took me into a small doorway off the street on which he parks his cart. He bent down to an orange crate with a piece of dirty, water-stained cardboard over top. He pulled the cardboard aside and proceeded to scoop potatoes into a plastic bag that he then weighed with a small hand-held scale. As he was doing this, he looked up to me and said, “We have to hide them because it’s prohibited to sell potatoes (*hay que tenerlo escondido porque es prohibido vender papas*).” I paid for my two pounds, about 7 or 8 small white potatoes, and walked away (field notes, March 2015).

This excerpt conveys the strategies that street vendors use in evading restrictions on their selling practices by, for example, hiding prohibited items.



Potatoes (back), cabbage (front), State agricultural market, Pinar del Rio,
Photo source author, 2015

The distribution of potatoes in Pinar del Rio, moreover, illustrates the competitive and complementary relationship between the state and private sectors. The state sector evidently influences the value of products and deters rampant price speculation on food items. Near the time that I had purchased potatoes from Franco, they became available at state markets:

Today the state market was bustling despite the strong afternoon sun. There were crowds of people lined up around most of the usually deserted food stalls, and I asked a woman in line what was being sold. *Papa* (potato) she said. Although in the preceding weeks *carretilleros* had been selling potatoes quite frequently, I had never seen them at the market. Two older gentlemen who were waiting patiently in the shade began chatting with me. In a sort of half-question, half-statement I mentioned that potatoes are rarely sold at the market. They agreed, and told me that today was the first time this year. They said that potatoes sold in the streets for anywhere from 5 to 10 pesos (CUP) a pound, but today the state market was

selling them for 1 peso (CUP) per pound, and each person was allowed to buy up to 10 pounds (field notes, March 2015).⁵³

While over the course of my field work (2013 to 2016) I bought potatoes for anywhere from 3 to 10 pesos (CUP) a pound from street vendors when they were available, they were unmistakably cheaper when they were being sold simultaneously in state markets. In terms of the timing for the availability of the potato, I was able to buy from street vendors from mid-February to mid-March, and the state began selling in late March; this timeframe is interesting in that it points to questions regarding from where, and from whom or what organization street vendors were able to source potatoes before they were released by the state. While people are hesitant to explicitly admit that they are engaged in illegal market activity, as suggested earlier, it is a likely possibility that the potatoes were sourced illegally from state distributors, which again highlights the complementary relation of the two sectors. In the socialist context, it is not a novel insight that the illegal market functions to curb some of the instability of the centralized redistributive system and simultaneously subverts it. On one hand, informal economic practices are often seen as sapping resources from the central state, which has a dual effect: the state loses money, and resources become less equitably distributed among the population (Wilson 2014;

⁵³ The restriction on how many pounds people can buy is one of the strategies the Cuban state uses to discourage hoarding, and the illegal re-sale of scarce items.



Carretillo selling prohibited item (black beans), Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015



Carretillo selling prohibited item (black beans) close-up, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

Pérez-López 1995; Eckstein 1994; Benjamin et al. 1986). On the other hand, informal economic activity is seen to fill a gap left open by the inefficiencies of the state sector.

In addition to the interplay of the state and informal markets in Cuba, the potato case study demonstrates the way in which shifting state plans and the Cuban state's propensity to experiment with reforms and policy changes are interpreted as contradictory. For instance, street vendors like Franco also periodically sold potatoes openly. On one occasion, I asked Franco if he was permitted to sell potatoes, to which he responded: "Some say yes, others say no" (field notes, February 2015). While his response conveys uncertainty regarding the direction of agricultural reforms, *carretilleros* were no doubt aware that production plans were underway to decentralize potato production in Pinar del Rio, and to liberate them from state control (interview, Director, *Acopio*, May 2015). Thus, it seems that the conflicting information that Franco, and other street vendors received might be a reflection of this forthcoming food policy reform.⁵⁴ In a sense, the contradictory experience of reform is productive in that it allows for flexibility in the interpretation of policies and regulations; street vendors (and other self-employed actors no doubt) can use this flexibility to maneuver restrictions on their practices, and offer obscure responses when they are asked about prohibitions. This brief foray into the circulation of potatoes, then, evidences the interplay between the state and the informal markets in Cuba, and shows how state intervention within food distribution remains dominant. It also highlights the line that street vendors occupy between legal and illegal practices regarding food distribution, which helps to explain why particular actors invest trust in the state over the private sector in food.

4.5 Filling the Gap: *La Placita No Tiene*

Statistically the state is still the main food seller in the country. What happens is that it seems that the *carretilleros* sell more than the state because their carts are always full of products, but it is not so. The state offers food at subsidized prices, which is why the food available in state markets sells quickly. People rush to buy subsidized foods because of the low price. The prices that *carretilleros* charge,

⁵⁴ Please also note that a third possibility is that *carretilleros* purchased potatoes in Havana, where it seems they are sold liberally, and brought them to Pinar del Rio for re-sale, the legality of which is unclear.

based on supply and demand, have nothing to do with the need of the people but with who can pay, who has money. Thus, their products sell less quickly, and they always have a supply. In the state market, a sack of carrots lasts a day but a *carretillero*'s sack of carrots might last 10 days. The state still guarantees 85% of the population's demand for food. Supply and demand, by contrast, only satisfies 10% to 15% of the population's food needs (interview, Economics professor, February 2015).

As emphasized here, the contribution that street vendors make to the food supply remains relatively marginal.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, from the perspective of street vendors, they fulfill a much needed service to the Cuban populace by providing a stable food supply, which the state has increasingly neglected to do. In this sense, not only the unpredictability of the centralized food system but also reforms that delineate a lesser role for the state in providing subsidized foods is partly manifest in a public discourse regarding what the state no longer has or can provide. When I asked a government official about the unpredictability of the supply to state markets, I was provided with this explanation:

It all depends on the level of agricultural production. In Cuba, demand far outweighs supply for several reasons: the low level of agricultural production, and all of the problems we have had, such as the *bloqueo* [literally the blockade or U.S. embargo], we cannot acquire goods or primary materials as easily as in other countries. We cannot negotiate trade in the same way as other countries but have to go through third parties, which is more costly. There is often much more demand than what we produce domestically can satisfy, so eggs disappear (*se pierden los huevos*), every now and then yogurt disappears (*a cada rato se pierde el yogur*), every now and then everything disappears (*a cada rato se pierde todo*)

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Castiñeiras García (2013, 152) cites that as of 2006, subsidized foods “accounted for 64.1 percent of total caloric intake and 62.7 percent of protein.” Although this author, and the Economics professor cited above are referring to distinct aspects of the food supply (caloric intake and protein consumption versus material supply), the Economics professor's account of how much food the state supplies could be slightly exaggerated.

as a result. There is much more demand than supply. Sometimes though, production levels are higher and the markets are full and there's stability with the eggs, for example. But other times, no. It is not a decision the government makes, but results from the relation between supply and demand (interview, MINAG employee, 41 years old, January 2015).

Generally speaking, consumers in Pinar del Rio feel that the prices that *carretilleros* charge are expensive, even exorbitant at times and there is no question that certain consumers have greater accessibility to purchase from street vendors than others. This differential access to goods in the private market is one of the points that critics hang onto regarding the impact of state decentralization upon social inequalities that the revolutionary government has consistently worked hard to eliminate.

Despite elevated prices, however, there is a widespread perception (among *carretilleros* and consumers) that cheaper alternatives for Cuban consumers are gradually disappearing with the state's reduction of subsidies. Given this situation, I asked street vendors why they had a steady clientele despite the fact that they are publically critiqued for charging often out-of-reach prices:

Because the state doesn't have it [food], can't offer it (*porque el estado no tiene*). It is expensive because by the time it gets to Pinar del Río the produce has already passed through two or three intermediaries, by a second hand (*por segunda mano*) (interview, Franco, 42 years old, October 2014).

People have to eat...there's none from the state [referring to food]. Look, I'm here parked in front of *la placita* and there's nothing there (interview, Manuel, 35 years old, November 2014).

All of the products I have here are in demand. Sweet potatoes, which people really like, plantains...all of the products that we [*carretilleros*] sell the people want because there is a lot of necessity, a lot of hunger (*mucha necesidad, mucha*

hambre). In *la placita*, the state markets, there's none [referring to food] (interview, Rafael, 48 years old, May 2015).

In *la placita*, there is none [referring to food] and the people are obliged to come and buy from us. Imagine if there's no cassava in the house, and you've got to make stew for a family member who's sick. You can't do it with beef because it's prohibited and if you can't buy a little cassava, with what are you going to make the stew?! (interview, Lisandra, 26 years old, May 2015)

Lisandra's comments emphasize the importance of alternative food retail venues in Cuban livelihood strategies, especially in a context where certain food items such as beef, have historically been prohibited for sale to the public, or in more recent years prohibitively expensive. Thus, the gradual decline of state subsidized foods as one alternative is a difficult situation to come to terms with for many Cuban families. In many instances, street vendors highlight the lacking state food supply as rationale for their presence and work in general. They also point to high demand within a context of scarce food resources as one justification for charging high prices (in addition to other consequences of privatized food distribution, such as price inflation by other intermediaries along the food chain). Indeed, others were more candid about the fact that they are a small business and geared to making a profit, which contrasts with the stated purpose of state agricultural markets:

The prices depend on the selling and buying practices of the intermediaries. It's a business. And clients will always complain. You could sell cassava at 3 pesos (CUP) a pound, and they'll still complain. The products are more expensive because the *placita* does not have the same variety and for this reason, we are a business. Also, we bring our product directly to people's front doors and people buy from us instead of going to the *placita* because it's more convenient (interview, Carlos, 25 years old, July 2015).

Although each neighbourhood has community retail shops like the *placita*, it seems that they are being outstripped by the convenient service provided by street vendors. Picking up on the situation as cast by market administrators (and captured above), street vendors also point out that they pay in cash, which is supposedly more accommodating to farmers:

Do you know why the state has none [referring to food]? The state delays paying farmers, and also pays them very little. Farmers prefer to sell to me because I purchase at cost and pay them directly on the spot. If the state paid farmers better prices, *la placita* would be full [of merchandise]. It's proportional, you see? (interview, Reinier, 31 years old, January 2015).

As evidenced in the quote that opens this section, the stipulation that the “state has none” is, in a way, an example of exaggerated posturing by street vendors. Nevertheless, many rationalize street vending in terms of the moral economy of food as established by the revolutionary government. That is, even street vendors frame their own activities (including when they cross the line into illegality) in light of the state’s failure to live up to the established moral economy of food.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have endeavored to demonstrate the currency in Cuba of a moral economy of food that revolves around state centralized food procurement and distribution. What emerges is a sort of moral conundrum between a guaranteed food supply to the appropriate venue of the state market, a lack of state resources to ensure efficiency in the food system, and the decision of the state to move away from centralized distribution as a result. On one hand, both state and integrated civil society actors that work within the centralized food system seem to consider it their moral obligation (as well as that of the state) to ensure that state marketplaces are well-stocked with subsidized foods. The problem of Cuba’s food supply from this perspective is tied to inefficient agricultural production and distribution, which intermediaries and private

entrepreneurs take advantage of. The interception of farmers by street vendors is heavily weighted as negatively impacting the availability of produce at reasonable prices to the populace. On the other hand, street vendors justify their work in terms of a discourse that hinges on the state's inability to adequately provide for the population. As demonstrated, this perspective is not wholly accurate given that the state continues to supply a large proportion of foodstuffs to the Cuban people. Regardless of the relative marginality of the private sector in food to date, however, changing state policies have had an enduring impact. It is telling that the actors represented here (those that work in centralized and private food distribution alike) still frame their activities in a manner that directly or indirectly upholds a moral economy of food wherein the state is expected to provide food for all at fair prices. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon to observe consumers purchasing items from street vendors even when such items were available in the state markets at subsidized prices. This discord between the discourse that "the state has none" and the practice of opting to not buy from the state, even "when it has some," ultimately points to the way in which everyday practices are beginning to outstrip ideals regarding what may be considered "proper consumption" in a socialist society.

Chapter 5

5 Mitigating Risks and the Use of Public Space

In a *Trabajadores* article on August 2, 2015 Barreras Ferrán writes about the apparent crackdown by inspectors on street vendors in Havana: “The *carretillero* from whom I usually buy vegetables tells me ‘the inspectors do not let me live.’ He then went on to narrate more than one incident wherein inspectors tried to penalize him despite not violating any of the established laws or regulations that, unnecessarily in my opinion, have been attached to the territories wherein they can work, such as places that they are forbidden from selling in or passing by.” Similar damning stories have also surfaced in Cuban media outlets such as *CiberCuba* (which has known ties with the U.S. and is a source of anti-Cuban state propaganda). Posted on their feed are grainy cell phone videos that show Cuban police confiscating the merchandise of *carretilleros*, or forcibly removing different ambulatory food retailers while crowds of onlookers shout in protest.⁵⁶ By mentioning these accounts, my intention is not to cast the actions of state agents as following through with the unwavering force of a police state; however, such stories captured in the media beg the question as to how the seemingly innocuous use of public space to privately sell fresh produce and other food items is interpreted within the context of Cuba’s evolving state socialism. Indeed, the establishment of “detailed regulations over the use of... public spaces, specifying where self-employment would be prohibited” is not unprecedented on the island or elsewhere for that matter (Ritter and Henken 2015, 253). Nevertheless, given this contested terrain, this chapter picks up on themes previously explored regarding the paradoxical position that street vendors occupy, encouraged as legitimate workers and food distributors, yet heavily restricted by state regulations. In particular, this chapter examines the dynamic between restrictions on the use of public space, and the way in which street vendors in Pinar del Rio bend such restrictions to their own ends. Thus, while street vendors use various strategies to

⁵⁶ For example: <https://www.cibercuba.com/videos/noticias/2016-01-28-u13-policia-cubana-decomisa-productos-carretilleros-y-el-pueblo-responde>

negotiate encounters with general inspectors, this chapter explores such strategies exclusively in terms of street vendors' use of public space.

In what follows, I first explore the official definition of the *carretillero* job category, wherein permitted practices are mostly defined in terms of the use of space. As such, the official job category provides insight into hegemonic⁵⁷ notions of public space in Pinar del Rio. While the need to access public space as a livelihood strategy makes street vendors vulnerable to dominant notions regarding its appropriate use, they also exhibit knowledge of the cityscape that they use to their advantage. With this in mind, next I look at the common strategies that *carretilleros* use to adapt space to their own ends and to avoid receiving fines. The third section of this chapter delves into how *carretilleros* interpret the restrictions placed on them and the fines they receive for committing infractions. Notably, these actors express a generalized belief that they are subject to the arbitrary exercise of power, which in this case is articulated in terms of state restrictions on the use of public space. In this sense, de Certeau's concept of "dominant space" is relevant. He argues that such space is created by "powerful" decision-makers, and that "users" of space, while unable to "change the system," are able to appropriate space to their own ends, albeit temporarily (Premat 2009, 30). Such appropriation is not necessarily outright resistance but is enacted on a scale of the quotidian, what de Certeau (1984) calls "practices of the everyday." Ultimately, in this chapter, I seek to interpret where small economic actors fit within Cuba's reconfigured socialism in terms of spatial relations of power.

⁵⁷ I use the term hegemony to refer to a historically dominant paradigm.

5.1 Ambulatory Vendors



Carretillos parked on a prohibited street, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2014

Legally, street vendors belong to the “ambulatory vendor of agricultural products” job category (*vendedor de productos agrícolas en forma ambulatoria*), whereby the stipulation that they are “ambulatory” is central to the way in which their practices are defined and subject to discipline. Activities that are permitted under this job category revolve around “transporting cargo in a cart or similar object in order to sell agricultural products in public without establishing a fixed area; complying with urban regulations and traffic laws regarding the routes they travel; and following regulations as set by administrative bodies regarding the areas within which consumers can access their merchandise [where within the city they are permitted to sell]” (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2013a, 257). As outlined in the law, *carretillos* are restricted in terms of the streets on which they can travel and sell. In Pinar del Rio, as well as the surrounding suburban areas, they are prohibited from traveling upon streets that comprise the center of the city and high-traffic zones, and are not permitted to sell within one-hundred meters of other agricultural commercial outlets (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2013b, 405). They are not permitted to park the cart in a fixed space, unless they stop to sell a product; however, they cannot stop to sell in no-parking zones or in front of public institutions, such as daycares, schools, hospitals, museums and other official institutions of historic and

cultural significance (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 2013b, 405). Street vendors are also not authorized to sell exclusively within one neighbourhood (interview, Franco, 42 years old, November 2014). Additionally, although not explicitly referenced in the law quoted above, street vendors must comply with Public Health (*Higiene y Epidemiología*) and Urban Planning (*Planificación Física*) by-laws regarding proper hygiene and handling of food products, and the aesthetics of the city in general. To this effect, their carts must be clean and well-kept, which includes not discarding the refuse from agricultural products on the streets (personal communication, employee, Urban Planning, Pinar del Rio, 2015). The street vendors I worked with often took issue with the scope of these prohibitions, and their choice to not comply with the restrictions on their selling practices and whereabouts is one reason among others for which they are targeted by general inspectors and other state agents.

5.2 Competing with the State “Store”

Franco, 42 years old and working in street vending for 3 years, was the first street vendor I interviewed formally. He works with a partner (both of whom have an equal share in the profits) which he says makes it easier to divide up duties associated with sourcing merchandise and working the cart. Franco’s (and his partner’s) *carretilla* was consistently parked in a prohibited zone, which I found interesting given that he had been to prison for black market dealings in previous years (*un negocio que salió mal*, literally a business venture that went bad, he told me). I assumed that having such an experience would motivate a person to more obligingly follow the law. Nevertheless, when I asked Franco about the restrictions on street vendors’ use of public space, he provided the following account:

There are many regulated streets here in Pinar del Rio, almost all of them.

Because what they don’t want is for us to be in the historical district of Pinar del Río, see, us *carretilleros*. You can sell where the neighbourhood of *Llamaris* begins and outward, but not in the center of town. You have to be on the outskirts of town. I don’t know if it’s because of hygiene, or so as not to disrupt traffic.

There are a thousand reasons that they come up with... not to be on the sidewalk

because you obstruct pedestrians who have to be asking “excuse me, excuse me,” to get by. They look at all of this. And then there are carts, as they say, that make the city look ugly. There are carts that are well-kept, but there are many that are falling apart or the *carretilleros* throw trash, waste from the produce, on the street and these are the ones that make the city ugly, and so they don’t want any of us in the city center. Look to see if you can find a cart on Main Street, or the cross-street that goes up to the *Copelia* [ice cream parlour]. There are none. We look for a corner, somewhere inconspicuous, because they tell us that we cannot be in the historical district. My work partner and I are parked here [on a prohibited downtown street] but we shouldn’t be because we are in front of the *Tienda Panamericana* [Panamerican Store] (interview, Franco, 42 years old, November 2014).

As Franco explains, the public space that *carretilleros* can access is peripheral to the main city center, and this relegation to the margins of the city is symbolic on multiple levels. The *Tienda Panamericana* that he references belongs to a commercial chain owned by the Cuban state. Many state-owned chains like the *Tienda Panamericana* are located upon the main arteries of the city of Pinar del Rio. Thus, from one viewpoint street vendors’ businesses are legitimate so long as they do not encroach upon the public space reserved for commercial ventures of the state (Cross 2000 explores a similar phenomenon). The *Tiendas Panamericanas* do not typically sell fresh produce, other than imported items like apples and pears periodically. Nevertheless, spatial restrictions on street vendors may also be linked to limiting competition to the state sector by private entities, as some scholarly analyses convey. In their extensive study of *paladares* (private restaurants), Ritter and Henken (2015) trace the Cuban state’s approach to self-employment that has conformed to a cycle (for lack of a better term) of liberalization and retrenchment; they note a period of contraction in the mid-1990s, wherein the Cuban state recognized that “legalization had been a mistake due to the suspicion that these fledgling restaurants [*paladares*] encouraged competition with the state sector” in addition to other

illegalities (Ritter and Henken 2015, 251).⁵⁸ Premat (2012, 49) also observes that this period of contraction was linked to “signs of a recovering economy.” She notes that “local NGOs, allowed to flourish at the beginning of the Special Period as a means to draw needed foreign currency into Cuba, not only were considered less necessary to the economic recovery of the country but also were perceived to be prone to political deviations” (2012, 49). Although there has been a clear shift toward the official recognition that self-employed actors are important to economic growth, there is a complex relation between the spatial marginality that street vendors experience and the extent to which they are considered marginal (even suspect) within the dominant state economy.



Imported pears and apples for sale, State *tienda* (store), Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

In this way, street vendors in Pinar del Rio draw an explicit link between restrictions on where they can sell, and their ability to have a successful business. As a result, many of the *carretilleros* with whom I spent time did not abide by prohibitions regarding selling

⁵⁸ This period of contraction also came as a result of “renewed escalation of tensions with the United States culminating in the Helms-Burton Act, which broadened the U.S. embargo to third-party countries” (Premat 2012, 49).

on central streets,⁵⁹ as the following interview excerpts demonstrate:

Lina: Isn't this a prohibited street?

Rafael: This is *Galeano* and yes it's prohibited.

Lina: Don't they fine you?

Rafael: Sometimes. About 15 days ago they gave me a fine of 700 pesos [CUP].

Lina: So why do you park here?

Rafael: Because you can sell a lot, so much! (interview, Rafael, 48 years old, June 2015)

Lina: This is a prohibited street?

Fidel: Yes, but they can fine me if they want. That's not right [restrictions on where *carretilleros* are permitted to sell]. I sell where the people come most often. Nobody can be walking all day with this cart. If I've already had to walk from *la Piña* [the market] and my legs hurt! So many limitations and restrictions (interview, Fidel, 59 years old, April 2015).

Lina: Is this an ideal place for you to sell? Where would you prefer to place your cart if you had a choice?

Manuel: More central. You've got to be walking, but outside the city center where there are no people. That law [restricting the use of public space], I don't understand. It comes from... [taps his left shoulder with the index and middle fingers of his right hand] (interview, Manuel, 35 years old, November 2014).

⁵⁹ Note that for analytical purposes, I created a map of the whereabouts of street vendors in my sample, but do not include it here for ethical reasons (to ensure anonymity of street vendors). Of the 24 street vendors in my sample, 8 (1/3) were often blatantly parked on prohibited streets. Also, 19 of the 24 street vendors in my sample worked within Pinar del Rio proper (as opposed to suburban areas). Of these 19, 6 were typically parked within 100 meters of state dollar stores (nearly 1/3); and 6 typically parked on the corner of prohibited streets, also within close vicinity of state dollar stores and state agricultural markets (nearly 1/3).

The gesture that this last vendor makes is characteristic of Cuba and signifies those with high rank in the *Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias* (Armed Revolutionary Forces, FAR); however, in my experience, the gesture has evolved to generally refer to “the bosses” (*los jefes*) or decision-makers in positions of political power. Spatial restrictions on street vendors’ whereabouts are not exclusive to the proper city of Pinar del Rio but also apply to suburban areas. For instance, a young female vendor who was (according to her) parked in an unsanctioned zone in the suburb of *Calero* explained to me: “Yes, the restrictions apply here as well. We can’t be here; we can’t be anywhere. I pay for my license, which they have raised to 200 pesos [CUP] every month, but if they want to they can fine me 700 pesos [CUP] for being on this street. We have to be walking [pushing the cart] all day, which is impossible.⁶⁰ If farmers have to give their oxen a break at mid-day to rest in the shade until 3 or 4 in the afternoon, imagine us, we are humans! (interview, Lisandra, 26 years old, May 2015). Lisandra is one of the vendors who were turned out from the private market in *Calero* when, as she tells it, unexpectedly the state decided to take possession of the market. Apparently, all of the vendors were told to leave, many of whom became *carretilleros* as the market was transferred over to state management. The photo below shows four of these vendors congregated together. Notably, they not only dominate the street corner, but they are parked directly across from the converted market, also a prohibited zone. Indeed, the administrator of the converted market in *Calero* was indignant about the presence of *carretilleros* near the market as it not only constituted outright subversion of regulations, but also meant for competition. As explored in Chapters 3 and 4, market administrators are generally of the opinion that *carretilleros*, by their very nature as intermediaries, intercept goods and divert agricultural products from the “appropriate” destination of the state market.

⁶⁰ It was common for street vendors to “round up” when talking about their monthly license and social security fees, which is actually \$187.50 CUP.



Carretilleros congregated in a prohibited zone, Calero, Photo source author, 2015

What emerges in these interview excerpts is resentment on the part of *carretilleros* regarding the fact that they are excluded from access to spatial zones of high commercial activity, which inhibits their ability to profiteer.⁶¹ On this point, Seligmann's (2012, 128-29) discussion of Peruvian street vendors may provide insight:

What to do about vendors has always been a political hot potato. I argue that they are such a hot potato, not so much because of the consternation they provoke due to practical matters, such as freeing up city streets and improving urban hygiene. These aspects matter, but just as importantly if not more, they provide invaluable economic services... and the flexibility, unpredictability and knowledge about space that they command as weapons has meant that they are a force to contend with. They are hard to govern.

What distinguishes the Cuban from the Peruvian case is that Cuban *carretilleros* are legally employed, which means that their encounters with authority are probably not as

⁶¹ It is important to qualify that such restrictions may also be tied to tourism, and the fact that street vendors may interfere with a particular aesthetic that the state would like to maintain. However, given that the city of Pinar del Rio proper cannot be characterized as a tourist destination, such reasoning for restrictions on street vendors' whereabouts did not emerge in interviews (with bureaucrats or street vendors).

contentious, nor are the stakes for holding ground on the public space they use as high. Even though their job category has been created to fill an economic gap in terms of services that the state alone cannot provide, their activities are evidently interpreted as somehow threatening to the socialist state. From this view, street vendors are meant to fulfill a particular social purpose within the emergent nonstate sector in food that should remain complementary (even marginal) to the dominant socialist economy.

5.3 Mitigating Risks

The legal stipulation that street vendors be ambulant points to the social purpose (*objeto social*) they fulfill within Cuba's socialism: to facilitate access to fresh produce by bringing it directly into residents' neighbourhoods and in some cases directly to their homes. However, the requirement that they physically must be circulating through local neighbourhoods all day makes them "moving targets," which not only speaks to state agents' preoccupation with their whereabouts but also to the way in which *carretilleros* capitalize upon the transitory nature of their job in ways to resist prohibitions on their practices. Thus, the significance of the ambulatory nature of *carretilleros* is multi-faceted in that it is both central to the way in which they are governed, as well as to their strategies for avoiding regulations. Contrary to the perspective that street vendors as private actors are marginalized so as not to compete with the state "store" (Ritter and Henken 2015, 276), the prescribed ambulatory aspect of their work provides them with a



Carretillero moving locations, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015



Carretilla (cart) fully loaded, Calero, Photo source author, 2015

certain amount of freedom. As more broadly articulated in the literature regarding street vending (Kathleen Dunn 2014; Seligmann 2012; Véliz and O'Neill 2011; Zolniski 2010 for examples), *carretilleros* are not simply subject to what they consider the capricious exercise of power but take advantage of the requirement to move around in order to avoid

inspectors. Creative work-arounds on the part of street vendors parallel what de Certeau (1984) coins “Styles of action,” or ways of operating within a given dominant regime or space. As this author (1984, 30) theorizes, styles of action “intervene in a field which regulates them at a first level... but they introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage that obeys other rules and constitutes something like a second level interwoven into the first.” The strategy most commonly referred to by street vendors in my sample involves moving their carts between a few (usually two) set locations throughout the day, although often staying within the same vicinity of a particular neighbourhood or street, as the following interview excerpt indicates:

Lina: Are you in a prohibited street?

Raul: No, that’s the prohibited street [pointing to a nearby cross-street.] But here everything is prohibited.

Lina: Inspectors usually fine *carretilleros* for selling restricted items or for being in a prohibited street, right?

Raul: No, they fine you when they feel like it. We are supposed to be walking all day, but with such a heavy cart it’s not possible. I walk over there, over here, a little at a time (interview, Raul, 51 years old, May 2015).

Raul explains that he moves from street corner to street corner but stays within a small radius. His cynicism is typical wherein he emphasizes that not only the street vendor job category but also life on the island is generally prohibitive. Part of his (and other street vendors’) frustration is linked to the sheer size and weight of his *carretilla* (cart) as can be gleaned from photos herein. The carts are also often improvised constructions whereby the wheels or other parts may have a defect, and this makes it difficult to maneuver them. While some *carretilleros* were conscious of this hindrance and worked with small, more manageable carts, all of the *carretilleros* that comprise my sample had large carts that were heavily loaded with products, and as such were cumbersome to move around with. Although the law does not stipulate parameters for the size of the cart, and it also does not seem logical to burden oneself with such a heavy piece of equipment,

I can speculate that the larger the cart, the more produce one can carry and thus, meet consumer demand.

Many consumers buy from the same *carretilleros* due to convenience and rapport, among other reasons. As might be expected, then, maintaining their clientele is a key concern for street vendors. Street vending is not only marginal to zones of high commercial activity but is also tied to the risk of losing customers as a result of the prescribed transitory nature of the job. Franco subtly underscores this risk:

I'll tell you, my partner and I have worked as *carretilleros* for many years and we know how to live [survive]. When they [inspectors] are coming, and we know they are going to fine us we move to another street. It's for that reason that I tell you if I'm not here, I'll be there [at their second location]. See? So they don't fine me. If I don't do that, they'll fine me and get me good, 700 or 1500 pesos [CUP]! (interview, November 2014)

The survival of Franco's business (and that of other street vendors) partly revolves around keeping customers informed of his whereabouts. More broadly, what emerges in the above excerpt illustrates the social dimension of navigating restrictions on the use of public space. In this sense, Franco partly relies on the forewarnings of acquaintances, people in the street, other *carretilleros*, or even other inspectors that he should move lest he be fined.

5.4 Interpreting Inspections

This afternoon, I saw Ruben selling on *Gerardo Medina*, and thought it was odd because he normally sells on *Comandante Pinares*. About 30 minutes later as I came out of the internet café, I saw him moving his *carretilla* again to another less central street. I went over to chat briefly with him. He said the inspectors were "coming down hard" on them today, and so he was forced to travel with his cart more frequently, and outside of his typical selling locations (Field notes, December 2014).

Street vendors can receive fines for various infractions; however, how often they encounter inspectors and receive fines is relative to the neighbourhoods or zones within which they sell, the level of social capital they hold with general inspectors (which is often based on friendships and/ or gifts of produce), how disposed they are to abiding by regulations, among other factors. In order to get a sense for the extent to which *carretilleros* are subject to inspections, I asked them how often they typically encounter inspectors, and how often they are fined. With respect to the former, responses varied from six times a day to once a month; in terms of the latter, responses also differed from once or twice a week, to once a month, to once every few months or less. Take for example the following interview segments:

Lina: Do you encounter inspectors often?

Julio: Five or six a day.

Lina: And when they give you fines, what are they for?

Julio: Whatever they want. Because I've parked the cart or am not following some law. One time, I was parked here and I crossed the street to buy some sweets and they fined me 700 pesos [CUP]. Another time, I forgot my license at home and they fined me 1500 pesos [CUP].

Lina: How often do you receive fines?

Julio: Once a month, depending on when I see inspectors (interview, Julio, 20 years old, November 2014).

Lina: How often do you receive fines?

Vladimir: Not since November [2 months] but it varies. Before November, there was a period where I received many fines, 1 or 2 a week. Sometimes they take away your license. This happened to me once but I went to their office on *Gerardo Medina*, and talked with them, and they gave my license back (interview, Vladimir, 20 years old, January 2015).

Lina: How often are you fined?

Manuel: Every 3 or 4 days, once a week.

Lina: And do inspectors give you a reason for why they fine you?

Manuel: It's their work. In order to get paid, you have to do something. I wait for them, and don't argue with them. I pay the fine and then I'm done with it. Nobody understands it [the system for administering fines.] The worst is to not have papers, but I do, I pay my license monthly (interview, Manuel, 35 years old, November 2014).

A thread that weaves these three conversations together, and appears in other interviews, is the perception among street vendors that the outcomes of their interactions with general inspectors are often capricious. Given that part of the complex way in which Cubans experience "the state" is in reified terms, it is typical to hear people describe interactions with the state and state agents as having a characteristic of powerlessness or ambiguity that can lead some people to exaggerate or confound the situation (recall Raul's comments above that "everything is prohibited.")

While many of the street vendors that I worked with were most commonly fined for not following rules as regards the use of public space (that is, parking the cart, and/ or selling on central streets), when asked to explain why they are fined, or if they understand the regulations that have been placed on their selling practices they often replied that they did not know why:

Lina: Do the inspectors give you a reason for why they fine you?

Manuel: No, they fine you because they can (interview, Manuel, 35 years old, November 2014).

Lina: Do you often encounter inspectors?

Jorge: *Muchacha* yes, how they like to give fines!

Lina: Why do they fine you?

Jorge: Because you have to be walking around [pushing the cart] all day, and if they see you stopped they give you a fine. You also need to keep the cart clean, and if it's not well-kept Public Health will give you a fine.

Lina: Why do you have to keep walking all day?

Jorge: I don't know (interview, Jorge, 18 years old, December 2014).

Jorge is an unlicensed vendor who works his brother's cart a few days a week to make extra money (the brother is the rightful licensee). While it is clear that some *carretilleros* genuinely do not fully understand the reasoning for regulations placed upon them (such as this young man), others simply feign ignorance, or take a stance of mild resistance by claiming that they do not know. In addition to this perception of the arbitrary exercise of power, other street vendors also alleged that inspectors are required to fulfill a certain monthly quota, and simply abuse their power for administering fines in order to reach the quota. Although I was never able to confirm this particular allegation, it further underscores the extent to which street vendors feel that they are unfairly targeted and that their encounters with state actors are seldom positive. Moreover, they relate experiences of overt abuses of power tied to *amiguismo* (cronyism), which is also characteristic of power dynamics in Cuba (see for example Ritter and Henken 2015). When asked about the outcomes of their encounters with inspectors, these street vendors had this to say:

You have to be walking all day long but that's impossible because the cart weighs a lot. We also can't be in the main streets. The inspectors are, as they say, *el Diablo* (the Devil). There are many that don't fine you but they'll swipe something from your cart, three tomatoes and a cabbage (interview, Juan, 28 years old, December 2014).

It depends on who you are. There are *carretilleros* who are "friends" with inspectors and they give the inspectors free merchandise. Those *carretilleros* don't get fines (interview, Julio, 20 years old, November 2014).

Despite their perspective to the contrary, it is not entirely accurate that street vendors are simply unduly targeted by inspectors. Although I did not gain access to a sample of general inspectors, I informally conversed with a friend who works as one. As might be expected, she was not of the opinion that street vendors are treated unfairly, but that they are simply fined when they commit infractions. Although her responses were matter of fact, she was noticeably uncomfortable talking about interactions with street vendors and the types of fines she administers. While her behavior indicates discomfort with the subject matter, it might also speak to the controversial nature of street vendors in general.

Evidence also suggests that inspectors are at times complicit in turning a blind eye to specific street vendor infractions:

Lina: So the inspectors fine you?

Manito: Yes, sometimes. Not in this street because I'm not very visible but in the afternoon, when I move to the other, more visible street, yes. If they see you stopped, they fine you. If you're not doing anything wrong, though, they don't fine you. (interview, Manito, 33 years old, November 2014).

Lina: Do you often receive fines for being parked here on a prohibited street?

Martin: Well they [inspectors] don't bother me much because I'm in an alley, and not in the middle of the street. Sometimes they [inspectors] pass by and tell me to go further into the alley so I'm not as visible.

Lina: What do you think about restrictions on where you can sell?

Martin: I don't think it should be like this. If I pay taxes to the state, which they have now increased to 200 pesos [CUP], they shouldn't give out fines. We aren't allowed to be on main streets where we could sell more, we have to go to the outskirts of the city where you sell less, and for this we put ourselves in danger [take the risk of selling on prohibited streets and potentially receiving fines] (interview, Martin, 27 years old, January 2015).

Martin exaggerates the monthly fees he pays, which as noted are \$187.50 CUP for license and social security. The interview excerpts above indicate that inspectors are often reasonable in the sense that they are not simply determined to administer fines without a justification. By interpreting inspections in arbitrary terms, though, street vendors reproduce a historically embedded antagonism between *cuentalpropistas* and the state. It is possible to conjecture, moreover, that such antagonism is not wholly reflective of the current context wherein self-employment (and street vending) has been increasingly de-stigmatized. What emerges from these excerpts is that the practice of eschewing spatial prohibitions is not simply about access to the commercial center. Rather there is a certain level of resistance, of talking back to authority that has been identified as characteristic among Cuba's self-employed, and that warrants further inquiry.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to explore the relation between space and power as it emerges through street vendors' encounters with general inspectors as state agents. The spatial restrictions placed on the *carretillero* job category reflect what might be considered an ideal vision of space that revolves around the prioritization of central streets for particular state-managed commercial activity. From one perspective, this vision is tied to a political objective to maintain state dominance of the commercial sector by relegating private economic actors to off-center spaces. In her ethnography that looks at new and emerging forms of labour in New York, Dunn (2014, 136) argues poignantly that "street labor, like other types of informal self-employment, is embedded in structured relationships of dependency. Street vendors' primary dependence is on access to public space, which is precisely what makes them subject to intensive state regulations." Although it is difficult to compare Cuba's unique situation to informal labour in North America, Dunn's insights here are applicable to what *carretilleros* in Pinar del Rio experience, whereby they have restricted access to public space in three significant ways: they are only permitted to conduct business outside of central streets; they are not sanctioned to stop in front of public institutions to sell; and they must work in an

ambulatory fashion that precludes access to a fixed location. From another perspective, however, their very nature as ambulatory affords street vendors a certain level of freedom that articulates with the perceived need to control their whereabouts. Street vendors are not simply subjects of the capricious exercise of power but use the requirement to be transitory as a means of avoiding inspections and of manipulating spatial restrictions to their own ends.

A theme that consistently surfaces in conversations with street vendors regarding their interactions with general inspectors revolves around arbitrary restrictions and punishments. To an extent, this experience of arbitrary power can be linked to the contradictory evolution of private commerce within Cuba's socialism. Moreover, the fact that street vendors work in food, a highly politicized and state-controlled item in Cuba means that they are using public space, a public good, to enact the economy otherwise (that is, to sell food privately), which carves them out as particularly controversial economic actors (Leyshon and Lee 2003, 7). This chapter demonstrates in spatial terms the complex position that street vendors occupy as legitimate yet displaced from the mainstream economy. Nevertheless, for all the controversy that it invokes, the street vendor job category has yet to be eliminated. Their continued presence in nearly every *barrio* (neighborhood) and on nearly every *esquina* (corner) in Pinar del Rio, and across urban spaces in Cuba speaks to the integration of the state and private sectors in food commercialization.

Chapter 6

6 The Normalization of the Private Sector in Food



“Blockade [U.S. embargo]: the longest genocide in history,” Havana,
Photo source author, 2015

One afternoon in late October 2014, I sat with Lucinda on the back patio of the spacious yet sparsely decorated apartment my partner and I rented informally (the owner did not hold a license for renting). We were *escogiendo el arroz* (literally choosing the rice) or picking out the debris and broken grains of rice in order to prepare it for cooking, a banal practice that is iconic of life on the island. Lucinda is a friend of my partner’s family who cooked meals and did laundry on an irregular basis for us to earn extra money. Noting the relatively clean state of the rice, she asked me where I had bought it. In the *Ideal*, I told her.⁶² She said that for the last three months, the rice rations sold in the *bodega* have been of poor quality.⁶³ For a period, the rice had been clean and the grains were whole, but now the “good” rice has been going to Havana, where she said the products of best quality always go. There was a pause in the conversation, not uncharacteristic of Lucinda

⁶² *El Mercado Ideal* (the Ideal Market) refers to a chain of stores operated by the state that sell a selection of foods (excluding fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat). These foods are subsidized but the state considers them “liberated” nonetheless because they are not rationed.

⁶³ The quality and price of rice, for example, across retail outlets, such as the *bodega*, the *Ideal*, and street vendors varies. Typically, higher quality rice is sold in the *Ideal* and by street vendors and costs 5 CUP/ pound and 6 CUP/ pound respectively. Rice rations in the *bodega* cost 3.5 CUP/ pound.

who was now in her late seventies and tended to speak in a slow, contemplative way. She continued: “The people say it is because of the *bloqueo* [the U.S. embargo], that if it weren’t for the *bloqueo* we wouldn’t need the *libreta* (ration booklet). But without the *libreta*, people with no money, no *poder* (power) will go hungry.”



Rice (not cleaned) from the local *bodega* in Pinar del Rio,
Photo source author, 2014

Lucinda, an Afro-Cuban, was a child during the Batista dictatorship (1954 to 1958) and shared the general perspective of many of her generation that the merits of *la Revolución* that provided them with equality of opportunity for education, healthcare, employment and other necessities, such as food should not be forgotten. However, Lucinda’s perspective is also a reflection of her socioeconomic status. Both she and her husband, who live in a *barrio marginal* (marginal neighbourhood), are retired and receive a collective monthly pension of about 500 CUP (the equivalent of about 19 CUC). In order to supplement their meager pension, they participate in the informal economy by providing a domestic service (in the case of Lucinda), and selling small household wares (shot glasses typically) or cigarettes from their front porch. Lucinda’s husband’s diminishing health (he has terminal cancer) prohibits him from engaging in other *negocios* (the term used for both legal and illegal business ventures) that would be more lucrative but would also require more physical strength. Lucinda’s experiences are not uncommon, and they resonate with many Cubans who without question rely on rations.

Nevertheless, even Lucinda buys produce on the private market from *carretilleros* or *la Piña* from time to time. Indeed, I often struggled to reconcile legitimate complaints about the cost of food, and the speculative prices of *los particulares* (another term used for the self-employed that signals the individual rather than collective nature of the practice) such as street vendors, and what seemed to be the ever-more commonplace practice of buying from them. At its core, this work examines the relatively novel economic actor of the street vendor (private food entrepreneur) as a departure point to discuss broader evolving state-private sector relations. What I have explored here revolves around the normalization of the street vendor, or food intermediary actor and by extension, private food distribution within the context of Cuban reform. On its face, it is perhaps not evident what the practice of cleaning rice has to do with such normalization; however, the nuances of my conversation with Lucinda and my experience of getting to know her are significant in that they demonstrate not only the social and moral stakes of shifting state plans and food policy reform but also the cacophony of contradictions that characterize continuity and change in Cuba today. Fundamentally, as the role of the state evolves, so too do livelihood strategies that are linked into an increasingly heterogeneous food system that integrates both the state and private spheres (Brotherton 2012).

6.1 Continuity and Change



Street vendor, Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2014

Economic reforms initiated in the 1990s were interpreted among the populace with a certain level of skepticism regarding the depth of change. To this point, Routon (2010, 6) highlights that by the early 2000s, “All hope that market reforms would lead to more openness and ease some of the heavy-handedness by which the government sought to restrict political discourse and economic self-determination had been replaced by a kind of gloomy pessimism. The state, many believed, had no intentions of pursuing any changes that would erode its status as the absolute center of moral authority and power.” In a related sense, Ritter (1998, 64) portends that the strict “taxation and regulatory environment” implemented during Fidel Castro’s administration “seem[ed] to be designed mainly to hold back the evolution of small and middle-sized enterprise, to extract as much revenue as possible, and to protect the monopoly power of state sector activities.” Notably, this historically complex relation between the state and nonstate sectors has been interrogated in recent academic work on Cuba (for examples, Wilson 2014; Routon 2010; Weinreb 2009; Hearn 2008). In her study of the evolution of urban agriculture in Havana, for instance, Premat (2012, 9) contends that,

The transfer of responsibilities to the nonstate sector was arguably accompanied by an important shift in the practice of governance as individual citizens became responsible for ensuring their own well-being and, to a certain extent, gained the right to make their own choices in the area of subsistence. Although most urban agriculture sites in Havana retained links with state institutions, the sites my research focused on—namely the *parcelas* and *patios*—were characterized by considerable autonomy from the state control apparatus.... In a context where the state had lost its prior capacity to allocate resources and enforce compliance with established regulations, these small-scale urban agriculture sites could, but did not always, constitute a threat to state power.

My research project follows a similar trajectory, and explores the extent to which street vendors may, or may not, constitute a potential threat to the state not only as private economic actors but also as actors that exist outside of the centralized food system. Akin to the *parceleros* described by Premat (2012) *carretilleros* have been encouraged by the

state and are recognized as necessary in terms of practically and adequately addressing food insecurity. It is notable that nearly two decades have passed since the early reforms of the 1990s, whereby skepticism and heavy-handed regulation seems to have given way to a more pragmatic integration of the private sector within the Cuban socialist economy (Ritter and Henken 2015). Such integration is apparent not only in terms of the official measures to develop the private sector but also the everyday practices of food provisioning that revolve around a combination of private and state retail outlets.

Nevertheless, the persistence of a moral economy that expects the state to guarantee redistributive justice evidences the extent to which ideals may lag behind practices. The following excerpt from a farming cooperative president, wherein he explains the rationale behind the planned economy and centralized food system illustrates such ideals:

We in Cuba have a planned system, which is part of our socialism and many people forget when they ask us why we do not commercialize all agricultural production. We don't do it because one of the objectives of the planned system is that food be made equitably available to all Cuban people. Because of this system some food is subsidized, and some is sold according to supply and demand (Augusto, Cooperative President, interview, April 2015).

Evidently, the moral authority of the state as regards food provisioning and distribution remains a predominant point of discussion among actors that work within the centralized food system (and as such rely on state resources for their livelihoods), be they Ministry of Agriculture officials, vendors at state markets, or members of agricultural NGOS and cooperatives. Likewise, and as shown, this view is also held by members of the public at large. Cuba's moral economy of food, then, provides the backdrop against which the role of the street vendor is evaluated as a newcomer to a field that has been historically dominated by the state, and that citizens feel should continue to be dominated by the state.

6.2 Inroads of a Market Mentality

All criticisms of intermediaries by the government and the people have a real basis, but they often lose sight of the fact that these people are workers too, who are as socially essential as those who produce (Ravsberg, *Havana Times*, 2012).

The call for legitimating street vendors in Cuba has gone hand in hand with the increasing legitimation of free market mechanisms. Despite that they are (at least in theory) at odds with the ideals of the centralized food system predicated on equality, collectivity and food as a right, market principles not only appear in official rhetoric regarding food commercialization but have also become integrated into the popular lexicon. Tapping into the apparent moral decline associated with economic changes implemented in the 1990s, Premat (2012, 42) explains that, “In the view of many, Special Period reforms undermined a previously existing solidarity among fellow Cubans so that... the drive for personal profit now appeared to override the need to contribute to the well-being of the broader society.” Nevertheless, and in spite of some suggestion to the contrary, actors involved in food distribution may be changing their language in a way that reflects the ideological inroads made by a capitalist market logic in today’s Cuba. Writing about self-employment in particular, Ritter and Henken (2015, 5) state that, “References to the ‘market’ or the ‘private sector’ are absent from government discourse, which consistently uses the euphemistic term ‘nonstate sector’.” While the use of the catch-all term “nonstate” to refer to the private and cooperative sectors holds true in my experience, in the realm of agricultural commercialization references to *oferta y demanda* (supply and demand) are also becoming more commonplace. It is notable that legislation that permitted the opening of “free farmer’s markets” in 1994 makes no reference to *oferta y demanda* (DL 191), whereas more recent legislation in 2013 regarding the commercialization of agricultural products does (DL 318) (Cuban Gaceta Oficial 1994; 2013). This change is congruent with Cuba’s last two iterations of their economic plan, which have policies that commit to “allowing competitive mechanisms to play a more active role in” commercialization (Cuban Political, Economic, Social Guidelines, 2011, 26). The freedom to set prices by agreement (*precios por acuerdo*) as opposed to the

regulation to set prices as per the Cuban Ministry of Finances and Prices, however, is not as novel and is referred to in both the 1994 and 2013 legislations.⁶⁴ *Precios por acuerdo* indicates that actors privately trading in food (such as those captured in the private food distribution network in Chapter 3) are permitted to set prices according to private agreement between the parties involved. Moreover, a tangible shift toward talking about food distribution in terms of supply and demand is evident. In discussions with bureaucrats, farmers, and street vendors alike, the principle of supply and demand as much as centralized mechanisms, is typically referenced as guiding commercialization and the cost of food. For instance, Augusto, the cooperative president referenced above, underscored the notion of food as a right rather than a commodity in Cuba while simultaneously naturalizing the supply and demand rules that account for the pricing of food sold by *carretilleros*:

There are more than 4000 farmers in the province of Pinar del Río, and the objective of the state and of the cooperatives is to produce enough food so that supply outweighs demand. Unfortunately, demand is often greater, and for this reason *carretilleros* charge high prices for many products (Augusto, Cooperative President, interview, April 2015).

This incorporation of market principles into how people talk about agricultural commercialization signals a greater integration of market principles and a broader acceptance of the private sector entrepreneur in the field of food distribution than one might expect given the mentioned critiques of *carretilleros*.

For decades, the role of the private entrepreneur was framed in a negative light in Cuba, and there continues to be a certain level of moral distaste associated with these actors as being driven primarily by profit. As a result, the perceived need to inculcate the

⁶⁴ Premat (2012, 38) also notes that the staff of Agricultural Consultation and Input Stores (*Tiendas Consultorios Agropecuarios*, TCAs) in Cuba that sell agricultural inputs, “Did not receive salaries but worked on commission primarily derived from the sale of nonprotected items (e.g., ornamental plants and gardening tools), which they produced independently of ESA [Cuba’s Agricultural Input Enterprise] and could price as they wished.”

moral difference between “honest profit regulated by the state and profiteering connected to illegal activities” remains resonant (Premat 2012, 40). However, regardless of moral posturing against dealing with street vendors, it is clear that they have become an accepted actor within the food distribution system. Not only can the state collection enterprise (*Acopio*) enter into contracts with street vendors, farmers also often trade with them. Additionally, street vendors constitute a key retail point in the provisioning practices of consumers. Consumer-informants often conceded that their repertoire of provisioning outlets included *carretilleros* given that they are not only convenient to reach (often passing by people’s homes), but also offer a variety of produce usually unavailable in the state agricultural markets. In this way, the complementary service that street vendors in particular, and the private food sector more broadly provide has been increasingly included within daily provisioning practices. All of these observations suggest that the private market in food is becoming more embedded in Cuban society, both discursively and in practice.

6.3 Adaptations of the Cuban Socialist System



“With Fidel, Revolution,” Pinar del Rio, Photo source author, 2015

The adaptability of the Cuban socialist state to internal and external pressures has been explored by several scholars (Gold 2015; Brotherton 2012; Premat 2012; Eckstein 1997).

In describing what he terms the “pragmatic state” Brotherton (2012, 185) argues that “rather than imagine the State as a tangible, monolithic entity, one must see it as being disaggregated in multiple forms, dynamic and responsive, to global and external pressures.” In this sense, “the institutions of the State have increasingly modified their policies, objectives, and age-old ideological positions,” a process whereby “Cuban socialism is itself being redefined and transformed” (Brotherton 2012, 185). This process of transformation can be seen in terms of evolving private sector-state relations in the realm of food. New food policy seeks to unburden the state economy by providing alternative avenues for food distribution and provisioning. On one hand, this situation points to the withdrawal of the state regarding food subsidies and the centralized mechanisms of food distribution. On the other hand, it also evidences the extent to which the state has successfully diversified food retail options by integrating private actors within commercialization. The fact that buying from *carretilleros* has become normalized speaks to a market heterogeneity that reflects not only the adaptability but also the shifting role of the Cuban state in the nation’s economy.

The state’s role as food distributor has been reconfigured to the extent that it is now shared with private economic actors in a kind of symbiotic relationship. In terms of the street vendor figure, the official position holds that they are legitimate, if properly licensed, but that they should remain somewhat off-center (or complementary) to the state food distribution and commercialization system. Nonetheless, street vendors have gained ground in terms of both becoming viable retail options for consumers, and gaining legitimacy within the broader economy.

Much of the opposition and tensions surrounding the work of *carretilleros* seem to stem not entirely from their role as private entrepreneurs but more so from their role as traders in food, a politically strategic item that is closely intertwined with the notion of rights in Cuban socialism. This case study ultimately suggests that the role of the Cuban state as guarantor of basic rights such as food has begun to shift in unprecedented ways.

It is worth noting that with the recent passing of Fidel Castro in November 2016 and plans for Raúl Castro to step down from the Presidency in February 2018, the future trajectory that Cuba will take remains an open question (Ritter and Henken 2015; Pérez-

Stable 2007). I am willing to venture that the inroads to date as regards the private sector in food commercialization (the heterogeneity of food provisioning outlets so to speak) will continue to develop in ways that could radically transform food access on the island, in addition to the way in which Cubans generally perceive food. All the same, and as the Cuban state continues to “perfect socialism,” the extent to which the commoditization of food in Cuba will be as all pervasive as it is in the capitalist context will only emerge over time.

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Appendix A: Research Ethics Approval Form



**Western
Research**

Research Ethics

Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Adriana Premat
Department & Institution: Social Science/Anthropology, Western University

NMREB File Number: 105616
Study Title: Doctoral Fieldwork Research: Exploring Themes related to Sustainable Food Production and Consumption in Pinar del Rio, Cuba
Sponsor:

NMREB Initial Approval Date: September 24, 2014
NMREB Expiry Date: August 31, 2015

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
	Research instrument for food vendors in Spanish/English	
	Research instrument for presidents of farming cooperatives and farmers in Spanish/English	
	Verbal consent script in Spanish/English	
Letter of Information	Letter of Information	2014/09/06
Revised Western University Protocol	Revised Western protocol in PDF.	2014/09/06
Recruitment Items	Revised telephone script for recruitment	2014/09/06

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the HSREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of HSREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Riley-Hinson, NMREB Chair, or Board Member designee

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

<input type="checkbox"/> Erika Basile ebasile@uwo.ca	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grace Kelly grace.kelly@uwo.ca	<input type="checkbox"/> Mina Mekhail mmekhail@uwo.ca	<input type="checkbox"/> Vikki Tran vikki.tran@uwo.ca
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This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.

Appendix B: List of Acronyms

ACOPIO	State Collection Enterprise
ANAP	<i>Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños</i> (National Association of Small Farmers)
CCS	<i>Cooperativa de Creditos y Servicios</i> (Credit and Services Cooperative)
CUC	Cuban Convertible Peso
CUP	Cuban Peso
DL	<i>Decreto-Ley</i> (Decree-Law)
ESA	Empresa de Suministros Agropecuarios (Cuba's Agricultural Input Enterprise)
MINAG	<i>Ministerio de Agricultura</i> (Ministry of Agriculture)
ONAT	<i>Oficina Nacional de la Administracion Tributaria</i> (National Office of Tax Administration)
TCA	<i>Tiendas Consultorios Agropecuarios</i> (Agricultural Consultation and Input Stores)
UBPC	<i>Unidad Basica de Producción Cooperativa</i> (Basic Units of Cooperative Production)
UPR	<i>Universidad de Pinar del Rio</i> (University of Pinar del Rio)

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Lina Michelle Johnston

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
2000-2004 B.A., Honours

University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
2007-2009 M.A., English Literature

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2010-2012 M.A., Anthropology

Western University
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
2013-2017 Ph.D., Anthropology

Honours and Awards:

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2014-2015, 2015-2016 (Declined)

Regna Darnell Award
Western University
2014-2015

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Doctoral Fellowship
2015-2016, 2016- 2017 (Declined)

Related Work Experience

Research Assistant
University of Ottawa
2009-2010

Teaching Assistant
Carleton University
2010-2012

Research Assistant
Western University
2013-2014

Teaching Assistant
Western University

2013-2016

Publications

Johnston, Lina and Yoan Suarez Toledo. Cuba's *Programa de Innovación Agropecuaria Local*: State Decentralization and Farmer Participation. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. (Article submitted).

Conferences

2013. "Mobilizing Alternative Farming: Cuba's Model of Popular Participation." 3rd International Graduate Student Research Conference on Latin America and the Caribbean, York University, Toronto, ON.

2012. *La seguridad alimentaria en la voz de los campesinos: una investigación en la provincia de Pinar del Río. Segundo Simposio Científico Internacional, Cuba*. Universidad de Pinar del Río, Cuba.

2012. *La formación de fincas agroecológicas destinadas al cultivo de plantas medicinales y aromáticas. Primero Expo Feria de Plantas Medicinales y Productos Naturales* Universidad de Pinar del Río, Cuba.

Research Projects

2011. "Integrated Knowledge Translation: Studying the Partnership Aspect of Collaborative Research." Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

2012. *La formación de fincas agroecológicas destinadas al cultivo de plantas medicinales y aromáticas*. Universidad de Pinar del Río, Cuba.

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