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State and life in Cuba: calibrating ideals and realities in a state-socialist system for food provision

Based on our collective ethnography of Cuba's socialist system for the provision of state-subsidised food, this article explores manners in which the state weaves itself into the fabric of people's everyday lives in state-socialist society. Instituted by Cuba's revolutionary government in the early 1960s, Cuba's 'state system for provisioning' is still today the backbone of household subsistence, propelling individuals into direct daily relations with the state via its neighbourhood-level network of stores that distribute food catering to citizens' 'basic needs'. Our ethnography brings together a series of studies conducted by the members of our team in different parts of Havana, charting the most salient aspects of people's interaction with the state in this alimentary context. We argue that the state becomes pervasive in people's daily lives not just because it is present in so much of it, but also as the basic normative premise on which people interpret and evaluate everyday compartments in the interactions food provisioning involves. Life in state socialism involves the constant and intricate comparison of its own realities against the normative ideals the state purports to institute. These 'vernacular comparisons' between life and state, as we call them, are the 'local knowledge' of state socialism in Cuba.

Sacando los mandados: entre lo normado y lo real en el sistema estatal socialista de abastecimiento cubano

A partir de nuestra etnografía colectiva del sistema del abastecimiento de alimentos subsidiados por el Estado cubano este artículo explora las formas en las que el estado se imbrica en el tejido de la vida cotidiana de las personas en el socialismo de estado. Instituido por el gobierno revolucionario cubano a principios de la década de 1960, el 'sistema estatal de abastecimiento' de Cuba es todavía hoy la espina dorsal de la subsistencia de los hogares, el cual impele a los individuos a establecer una relación cotidiana y directa con el estado a través de la red de establecimientos comerciales a nivel de barrio que distribuyen alimentos de acuerdo con las "necesidades básicas" de los ciudadanos. Nuestra etnografía reúne una serie de estudios llevados a cabo por los miembros de nuestro equipo en diferentes partes de La Habana, describiendo los aspectos más significativos de la interacción entre las personas y el estado en este contexto alimentario. Argumentamos que el estado se vuelve ubicuo en la vida cotidiana de las personas no sólo por estar presente en numerosos aspectos de la misma, sino también por ser el supuesto básico y normativo con el que la gente interpreta y evalúa sus comportamientos en las interacciones cotidianas relacionadas con el abastecimiento alimentario. La vida en el socialismo de estado involucra una constante e intrincada comparación entre los ideales normativos que el estado pretende institucionalizar y sus realidades. Estas 'comparaciones vernáculas' entre vida y estado, como las llamamos, son el 'conocimiento local' del socialismo de estado en Cuba.

Key words Cuba, state, socialism, food, consumption, vernacular comparison, basic needs

Introduction

Much of the by now well-established anthropological literature on the State has focused on questions of what one might call critical ontology. What is the state (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991)? Does it exist or is it illusory, and how is its putative existence sustained (e.g. Geertz 1980; Alexander 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Gupta 2012)? It is noteworthy, however, that studies conducted in state-socialist contexts have been more concerned with what in a different context Krupa and Nugent call the ‘phenomenology of rule’, ‘attend[ing] closely to the social space of lived governmental and nongovernmental encounters and [asking] about the conditions that (may) make the state appear present in everyday social relations’ (2015: 6). For example, in East Germany, how did the state implicate itself into people’s personal lifecourse so as to define their sense of self and belonging (Borneman 1992)? How, in Romania, did the state make its presence felt in people’s most intimate spaces through the regulation of family planning (Kligman 1998)? And how did it come to have such a powerful hold on people’s imagination even where its reach may have seemed weak, such as Soviet Siberia (Humphrey 1983; Grant 1995; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003)? In conditions of state socialism, then, in which the state’s presence purports to be pervasive, making itself felt in high on every aspect of life, the most pressing anthropological question is not what the state actually ‘is’ – or whether, indeed, the state is actually as powerful as it claims, or why people come to imagine that it is – but rather, first of all, what it is like to live in the midst of such a thing.

Taking such phenomenological (as opposed to ontological) questions as our starting point, in this article we take the state as a vernacular concern rather than an analytical one (cf. Krupa and Nugent 2015: 9–10), to ask *how* the state exists for people in the late state-socialist context of Cuba. To render ethnographically visible the sometimes visceral relationship between ‘the state’ (*el estado*) and ‘the person’ (*la persona*) in Cuba, we focus on an arena of daily life in which this relationship is vital in a literal sense, namely, the everyday operation of the ‘state system of provision’ (*sistema estatal de abastecimiento*), in which rationed quotas of state-subsidised food are distributed to the population on a monthly basis. In what follows, we describe ethnographically the character and dynamics of this interaction in order to articulate analytically the particular manner in which ‘the state’¹ becomes not just a pervasive element of people’s lives, but a point of reference that provides the basic coordinates within which life in Cuba is lived. In particular, we argue, through its manifestation in the structural arrangements for the daily provision of food for households, the state provides the horizon of expectations, values and, in the most literal sense, ‘norms’, against which its daily interactions with people, as well as the interactions between people themselves, are constantly calibrated. As we shall show in an array of different aspects of the state system for food provisioning, this capacity of the state to become the norm against which life is measured is realised most pervasively through the way people continually *compare* the reality of their experience with the normative expectations that the state itself embodies. This capacity of the state to implicate itself as a premise of such continual everyday acts of ‘vernacular comparison’, as we call it, is a prime way in which the state becomes the very ground on which life is lived in a state-socialist society such as Cuba.

¹ To avoid tiring the reader with proliferating scare-quotes of this kind, for the rest of this article we will take as read the inverted commas indicating the vernacular character of the terms ‘state’, ‘person’ and their cognates (‘functionary’, ‘citizen’, ‘household’, etc.).

Our argument will develop in two steps. The first two sections provide a phenomenology of the state's presence in people's daily lives by examining two social spaces that the Cuban system of food provisioning connects, namely, the intimacy of the home in which the arrangements for household consumption are made, and the state stores from which the subsidised goods are distributed at neighbourhood level. As we shall see, the state system of food distribution puts these two spaces in a relationship of mutual (albeit asymmetrical) interpenetration. Then, in the following two sections, we examine the ways in which vernacular comparisons between state norms and lived realities are woven into the fabric of people's everyday interactions with the state system of food provisioning, becoming the very stuff out of which these finely balanced interactions are made.

A note on the nature and methods of our research will be useful at the outset. The research is the result of a four-year-long ethnographic collaboration between us, which grew out of an 'ethnographic exercise' that Holbraad ran as part of his teaching on the Diploma in Anthropology at the Cuban Institute of Anthropology (ICAN) in Havana in 2015. Our team comprises students and staff of ICAN who, inspired by an initial exercise on the study of the role of queuing in everyday life in socialist Cuba, decided to develop a more systematic study of the state system of provisioning (henceforth SSP). To do so, we decided to look at the SSP from the point of view of the different actors involved in it – clients, vendors, administrators, state functionaries – as well as the different social contexts it connects – family, neighbourhood, state stores and state agencies. Each member of our team took responsibility for charting one aspect of the process: Carrazana looked at the SSP's role in the context of the family, Reyes studied a local SSP store, Cano focused on the sociality of the interactions between clients and vendors, Rodríguez studied so-called 'messengers' as intermediaries between them, and finally Mesa was able to study the inner workings of a state agency charged with overseeing aspects of the SSP at municipal level. As Cuban citizens conducting 'ethnography at home', each researcher conducted participant observation and interviews in their own local area of Havana, combining their findings with their own life-long experience of the SSP. Holbraad acted as overall coordinator of the study, providing also some of the analytical framing in the final stages of drafting. Over the four years of our collaboration, each member of the group produced multiple versions of their ethnographic materials and analyses, and we met in Havana approximately every six months to discuss them, draw connections between them, and eventually give shape to the analysis presented below. The serial structure of our argument, therefore, largely reflects the shape of our group and the structure of our experiment in collaborative ethnography.

Metonymic flows between state and family

Following the Revolution of 1959, Cuba entered an era of profound economic, political and social transformation, with adverse effects on dominant interests of US capital on the island. In response to the revolutionary government's rapid measures of nationalisation, in June 1960 the USA imposed an economic embargo, commonly referred to in Cuba as 'the blockade' (*el bloqueo*). In addition to ending bilateral trade, withdrawing investment and banning American tourism, by February 1962 the embargo included the ban on food and medicines exports to Cuba. In view of the ensuing shortages, on 12 March 1962 the revolutionary government's Law 1015 created the National Board for the Distribution of Supplies. Its task was to establish the list of items that would become subject to local or national rationing, decide on the quantities of each product

to be allocated to the population, and organise their regime of distribution to individual households across the island. To facilitate this new system of state-subsidised food and other daily necessities, the state authorities instituted the so-called 'Notebook for the Control of Provisioning' (*Libreta de Control de Abastecimiento*, commonly referred to as *la libreta* – 'the notebook'). Similar to rations books used in situations of national scarcity elsewhere, this state-issued notebook has since the early 1960s been used to record on a monthly basis each family's allocation and consumption of state-subsidised provisions, as we shall explain in more detail below (for a detailed history and symbolic analysis of *la libreta* in Cuba, see Fundora García 2016).

In the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the SSP formed the backbone of household consumption in Cuba (Díaz Acosta 2010). To be sure, following the crisis provoked by the demise of the Soviet Union (the so-called 'Special Period' of the 1990s) and subsequent measures to attract foreign investment and develop controlled forms of private enterprise on the island, at present the SSP operates alongside other forms of consumption. These include non-rationed state goods (*productos liberados*), the higher-ticket goods obtained in state-controlled supermarket chains operating in so-called 'convertible currency' (CUC), which is pegged to the US dollar and runs parallel to the 'national currency' of Cuban Pesos (CUP) (see Holbraad 2017), as well as products available at non-regulated prices in the private sector, including an ever buoyant informal economy in goods and services exchanged beyond the parameters of the law. As described in a number of ethnographies of everyday consumption in contemporary Cuba (e.g. Pertierra 2011; Rodríguez Ruíz 2014), these varied fields of production, exchange and consumption constitute a complex field of transactions that Cubans navigate as part of what Anna Pertierra (2011) calls the 'struggle for consumption'. While the role of the SSP within the landscape of everyday consumption has diminished markedly in recent years, with the acute crisis of the 1990s having profoundly affected both the quality and the quantity of goods supplied,² the system still constitutes an important source of basic provisions for most Cuban families. Playing a significant role in people's daily activities and the dynamics of family life, the SSP constitutes a prime arena of interaction with what they refer to and think of as 'the state', and is therefore a privileged site for examining ethnographically how the state implicates itself into people's daily existence, formatting in particular ways lives lived in its midst. To be sure, in this the SSP is similar to a number of other domains of life in state-socialist Cuba – e.g. the education system (Blum 2011), labour arrangements (Rodríguez Ruíz 2015) or healthcare (Brotherton 2012). Nevertheless, the SSP can be seen as perhaps the most thoroughgoing example of how the state penetrates deep into people's lives, inasmuch as most Cubans interact with it on an everyday basis for the duration of their life, in the intimate sphere of the home, and indeed the very sinews of their body.

To gain a sense of this, we may start with the experience of members of a family with whom Carrazana interacted regularly for a period of two months in 2017. Living

² Since the 1990s the quantity and variety of the goods provided on the SSP has diminished. While in the 1980s the 'basket of basic goods', as state discourse marks it explicitly (*la canasta básica*), included a wider variety of foodstuffs as well as personal hygiene and cleanliness products, at present the subsidised provisions include for each person a monthly quota of rice, sugar, beans, eggs, oil, matches, coffee, pasta, salt, chicken, mince and spam. On average, however, this quota lasts for around 10–12 days per adult (Ferriol 2001; Mesa-Lago 2009). One might say that the SSP has passed from being a 'total social fact' in Ssorin-Chaikov's Maussian sense (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017: 97, citing Mauss 1992) to a situation in which its claims to totality are severely eroded by Cuba's increasingly varied economic landscape, which has since 1990 included more and more elements of marketisation (see also Holbraad 2017).

in a two-bedroom apartment in a working-class district of East Havana, the family consists of grandmother, a mother and father, who are both in full time employment, and their teenage daughter, who is still at school. The daily task of obtaining subsidised goods from the local state outlets in accordance with the system's distribution cycles, Carrazana found, marks the rhythm of family life (cf Elliot 2021: 27-48), shaping also the dynamics of family relationships. As is frequently (and stereotypically) the case, the grandmother plays an important role in this connection, since, having more time on her hands, as she explains, she is in charge of securing most of the goods each month. Following common parlance in Cuba, she refers to this activity as '*sacar* [or sometimes '*coger*'] *los mandados*', which could be translated freely as just 'doing the shopping', but is reserved in Cuba for the act of procuring the monthly quotas of the SSP. Indeed, the expression conveys some of the more intricate characteristics of this everyday activity, since '*mandados*' is more strictly translated as 'errands' (thus conveying a sense of obligation), while the verb '*sacar*' means literally 'to take out' (while '*coger*' means 'to get'), conveying the sense that goods here are not being so much purchased as procured. To convey this sense of procurement of something to which one is already entitled, we have opted for translating '*sacar/coger los mandados*' as 'getting the goods'. Here is how the grandmother explains her way of carrying out the task on behalf of her family:

Every morning I do my little tour. I pass by the *bodega* [the state outlet – see below] to see what's come in, then I pass by the *agro* [the fruit and vegetable market, which is not subsidised], the pharmacy, and then the bakery. Then I pass by the kiosk to get the paper and I stay for a while at the yard of the *bodega* chatting to the people there. [...] I don't hurry much in getting the goods [*coger los mandados*], I never go on the first day. I usually take them out [*los saco*] little by little. As we are very organised, we always try not to run out of rice or oil in order to avoid having to go running to get them. Sometimes we get the goods only at the end of the month, depending on how they are given. My son-in-law or my daughter helps me when we have to get the rice or the sugar, because they are heavy. But the rest of the stuff, like chicken, mince or whatever other meat products arrive, you do have to get as soon as it comes, because you only have three days to get it out, otherwise you lose it. We pick up eggs as soon as they arrive, not because you can lose them quickly, since you do have ten days to pick them up, but rather because they do not keep them cool and since it's so hot here I'm always worrying that they could go bad. With bread it's different, you have to go and get it every day.

Entirely standard for Cuba, the grandmother's account can be read as an example of what Katherine Verdery has called the 'etatization of time' under socialism. Writing of the ways in which state processes 'mark time' for ordinary people in socialist Romania in the 1980s, Verdery uses the term to describe 'the ways in which the Romanian state seized time by compelling people's bodies into particular activities' (1996: 40), including queuing for scarce goods, spending hours commuting, etc. To be sure, the SSP is but one of the ways in which similar temporal dynamics have been experienced in Cuba throughout the revolutionary period, demanding of people that they effectively coordinate the rhythm of their daily chores with that of the state's regime for the dispensation of food and other basic necessities. It is indicative, for example, that so many of the stock phrases one associates with neighbourhood chat in Cuba are concerned with these daily exercises in 'etatized' timing: Has the chicken arrived? When is its sell-by date? Is there anything new in *la bodega*? When is the salt due? Coordinating

the temporality of the intimate sphere of home and neighbourhood life (including the personal – indeed biological – sphere of eating and its arrangements) with that of the state as expressed through the organisational exigencies of the SSP is a continuous daily activity that implicates itself into the fabric of ordinary living.

We may note, however, how these acts of daily coordination between personal intimacy and state process tend in important ways to blur the distinction between the two. On the one hand, the sheer logistics of people's daily use of the SSP render the state-issued rations of food a prime mechanism through which the state implicates itself into the most intimate spheres of family life. This is most tangibly the case with the state-issued goods themselves, which, having been procured at the state outlets in the neighbourhood, are taken into the home, kept in the kitchen (often in designated receptacles and positions) and then cooked and eaten by family members. While the state's projection into the home in this material manner has all the unconscious qualities of a Bourdieusian *habitus* (Bourdieu 1980), it is significant here that Cubans are just as habitually conscious of the distinction between goods procured on the SSP and other goods purchased elsewhere (e.g. on the black market or at a supermarket), referring to the former as goods 'of the state' (*del estado*) or 'of the state outlet' (*de la bodega*), typically connoting in this way also their inferior quality (e.g. 'thanks for the coffee, it tastes good', one might say politely to one's host on a visit, only to be told 'oh no, it's bad, from the *bodega*').

Questioned about her own family's habits in this regard, the grandmother explained with reference to the layout of the apartment's kitchen:

Things have their fixed place, and I also have a few bags [*jabas*] I use for getting them [*que son para los mandados*]. There are the ones for the rice and the sugar that are the heaviest, those I made of fabric. The rest I put in plastic bags. For the tubers [*viandas*, including potatoes, yams, taro, etc.], my son-in-law bought me one of those bags with wheels so I don't have to lift so much. [...] I always put that in the courtyard so it's not in the way, but the others I have on the shelf where I store the goods. The notebook [*la libreta*] I keep in a handy spot so that everyone knows where it is, just in case they have to go and get something.

The 'notebook' mentioned by the grandmother is a crucial point of interface between the intimate sphere of the family and the state processes of the SSP, being at once an object of daily use by families and an official document issued by the state agency charged with administering the SSP, called OFICODA.³ This dual aspect of the notebook – both personal and official – is captured by the grandmother's comment on its importance: 'you have to have it at hand because you never know what you might need, and sometimes they can come and do a verification for something and they ask for it'. This duality is captured paradoxically on the cover of the document itself, which states 'This notebook is not an identification document' – the Magrittian statement indicating the ease with which its users can come to see it as such (cf Foucault 1983). The official nature of the information contained in its pages, after all, includes the full names of the members of the 'family nucleus', who must be registered at the local OFICODA, with gender, date of birth, address and even relevant medical conditions that are identified on the document by designated codes that correspond to special

³ This is the acronym of Oficina de Control para la Distribución de los Abastecimientos (Controlling Office for the Distribution of Provisions), which has local branches throughout the country.



Figure 1 Bags of '*mandados*' kept in the home – rice and bread from the *bodega* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

dietary provisions.⁴ In interactions with the SSP, then, the notebook comes to serve as a prime means of identification, representing the family's entitlements within the system, as well as recording their use on a monthly basis, acting in this way as a kind of bureaucratic metonymy for the family itself. In fact, one may think of the notebook's metonymic status as operating in two directions at once. In one direction, it allows the family to which it belongs (and which it represents in Alfred's Gell's indexical sense of 'acting as a representative of'; 1998: 98) to project itself into the administrative processes of the SSP. In the other direction, understood as an official document in its own right – a document 'of the state' – its presence inside the home renders the notebook a prime vehicle for the state's metonymic projection into the intimate sphere of family life.

Recalling similar techniques of the state's metonymic projection into family life in the Soviet Union as described by Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2003: 81–2), and illustrating further the processes Verdery has called 'etatization', mentioned above, this double movement of metonymic projection holds also for the traffic of goods and entitlements that the notebook serves to regulate, acting as the prime mediator of the

⁴ Conditions that receive special dietary dispensations include high cholesterol, diabetes, HIV, ulcers, cancer and malnutrition.



Figure 2 *Libreta* kept at a ‘handy’ spot in the kitchen cupboard, and decorated in a personalised way with protective bind [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

relationship between the SSP and the families it is charged with serving. As we saw, the movement of goods distributed by the state outlets of the SSP effectively carry the state into the home, inasmuch as the goods are understood as being ‘of the state’. A similar metonymic projection, however, occurs in the opposite direction, from families towards the state process of the SSP. This has to do with the marked sense of entitlement on which the system is premised and which its operation habituates. Enshrining the monthly quota of goods corresponding to each family as a matter of personal entitlement (rather than merely something that is offered for purchase or provided as a service), the SSP effectively establishes an internal (Ollman 1975), mutually constitutive (Sahlins 2013) relationship between people and the goods the SSP distributes not just to, but also *for*, them. Established and held up as an attempt by the state to provide for the ‘basic needs’ (*necesidades básicas*) of its citizens, there is an important sense in which the goods that the SSP provides are as much ‘of the people’ as they are ‘of the state’. This is also reflected in the language people use to refer to the goods in question, which is suffused with assumptions of ownership. The grandmother’s observation about not being in a hurry to get the family’s quota from the *bodega* is in line with such common expressions as ‘they have to arrive’,

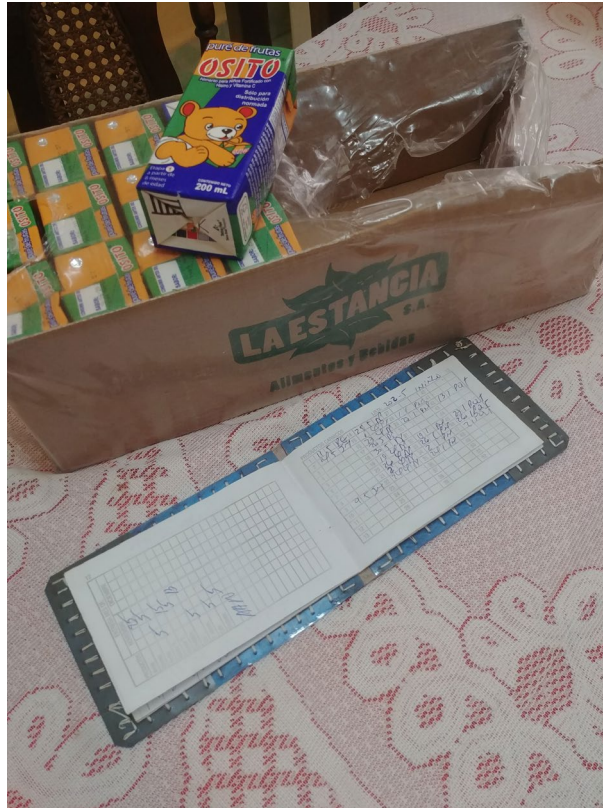


Figure 3 Open *libreta*, showing records of recent transactions
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

‘they must be there’, ‘they are mine and no one can touch them’, ‘there’s no hurry, they belong to me’ and, perhaps most pithily, the Spanish expression *lo que me toca*, which could be translated as ‘my fair share’ or ‘what I’m entitled to’. In this sense, the state-subsidised goods of the SSP can also be understood as metonymic projections of the person into the official realm of the state, with the state outlets acting as custodians of goods that in a deep sense are already constitutive parts of the people to whom they belong.

This metonymic traffic, then, allows the realms of the state and the family to penetrate each other in material, fully corporal, ways. This dynamic is further extended, however, when one shifts ethnographic attention from the family and its interactions with the SSP to the space of the *bodegas*, the local state outlets charged with distributing the goods, which family members visit on an everyday basis. As we shall show, the neighbourhood *bodega* is a highly socialised space, in which verbal and corporal behaviours that are associated with domesticity effectively flow into a space presented and imagined as an appurtenance of the state-sponsored administrative structure of the SSP. In the following section we illustrate this with reference to a single *bodega* that was studied ethnographically in a working-class area of Old Havana by Reyes.

Socialising the state in the *bodega*

Alongside state bakeries, butchers and milk dispensaries, *bodegas* are part of a nationwide network of state outlets charged with distributing foods and other items that the state deems to be part of the 'basket of basic goods' (*canasta básica*) that are supposed to meet families' basic needs. The 'basic' quality of this revolutionary undertaking is reflected in the no-frills character of the state outlets, which stands in perceptible contrast to the stores selling non-subsidised goods, and even more so when compared to the private sector shops that have mushroomed around Havana since the 2000s. The outlet studied by Reyes is typical. Goods are stored unceremoniously in basic receptacles of different sizes – sacks of rice, beans, sugar, a few cans, vases or packets of whatever other products are available, a plastic tank for cooking oil – and displayed around the counter at which the *bodeguero* (the administrator-cum-shop-keeper) keeps the pound scales on which the quotas are weighed out for the consumers, as well as his *torpedo* – the notebook in which transactions are recorded. The property itself is in a bad state of repair, darkly lit and with rickety doors. The official, state-sponsored character of what in pre-revolutionary times would have been a local convenience store (this being the standard meaning of the word '*bodega*' in Cuban Spanish), is made evident in lists of goods included in the current week's quota, displayed on the wall, alongside a worn poster that reads *¡Viva La Revolución Cubana!* As the *bodeguero* explained himself: 'The Ministry of Commerce (MINCIN) guidelines require us to put up the weekly distribution quotas so that the consumers are informed, so with my own money every Sunday I buy the newspaper [referring to the *Tribuna de La Habana*, the weekly paper in which the quotas are announced by the state authorities].'

Still, while the *bodega* is therefore perceived as being 'of the state' much as the goods it distributes are, it is also a space in which the more intimate sociability of domestic relations flows, mirroring the contrary-wise flow of the state into the home presented above. This is immediately evident in the relaxed attire of many of the consumers who visit the *bodega*. While official regulations prohibit consumers from entering the *bodega* bare-chested, on hot days male consumers habitually enter without wearing a top – an act that in Cuba connotes relaxed domesticity. Similarly, it is not unusual to see at the *bodega* women in their dressing gowns, with uncombed hair, wearing flip-flops – all markers of the domestic as well. In the *bodega* studied by Reyes, local clientele expressed their appreciation of the *bodeguero* in this regard, noting approvingly his relaxed attitude to questions of attire, notwithstanding the rules. In this sense, the space of the *bodega* acquires some of the qualities of a domestic space – a street-ward extension of the home, even. Recalling also the grandmother's comment about how she spends time at the *bodega* chatting with acquaintances as part of her daily routine, it is fair to say that the *bodega* is seen as a space of everyday sociability – a place to see neighbours, find out what's going on or just while away the time.

The domestic quality of the *bodega* is reinforced by the way *bodegueros* themselves act to personalise it as a space. In the *bodega* studied by Reyes, for example, the *bodeguero* would keep on the counter a radio playing mainly popular music, with a clock and extra shirt on a coat hanger hung on the wall, and, most strikingly, two house cats sat on the counter, offering themselves to visitors' stroking. While it is common knowledge that official regulations prohibit pets from such premises, the *bodeguero* is relaxed about their presence: 'Public health regulations prohibit domestic animals from commercial establishments, but I put some money aside for when the inspectors come,



Figure 4 ‘¡Viva la revolución cubana!’ Behind the counter of *la bodega*, with ‘board of distribution’ showing quantities of goods to which local residents are entitled [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

so my cats stay here. It’s better to have cats than to have mice.’ Furthermore, the sense of the *bodega* as part of the neighbourhood’s social landscape relates also to this particular *bodeguero*’s personal popularity. He’s a ‘good guy’ (*buena gente*), people in the neighbourhood say, fun to be around, charismatic and easy to deal with. With secondary-school education, and now in his 40s, the *bodeguero* has been in charge of this particular *bodega* for 22 years, and is by all accounts well embedded in the neighbourhood. As one neighbour put it, ‘the *bodeguero* has been in this *bodega* for so many years that it’s almost like he owns it. He’s had relationships with various girls from the neighbourhood and he’s quite a guy, but since he has money lots of them want to be with him.’

We return presently to the question of the *bodeguero*’s ambiguous status as both state functionary and ‘owner’ who ‘has money’. Here, however, we emphasise the manner in which his role in the *bodega* accentuates his social relations in the neighbourhood. He knows everyone’s personal circumstances, as neighbours point out, and this allows him to deal with consumers flexibly, helping to mediate problems that arise in their attempts to calibrate their personal needs with the formal regulations of the SSP. For example, neighbours will point out that he is generally happy to keep goods for them even outside the window of time given to consumers by the formal rules of the system. Some neighbours spoke of him as a kind of mediator in family conflicts, noting, for example, how when couples separate without notifying the authorities he will divide between them the monthly quota officially designated for the whole ‘nuclear family’, thus ameliorating the rigidity of the system. Discussing with Reyes his



Figure 5 Local resident having his quota weighed by the *bodeguero* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

informal role in such situations, the *bodeguero* gave his own vivid example, showing how far his flexibility can stretch on occasions: ‘When someone dies the family will go to OFICODA to get them removed from the *libreta*, but some people don’t do that and just continue getting the goods, and sometimes I’ll give them a break and play dumb. I tend to find out about everything that happens in the neighbourhood.’

The *bodeguero*, then, acts as a mediator between the personal sphere of the local families, with all of its fluidity, and the official realm of the SSP, with its more rigid framework of regulations. However, it is important to note also that the *bodeguero*’s mediations work in both directions, inasmuch as he is also charged with enforcing the regulations on his clients. For example, one lady in the neighbourhood told Reyes of an occasion in which the *bodeguero* abandoned his usual affable style and took on the more officious persona of a state functionary. On a previous month, she had forgotten to get the goods from the *bodega* so arrived there days late, in the beginning of the following month, but the *bodeguero* still gave her the goods – exactly the kind of favour he is known for doing (cf. Henig and Makovicky 2017). However, when a few months later she forgot to collect her quota again, the *bodeguero*’s style changed. With an unfriendly look (*mala cara*) he admonished her harshly: ‘the provisions are purchased during the month as per the established regulations, so now you’ve lost them. I have returned them to the *zona de comercio* (i.e. the state agents responsible for wholesale).’

In mediating between state regulations and neighbourhood sociability, then, the *bodeguero* himself can personify either, depending on the context and circumstances. Perceived as a ‘good guy’ who participates in the social life of the neighbourhood and helps people negotiate the inflexibilities of the SSP, the *bodeguero* can also come to



Figure 6 The *bodeguero's* cat on the counter [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

embody the state system which he metonymically represents, enforcing its norms and regulations when the circumstances require it. Instead of a metonymic flow that renders continuous the official sphere of the state and the intimate sphere of the family, in the figure of the *bodeguero* we have a discontinuous alternation between the two. If the state remains largely in the background of everyday interactions between the *bodeguero* and his clients, moments such as the one described above, in which the *bodeguero* enacts his role as enforcer of the system's regulations, render the normative force of the state as a figure of social life and a direct and explicit object of social interaction. This combination of features – a discontinuous alternation between state norms and ordinary life, and rendering the state an explicit object of consideration – come to the fore in the next two sections, in which we sharpen the ethnographic focus onto the way actors themselves conceive of their dealings in and with the SSP.

Suspicion and comparison

The most striking ethnographic feature of people's daily interaction with the SSP is a tell-tale attitude of generalised suspicion. All involved know that the SSP's official

regulations – the quantity and weight of goods allocated to each household, their frequency of distribution, the subsidised prices at which they are sold, etc. – are rarely followed to the letter, while people also tend to accept that some divergence between the ideal and the real, so to speak, is to be expected. This is most emblematically manifest in the interactions between clients and *bodegueros*. For example, Reyes's interlocutors were generally nonchalant about the fact that like all *bodegueros*, as they see it, their local store administrator would habitually help himself to part of the state produce to take home to his family, with no formal entitlement and without of course paying. For some this is a standard expectation since, as one of them put it sweepingly, 'all *bodegueros* are thieves, and they swindle you in weight or in money', while others were more charitable to their local *bodeguero* on account of his personal charm, with another of Reyes's respondents stating: 'I never weigh the goods after leaving the bodega ... I imagine that if the weight is short in some product or other it's just a matter of a few ounces. I don't think the *bodeguero* steals, he's a good guy and I get on with him well.' Be that as it may, the fact that some degree of personal gain is generally to be expected is confirmed by the openness of the *bodeguero*'s own admission during an interview with Reyes: 'the *bodega* guarantees me food for my home ... in earlier times one could make more (*uno se buscaba más*), but now it's just enough to eat.'

The expectation that *bodegueros* will skim off the produce they are charged with distributing was prevalent also among interlocutors in Cano's part of our study, which focused more sharply on the moments of transaction between *bodegueros* and their clients, in a neighbourhood of Alamar – Havana's biggest socialist-style residential housing estate, located on the eastern outskirts of the city. To be sure, a sense of indignation as well as suspicion is evident in the more generalising ways people here talked about the issue. For example, when asked about the issue while waiting at the butcher's queue to collect her monthly quota of chicken, one of Cano's respondents remonstrated: 'They don't display the prices, people don't ask for them, and that's where you get the "fines" [*multas*; colloquially ironic term, using the language of the state to refer to cheating]. People feel impotent, unable to claim their rights.' Another neighbour in the queue, however, weighed in: 'I do bring my calculator, and my scales are there at home if I need them, because if you're not on top of it they rip you off [*te tumban*]. He knows me [referring to the butcher] – once I came back because I was a pound short and he had to give me what was missing. He knows he can't mess with me!'

In their basic features, then, transactions between neighbours and local store administrators are reminiscent of the social dynamics of market interactions the world over – personalised strategies of negotiation, performed and performative confrontation and reconciliation, balancing of the actors' respective sense of self-interest against each other, and so on (e.g. Mintz 1961; Geertz 1979). What we focus on here, however, is the manner in which these complex and situational moments of negotiation involve the socialist state, as a normative horizon against which people understand and judge each other's actions. Through the official norms of the SSP, personified situationally (and intermittently, as we saw) by the store administrators themselves, the state operates within people's daily interactions with the SSP in the form of a *premise* in the complex strategic syllogisms in which these interactions play themselves out. Indeed, the attitude of generalised suspicion that, as we just saw, permeates these interactions can be understood (by the actors themselves as well as by us in our attempt to describe them) as a gloss on the myriad of situational syllogisms that are involved in obtaining goods from the SSP.

To illustrate how these daily syllogisms operate, let us take first an example of a transaction the actors involved took to be ‘normal’, taken from Cano’s interviews with her neighbours at Alamar. This concerns the story of one middle-aged woman’s transaction with her local *bodeguero*, regarding her entitlement to an extra monthly supplement of 8 lb of bananas due to her as ‘medical diet’ on account of her stomach ulcer. While, as we saw, clients are obliged to collect their ration before the month expires, on this occasion the woman had missed the deadline. Arriving at the local *bodega* in the first week of the following month, she mentions the problem to the seller (who has been in charge of the outlet for a number of years) and he helpfully adds the previous month’s quota to the current one, placing both together on the scales to serve the lady. The lady notices that at 15 lb, the produce is a pound short. ‘He looks at me, pauses, and hands the goods over [...], and I turned a blind eye’. The deal is sealed, then, in a split second, in silence, through a look in the eye, both parties doing each other a favour (see also Henig and Makovicky 2017).

Our particular interest here is in the role that the state-sponsored regulations of the SSP play as the horizon with reference to which the relative values of the favours transacted are measured. Both parties know (a) that the bananas must be collected before the end of the month and otherwise are ‘lost’ to the client and (b) as per the provisions of the medical diet, each client is entitled to 8 lb of bananas per month. On his part, then, the *bodeguero* understands that the client’s failure to make the previous month’s deadline is a circumstance that can be accommodated – she needs the goods to which she would have been entitled had she been on time, and to deny them to her would be a draconian imposition of rules that dictate a rhythm (‘etatized time’) that is often too rigid for a hard-working and busy person to follow. The reality of daily life is such that clients will sometimes fail to pick up bananas on time, so her request for them a week late is judged as fair. Conversely, the lady knows (as everyone does) that the state-employed administrator also needs to take a cut from the produce he is charged with dispensing. He has a family of his own to feed, and the salary he receives for his work is inadequate. Both parties, furthermore, know that the other party understands the rationale of their action – the lady knows that the administrator knows that her hoping to prevent the loss of the previous month’s bananas is reasonable, while the administrator knows that the lady knows that his taking a cut of the quota is also understandable. The knowing look the two parties exchange when the mutual favour is transacted, then, acknowledges their shared judgement that their respective divergences from the SSP’s norms are indeed ‘normal’. Had the administrator taken half of the quota off, say, the lady may well have remonstrated with him, just as the administrator is unlikely to have dispensed the missed month’s quota to her had she come to claim it, say, many weeks later.

Admittedly, this example is unusual in its balance, since both parties benefit in an equally immediate way. More typically, the fact that store administrators have more control over the terms of transaction owing to their role as state-charged functionaries of the SSP, as we saw earlier, means that they are able habitually to ‘steal in weight or money’, to recall the aforementioned respondent’s expression. That they should do so is ‘normal’, although, as we saw, some clients may seek to deny them the privilege, arming themselves with calculators and even their own scales. The point, however, is that the extent to which any given transaction is judged acceptable or as having gone too far is based on comparative syllogisms of the kind we saw with the bananas. Any given store administrator’s actions will be judged according to the degree of their

divergence from the regulative norms of the SSP, pitting against them the realities of daily life that everyone can be expected to know and understand.

As a number of ethnographers of daily life in post-1990 Cuba have noted (e.g. Rosenberg Weinreb 2012; Simoni 2016), the concept people often invoke to account for the more or less illicit means people – in this case SSP administrators – use to make ends meet as that of '*la lucha*'. Literally meaning 'the struggle' (invoking ironically the 'revolutionary struggle' of official government discourse), the term is used most often to mean something like 'the hustle', referring to the inventive ways in which individuals supplement their income, taking advantage of whatever opportunities their position affords them. *Lucha* is what everyone is expected to do, given how difficult life in post-Soviet Cuba is acknowledged to be, so the question is more how far one's *lucha* can be deemed acceptable by others, and how far it might cross the limit and be deemed as an unfair or abusive attempt to take advantage at others' expense. The evaluative logic of *la lucha*, we might say, is the logic of 'live and let live' – *vive y deja vivir*, as it is also said in Cuba.

As an example of what happens when the balance between idealised norms and real circumstances gets too tilted, we present a case from the material collected by Rodríguez in a multi-storied building in Vedado, a well-to-do area at the centre of the city. This focuses on the ambiguous role of a so-called 'messenger' (*mensajero*) whose services are used by residents of multi-storied apartment blocks. Residents too busy or frail to do the daily rounds of the SSP stores in the neighbourhood will come to an arrangement with a *mensajero*, handing over to him their *libreta* to enable him to collect the goods on their behalf in return for a monthly fee. Legalised as a form of self-employment (*cuentalpropismo*) as part of the economic reforms of the post-Soviet so-called Special Period of the 1990s, messengers act as intermediaries between the state-structures of the SSP and the persons whom they serve. This places the messenger in the ambiguous role of at once standing in for the client vis-à-vis the SSP and, conversely, acting as a representative of the SSP (in lieu of the *bodeguero* or other state-paid administrator) in the eyes of the clients who pay him for his services.

This sense of ambiguity is central to the complaints expressed to Rodríguez by residents about their *mensajero*, who has been servicing their building for over ten years, and who they are convinced is conspiring with the local *bodeguero* to swindle them, by effectively taking ownership of their rations-books at their expense. As one resident explained suspiciously, 'they are in cahoots, because if he gets to weigh stuff [at the *bodega*], he must be getting something out of it, since he isn't the *bodeguero*, and the guy who is lets him deal with his clients' goods [...] it's an arrangement between the two of them.' So, while the messenger's formal role is to stand in for the client in return for a fee, in reality his role comes to approximate that of the *bodeguero*, inasmuch as it gives him control over the distribution to clients of the SSP's goods. Therefore, according to the localised logic of general suspicion, the messenger is expected to skim off at least some of the goods for his own benefit, much as the *bodegueros* do. Whatever the realities of this particular case, then, messengers and *bodegueros* are 'in cahoots' structurally, as it were, messengers' advantage lying in their ambiguously dual role as both client and provider, ostensibly mediating between the two.

To a certain extent, the same allowances made to the *bodegueros* in the previous examples were made by Rodríguez's interlocutors too, readily accounting for their messenger's tricks by pointing to his '*lucha*' as a father. 'Everyone has a family to take care of, and the situation is really bad', as was said by one elderly neighbour who had

many years of bad experiences, ever since she was forced to contract his services due to mobility issues preventing her from visiting the stores herself. However, over the course of an extended interview with Rodríguez, it became clear that the 80-year-old lady had long since stopped feeling that the treatment she got from her messenger was to be excused as a normal part of making a living:

He brings me the stuff when he feels like it, and they weigh whatever he likes. [...] At least a leg of chicken he 'eats' for himself (*se la come*), and if you add everyone else's up, he must have enough chicken for the whole month. [...] With the bread it's the same, [bringing it irregularly and] alleging that it's so bad it isn't worth it, or that the bakery isn't working, and then people say they've seen him go home with a bag full of buns. [...] In the past I've told him even what evil he'll die of, but he always comes back, as if nothing had happened, as if he couldn't care less what you say. [...] I'm a person with many limitations, ill, and I can't move because of my legs. In any case, having started with him, now it's difficult to leave him, what with him being in the *bodega* weighing [people's goods], when he sees my *libreta*, if he is meant to give me 24 pounds he'll give me 20, he's going to rob me, so to avoid that I have to continue with him, you know what I mean? There's no other solution. It's just wickedness, these people lie because they're no good. A good person doesn't do that. [...] These days I don't even argue with him, I barely talk. He doesn't even know how to speak [laughing]. He must have gone up to the third year of primary school at most, but one thing he's good at is counting money, that's for sure, he passed in math, and his lies are of a high quality too, he makes them up on the fly.

Shifting from frustrated indignation to humorous resignation, it is clear that the elderly lady is not willing to accept the messenger's behaviour as 'normal' – even though, as she admits, it is quite usual ('all messengers are the same', she said on another occasion). As she sees it, rather than 'live and let live', what we have here is a man shamelessly taking advantage of her age and circumstances, using barefaced lies not merely to skim off some goods on top of his legitimate fee, but altogether to deprive her of whatever goods he can get away with. Note, however, that the lady's sense of moral indignation (in her eyes, the man is as evil as he is brutish) is founded on her sense of unfair disproportion. As with the previous case, both parties know full well what the lady is entitled to receive according to the regulations. But whereas in the previous examples *bodeguero* and client alike measured a reasonable distance from the regulations by taking into account the realities that either side confronted, here the messenger has developed techniques that allow him to effectively disregard the circumstances of his clients, and is rather perceived as asserting his own greed at their expense. His lies, imperviousness to complaint and even the implicit threat that he might continue to swindle the neighbours due to his close relationship with the *bodeguero* are all ways in which ordinary appeals to the state's regulations as a point of reference for deciding what is acceptable, if not quite fair, are effectively ignored. Rather than acknowledging that everyone has needs (the very needs that the SSP is meant to fulfil) and then trying to balance them with each other with reference to the normative horizon of the SSP, here the norms themselves seem to be arbitrarily trampled, and the lady's sense of proportion is offended.

In sum, people's daily dealings with the SSP play themselves out in finely balanced acts of comparison, in which actors understand their own and others' behaviour

by comparing it to the framework of norms and expectations that the SSP sets up, and make judgements by gauging the distance between those norms and their actual behaviour – state-sponsored socialist ideals, and life-ridden realities of behaviour, as it were. Moral evaluations of people's actions in this context, we suggest, come down to comparative evaluations of the distance between the ideal and the real. While everyone accepts that there will be some divergence between the two, the question people are interested in is how much of it there is. Some divergence is understandable, indeed acceptable, and in any case 'normal'. Too much divergence, however, can be condemned as unacceptable, and deemed too unfair to be condoned, or even 'abusive' (*un abuso*), insofar as it throws the normal (and fine) balance between ideal norms and real behaviours out of kilter. Making these kinds of 'vernacular comparisons', as we call them, is what daily life in state-socialist societies is made of, and, insofar as the state features as their major premise, attending to these forms of comparison allows us to articulate in the most concrete terms a prime manner in which the state itself becomes present in the very fabric of people's lives.

Vernacular comparisons of the person

To complete our account of how the state operates as a premise of the comparative syllogisms the socialist principles of equitable needs-based distribution the SSP engenders, we now turn to the research Mesa conducted, with functionaries of a municipal 'Company of Commerce and Gastronomy' of one of the inner city municipalities of Havana. These 'Companies' are local arms of the state, charged, among other things, with monitoring the distribution of goods on the SSP, as well as dealing with complaints by members of the public. Of the different facets of our study of the SSP, Mesa's comes closest to being an ethnography of the state as seen 'from within'. After all, if the *bodegas* are understood to be 'of the state', as we saw, the municipal Company would more readily be described as *being* part of the state itself, as one of its localised agencies, with its employees acting as its 'functionaries' (*funcionarios*). This is certainly how it is seen by members of the public who direct their queries and complaints to its staff, and they in turn understand themselves as authoritative representatives of the state with specialised knowledge of its norms, regulations and bureaucratic procedures.

A first point to note, however, is that the kinds of syllogisms we encountered in people's daily interactions with the SSP, gauging comparatively the rightful balance between state norms and lived realities, operate also in the functionaries' thinking. Indeed, in large part, Mesa's interlocutors saw their own role not so much as merely upholding the state system, but more as calibrating it in subtle and always contextual ways in relation to the reality of people's circumstances (see also Nading 2017). For example, speaking of her role as inspector of the municipality's SSP outlets, which involves making sure that *bodegueros* dispatch the goods appropriately, one young company employee explained to Mesa in candid terms her attitude to the *bodegueros*' ways of operating:

First comes the state's part [*primero es lo del estado*], and well, one tries to make it work, and then one's own bit comes too. [...] But there are some [*bodegueros*] who are too ambitious and that's why they explode. I'll give them a break, but they have to do things properly because the one thing I can't do is burn myself.

Bodegueros, then, are assumed even by the state inspectors to be measuring the distance between norms and reality, and the risk of 'exploding' or 'burning oneself' resides in becoming so ambitious that things are no longer 'done properly', veering too far away from the premise for judgement that the state's norms provide. Interestingly, however, this kind of comparative syllogism also operates in the finely balanced judgements that the state functionaries have to make when dealing with the complaints that members of the public bring to them. Just as the SSP's clients judge the 'normality' of the behaviour of *bodegueros* or messengers according to the degree to which this behaviour diverges from the state's idealised formal norms, so the functionaries assess complainants' claims with reference to the idealised formal image of people as 'citizens' with 'basic needs' on which the SSP is itself premised. Vernacular comparisons here, in other words, take the state's idealised, norm-like image of the person, rather than the system's 'proper' functioning, as reference for their evaluations. Thus on the one hand we have the person-as-norm, cast in terms of ideas about citizens, consumers, administrators and their collectively established 'basic needs' that are to be met through equitable distribution according to principles of social justice. On the other hand, we have persons as flesh-and-blood 'reality', involving ideas of self-interest, scarcity, and other problems and vulnerabilities everyone in Cuba – be they vendors or consumers – can be assumed to confront.

As an example of this dual conception of the person, consider the following dialogue between the Company's secretary and one of its administrators, discussing their perception that the people who bring complaints to them tend to be elderly:

Secretary: First of all it's because they are the most affected, I think they are more susceptible to these things because ...

Administrator: Yes, yes, but listen, here we also get old people who are retired and they have nothing to do ...

Secretary: Yes, but one also has to understand that they are people of limited resources and they really live from what the state gives them, so that every ounce counts.:

Administrator: Look, I'm sorry, but you know very well that here there are some [...] who think that everything is a big cheat, and in any case with that ounce they're hardly going to live ...

Framed as a vernacular comparison, the exchange turns on a strikingly clear polarity. On the one hand, we have the notion of 'every ounce counts', expressing the functionary's commitment to her role as a state official dedicated to protecting the interests of consumers and ensuring that the principles of the SSP are upheld. On the other, we have its counterpart, 'with that ounce they're hardly going to live', expressing flesh-and-blood interests, needs and struggles, as well as the real-life shortcomings of the SSP itself. While the snippet above dramatises this as a dialogue between two perspectives, the common ground of the conversation is that each side of the contrast acts as a context for gauging the other, such that the two operate in relation to each other for any given judgement to make sense – this being the message that each woman is conveying to the other. To see this comparative operation in action, consider the following fragment from Mesa's interview with a high-ranking official in the Company:

When a consumer presents a complaint that a product was given to them in a bad state, as in the case of fermented yogurt for example, I simply try to calm them down [...]. Then in my rounds the first thing I do is go look for the *bodeguero* or

whoever it is and tell them, listen man, you're getting out of hand. Make a score, sure, but don't push it. I can't get nasty, because here everyone has to live and I get that, but I also get the old people who complain.

Once again, then, deciding what is acceptable and what is not is a matter of balancing the two notions of the 'ounce': making a score, sure ('no one can live with an ounce'), but not pushing too far the line laid down by the state's norms ('every ounce counts'). As the official states explicitly, this is a matter of taking into account the contrasting positions of each of the actors involved (the scoring *bodeguero* as well as the grumpy elderly) and measuring their behaviour comparatively, against the state-given norms of personal comportment and entitlement, much as the actors do themselves, be it in order to take advantage or to lodge a complaint.

Conclusion: a less than cynical reason

We have presented our study of the SSP as a case of how the state comes to be such a prominent presence in people's everyday life in a state-socialist situation such as Cuba (still) today. To be sure, a host of other themes have emerged in the course of our account: the corporal manner in which the state becomes a habitus in a near-literal sense (the state 'inhabits' people, we might say, inasmuch their kitchens are stocked up with its products); the thorough ways in which the state is 'socialised' by co-opting, and perhaps also being co-opted by, forms of neighbourhood sociality centring on the local *bodega*; or the ways in which a putatively monolithic and bureaucratically ordained state system of food provisioning is subject to forms of interpersonal negotiation reminiscent in their subtlety of a Moroccan *suq* (cf. Geertz 1979). Taken together, however, these varied aspects of our ethnography of the SSP suggest that the state becomes so pervasive in people's daily lives not just because it is 'present' in so much of it (e.g. through material metonymies and processes of 'socialisation'), but also because it is integral to certain ways of thinking that make daily living in state socialism possible. Cuba's socialist state is most abiding, we suggest, in its guise as the basic normative premise with reference to which people are able to interpret and evaluate their own and each other's comportments in the daily interactions that food provisioning, in this case, involves. The state is so integral to state-socialist life, we might say, because here daily life involves the constant and intricate comparison of its own realities against the normative ideals the state purports to institute. These 'vernacular comparisons' between life and state are, to continue with the Geertzian reference, the 'local knowledge' of state socialism in Cuba.

Cast as an analysis of the relationship between lived reality and state ideals, our argument could also be expressed in relation to debates about the role of 'cynicism' in people's imaginative relationship to the state (e.g. Sloterdijk 1987; Navarro-Yashin 2002), and particularly the socialist state (e.g. Yurchak 1997; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2015). As Hans Steinmüller (2014) has observed, much of this discussion casts cynicism as a critique of the pretensions of ideology – an act of seeing through the lofty ideals propagated by the state and asserting instead the bare realities of life – an act that, according to Žižek (1989), is itself ideological. To be sure, Cubans can be cynical in just that sense, and, as is so typical of socialist societies elsewhere (e.g. Yurchak 2006; Kligman 1998), they have a markedly moralising idiom for referring to the split between the public pretences of official ideology and the less lofty behaviour

in which people are expected to engage in their private dealings, captured by the common expression '*doble moral*'. Still, here we may adopt the Žižekian suggestion that these avatars of cynicism in Cuba are themselves part of a local ideology. As we have seen, people's ceaseless operation of vernacular comparisons between ideals and realities in the functioning of the SSP is hardly a matter of simply exposing the falsehood of the former in favour of the bare truths of the latter. Rather, at stake is a much more subtle and symmetrical exercise, in which both are taken into account in equal measure as polar coordinates for understanding and making judgements about the daily transactions that make up so much of life in state socialism. As we showed in our initial analysis of the metonymic interpenetration of state and person in the SSP's operations, in state-socialist societies life is pervaded by the state in ways that are as real, after all, as a loaf of bread or an argument with a local butcher. Living one's life in such a situation, we suggest, involves knowing how to turn the reality of state ideals into figures of thought, comparatively measuring one's own and others distances from it in ever shifting situational judgements. Cynicism is just too crude to be of use in such an effort.

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L’État et la vie à Cuba: calibrer les idéaux et les réalités d’un système étatique socialiste pour l’approvisionnement alimentaire

S’appuyant sur une ethnographie collective du système socialiste cubain en matière d’approvisionnement de nourriture subventionné par l’État, cet article étudie la manière dont l’État s’immisce dans la vie quotidienne des gens, dans une société socialiste. Instauré à Cuba au début des années 1960 par le gouvernement révolutionnaire, le « système étatique d’approvisionnement » constitue encore aujourd’hui l’épine dorsale de la subsistance des foyers, et pousse les individus à entretenir des relations quotidiennes directes avec l’État à travers son réseau de magasins de quartier, qui distribuent des aliments correspondant aux « besoins vitaux » des citoyens. Nos travaux ethnographiques réunissent une série d’études, menées par les membres de notre équipe dans différents secteurs de La Havane, mettant en évidence les aspects les plus saillants de l’interaction entre les individus et l’État dans le domaine de l’alimentation. Nous soutenons que l’État pénètre dans la vie quotidienne des gens, non seulement parce qu’il y est presque omniprésent, mais aussi comme une prémisses normative fondamentale à partir de laquelle on interprète et évalue les comportements quotidiens dans les interactions faisant partie de l’approvisionnement alimentaire. La vie sous le socialisme étatique implique une comparaison complexe et constante entre ses propres réalités et les idéaux normatifs que l’État prétend instaurer. Ce que nous appelons les « comparaisons vernaculaires » entre la vie et l’État composent la « connaissance locale » du socialisme étatique à Cuba.

Mots-clés Cuba, État, Socialisme, Nourriture, Consommation, comparaison vernaculaire, besoins vitaux