

Beans and Roses

Everyday Economies and Morality in Contemporary Havana, Cuba

av

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Abstract

Drawing principally on eight months of anthropological fieldwork in Havana, Cuba in 2006, this dissertation explores how morality is articulated in everyday economic life among people with low to moderate economic capital: state employees as well as informal workers and entrepreneurs.

The people I talked to described their economic situation as tough, difficult and stressful. In this context of hardship and scarcity people were, however, reluctant to talk about “basic needs” and refused to call themselves poor. The differentiation between basic/non-basic needs as well as that between poor/non-poor people is shown to be far from neutral but is instead an act played out in a specific situation of unequal power. My interlocutors pointed at the politics involved by insisting on dreaming of, striving for and expecting not the mere basics but a “normal” life, and by presenting themselves as economically and morally capable rather than poor. Poverty is strongly associated with hunger and hunger has, in this context, moral implications. By refusing the label poor my interlocutors not only presented themselves as people capable of making ends meet but also as complete human beings capable of acting according to moral convictions.

Looking at consumption I explore the expectations people have of the state to provide them with possibilities to make a “normal life”, as well as the changing role of the state in this area. In post-Soviet Cuba, the state has gradually turned from being a provider to being a seller thus effectively changing the rights and obligations of the state as well as the citizen. Another important part of the changing material and moral landscape is the failure of the state to pay decent salaries. This failure not only motivates but morally legitimates my interlocutor’s engagement in the informal market – as consumers as well as workers and entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial spirit needed to succeed in this market is, on the one hand, celebrated as requiring a set of positive traits such as intelligence, creativity, and, on the other hand, feared as profit-seeking behavior which risks turning intelligent calculation into selfish cheating. The informal market is risky for both consumers and sellers and risk is frequently controlled by establishing relationships of trust. Social closeness is assumed to create moral rights and obligations which check the dangerous, immoral, aspects of entrepreneurialism.

The close but at the same time conflicting relationship between interest and intimacy is further explored in the area of interpersonal relations between kin, couples, friends and health personnel and their patients. Here, moral negotiations are performed to make sense of ideals of intimacy free from any economic interest that coexist with a reality where material transactions are not only central to interpersonal relations but where people are increasingly dependent on this economy of gifts and favors.

Keywords: *Cuba, Caribbean, Latin America, everyday life, economy, morality, living standard, consumption, work, informal economy, inequality, family, livelihood.*