Seeing Fidel in the Sky
Unruly Affects in the Making of the State in Rural Cuba

Marie Aureille

Abstract
In July 2017, local leaders interrupted their conversations after a long working day at the sight of a cloud that looked like Fidel Castro. This fleeting vision plunged them into a genuine and lasting joy, far from the hypocrisy and cynicism attributed to revolutionary elites since the crisis of the 1990s. Following the role of affects and emotions in the daily work of bureaucrats and in their interactions with farmers, I argue that affects play a pivotal role in producing what Timothy Mitchell calls the 'state effect' by fueling the boundary work that sustains the distinction between state and society in Cuba. I show how affects articulate registers of self-sacrifice and reciprocity which have been mediating relationships with El Estado since the beginning of the revolution.

Keywords: affects, agrarian policies, bureaucrats, cadres, Cuba, inspections, state, revolution

Seeing Fidel in the Sky: Unruly Affects in the Making of the State in Rural Cuba

It was 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. on a weekday in July 2017 in western Cuba, on the outskirts of the main town of the rural municipality of Arenas. I was sitting with Antonio and his friends, relaxing after a long working day. Antonio is a man in his late fifties, a cadre (cuadro) in a state-owned agricultural company where he oversees land management and a long-time Communist Party activist. Maikel and Emilio, two of Antonio’s friends who are cuadros in another state company in the municipality were among the visitors. Together they cultivate Antonio’s land in their free time, in the evenings and at weekends, and share the output to make ends meet. That evening, Antonio also received an unexpected visit from an old acquaintance with
whom he worked when he was in the army. Sitting behind the house, facing the manioc seedlings that were coming out of the ground, they talked and made jokes while drinking rum. As the conversation slowed down, Antonio suddenly shouted: ‘Look!’ He stood up and pointed to the dark clouds gathering on the horizon above the hedge. ‘That’s Fidel!’ We scanned the clouds. I eventually saw a cloud in the shape of a seated man. With a bit of imagination, one could see a beard and an outstretched arm, as if he were pointing at something.

Maikel and Emilio were a bit puzzled, but Antonio’s friend, the Ministry of Interior (MININT) officer, said, ‘It’s true! It looks like Fidel!’ Antonio was overjoyed: ‘That’s Fidel pointing to the Oriente, where the Revolution started!’ Antonio urged me to take a picture of the cloud. I did it as quickly as possible, but the clouds move fast during the rainy season. He and his friend were euphoric, it seemed like they just had a moment of grace. In the following days, Antonio told this story with enthusiasm to anyone who would listen. He asked me to show the picture on my camera and looked forward to my printing it for him.

At the time of this event, seven months had passed since the death of Fidel Castro on November 25, 2016. The nine-day national mourning had strongly framed how the emotions aroused by the death of the leader of the Cuban Revolution were expressed. After shock, I witnessed expressions of deep sadness and despair. Some people had privately shown satisfaction or joy. Many confided in me that they had mixed feelings or that they could not describe what they were feeling. After a few days, the omnipresence and redundancy of the tributes to the líder máximo seemed to arouse weariness and indifference among ordinary people or concern among cuadros who feared ‘inappropriate behaviour’ during the mourning period. The collective management of emotions is central to the exercise of power in Cuba (Guerra 2012). It is now commonplace in studies of revolutionary Cuba to point to the massive and passionate support of the population between the 1950s and the 1980s, followed by disenchantment from the crisis in the 1990s (Fernández 2000). While Antonio’s intense emotion at the sight of Fidel Castro in a cloud mitigates against a generalised disenchantment, it highlights the role of ‘ordinary affects’ in everyday life and in the exercise of power in a rural municipality in Cuba. What roles do affects and emotions play in the mundane interactions that constitute ‘the state’ and on the representations and ideas of the state that arise from them?

El Estado (the state) is a pivotal concept for ordinary Cubans to make sense of their daily life and their economic and political system. They perceive El Estado as an external yet pervasive and omnipotent entity whose unpredictable decisions regularly disrupt the way they seek to secure “a life worth living” (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014). Indeed, like other socialist regimes, the Cuban revolutionary system established in 1959 is characterised by ‘intense bureaucratic control over society’ (Dubois 2005: 15). As elsewhere, this idea of the state emotionally engages people by raising expectations, hopes, disappointments or resentment (Jansen 2015; Nava-ro-Yashin 2012). Yet, emic understandings of El Estado point to more than that. In this article, I argue that affects play a pivotal role in producing what Timothy Mitchell calls the ‘state effect’, that is “the effect of an enduring structure apparently
external” from society (2009: 170). He calls “to examine the political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced” a “distinctive technique of the modern political order” (2009: 170). Following the role of affects and emotions in the daily work of bureaucrats and in their interactions with ordinary people, here farmers, I show that affects fuel the boundary work that sustains the distinction between state and society in Cuba.

I focus on cuadros who, like Antonio and his friends, hold positions of responsibility in local government, state enterprises or cooperatives. I draw on a sixteen-month ethnography conducted in the agricultural sector of the municipality of Arenas, in western Cuba. Between 2016 and 2018, I followed the daily work of different actors in two agricultural cooperatives, I went with cuadros on their inspection tours, training sessions and public events. In parallel, I also spent time on farms on my own which allowed me to observe the routines of the cuadros and farmers and different moments when they confronted each other in formal or informal spaces. I came back for shorter visits in January 2019 and March 2022.

The term cuadro (cadre) is an administrative and political category of the Cuban state that refers to people who exercise leadership functions at the national or local level. In most cases, cuadros are members of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Their mission is framed by a ´cadre’s policy´ (política de cuadros), a set of political and regulatory texts which set out the conditions for their recruitment, modes of promotion, evaluations, and sanctions. They must respect a code of ethics that applies to their professional activities as well as to their private lives. Being a cuadro thus implies both a position of power and a set of obligations, responsibilities, and forms of control distinct from the rest of the population. The cuadros are not proper street-level bureaucrats. They are at the top of the municipal hierarchy, but they are the ones who are most often in contact with the farmers. In Arenas, their situation contrasts with the figure of the cynical and privileged socialist bureaucrat. They belong to the same social class as their constituents and are caught up in local kinship and neighbourhood relationships, and they struggle to make ends meet, like everyone else. In this article, I show that affects and emotions are a gateway not only to account for the trajectory of the cuadros and their ambiguous position in the local social space but also to understand how they ‘make the state’ on a daily basis (Dubois 1999) and how they embody the state in the eyes of farmers.

I use the distinction between affects and emotions, considering that affects are characterised by the intensity that precedes or escapes their narration as emotion (see Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017). The indeterminacy of affects has proven to be a heuristic entry point to produce ethnographies of the state (Pinker and Harvey 2018). Using this distinction between emotions and affects and accounting for affects’ intersubjective and uncertain nature in ethnographic writing, one can avoid over-interpreting what others feel or projecting one’s own emotions (Geoffray 2020) without denying that the ethnographer is necessarily affectively involved. Following Jansen (2016), I do not adhere to the postulate of an ‘autonomy of affect’ which is at the heart of the affective turn, and I find it necessary to historicise the social situations in which these affects are felt.
To that extent, firstly I show how revolutionary leaders gave affects a pivotal role in their conceptualisation of the revolutionary system and the mission of cuadros. In Arenas, the process of ‘building the revolution’ relied on injunctions to self-sacrifice and on discourses and practices which framed the relationship between individuals and El Estado (the state) as reciprocal. Then I focus on the boundary work (Mitchell 1991) currently produced by the contrast between cuadros optimism and sacrificial commitment to work and in turn, ordinary people’s increasingly distanced relationship to these injunctions. Finally, I analyse the affects that arise from cuadros attempt to challenge ordinary people disinvestment towards the revolution through ‘political work’.

**Building the Revolution: Self-sacrifice, Reciprocity, and the Mission of the Cuadros**

Feeling moved by an evocation of the figure of Fidel Castro is common. The charismatic leader has been at the heart of the revolutionary imagination that has permeated everyday life since the 1960s. Following his retirement from political life in 2006 and his death in 2016, Cuban leaders have completed the work of heroising and sacralising his person. Nevertheless, not all Cubans would have seen the figure of Fidel in the shape of a cloud, and if they had, this vision would not have generated such a spontaneous joy as that which seized Antonio that particular evening of July 2017. Understanding Antonio’s manifest joy requires to historicise how emotions have been conceived and included as a political tool in the revolutionary project and as a result how revolutionary leaders made emotional and moral demands on cuadros.

‘True Revolutionaries Are Guided by Love’

In a 1963 discourse on the construction of the Party, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara talks about how revolutionaries must fully commit to the revolution above any other thing and sacrifice themselves to the point that sacrifice doesn’t even feel painful because they would feel the new revolutionary truths in an intimate and natural way. He emphasises on the affective dimension of party militants’ commitment who ought to “feel the revolution” (sentir la revolución), and “to feel like a revolutionary, to be a revolutionary from within” (Guevara 1977: 38, my translation). Cherstich, Holbraad and Tassi argue that revolutions are ‘anthropological projects’ which aim at producing new subjects “making political change a function of changes in people’s personal comportment” (2020: 66). Indeed, in the Cuban version of the ‘New Man’ theorised by Che Guevara, forging revolutionaries goes as far as transforming affects and emotions. Love, Guevara states, is a central quality of a good revolutionary and a good leader, love for humanity is the trigger to revolutionary sacrificial commitment ‘until death’.4

Guevara also describes the revolution as being powered by an affective and spiritual direct connection between Fidel Castro and ‘the masses’ (las masas). In
his famous 1965 essay ‘Socialism and man in Cuba’ (Guevara 1977), he points at emotions as a way to measure the reaction of ‘the people’ (el pueblo) to the decision of the state (el Estado): when the people don’t feel enthusiastic anymore, the leaders must acknowledge a problem and correct their policies. He conceives the revolutionary political system as emanating from this direct connection between the leaders and the mass. Collective emotions act as a direct, vibratory connection between Fidel and the people, as a quasi-mystical experience (Guevara 1977: 5). The challenge of revolution building lies in how to organise institutions to allow this direct connection to keep nurturing the revolutionary process. In this ‘process of revolutionary statecraft’, Guevara’s goal is to foster “a collapse of the distinction between state and people” (Holbraad 2014: 373). As a matter of fact, Lilian Guerra shows how in the early 1960s, “participation in rallies and membership in mass organisations became substitutes for legislative bodies and a public sphere of debate and conflict where citizens could form and represent their own agendas without government mediation” (2012: 5) and how, by the end of the 1960s, these same spaces served to police people’s participation and to build new institutions.

Cuadros are a central feature of the new revolutionary system; they are supposed to lead political organisations (the party, mass organisations) but also administrations and state enterprises. What a cuadro is and what is to be expected from it was defined first in political discourses given by either Fidel Castro or Ernesto Guevara in the 1960s, then formalised in PCC guidelines at the first Congress of 1975 and eventually ratified in laws from the 1980s. According to Guevara, cuadros are the essential bond between the people (el pueblo) or the masses (las masas) and the top leaders such as Fidel. They need to ‘feel’ the mood of las masas to be attentive to the concerns of el pueblo and report them to the leaders. They must transmit and apply the national directives but also interpret and implement them in a ‘creative’ way to deal with any local or unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, they need analytical skills, creativity, education, a sense of responsibility and strong moral values such as loyalty to the revolution, a sense of sacrifice, honesty and so forth (Guevara 1977: 30–31).

Within revolutionary institutions, new feeling rules which defined what emotions are appropriate in a situation (Hochschild 1979) emerged, although in Cuba these feeling rules are explicit and at the core of the project of creating a New Man. Following Guevara’s theorisation, the legislation and PCC guidelines demand cuadros to perform emotion work—that is, to work on your affects in order to feel according to the rules (Hochschild 1979)—in two ways. They should feel love and positive emotions, and they should also be able to ‘feel’ and “to demonstrate...sensibility to perceive the feelings, necessities, and opinions...of the workers and the people”.

Guevara’s conceptions of a moral and emotional commitment to the revolution run through the debate in the 1960s around moral and material stimuli. Revolutionary leaders were debating the importance of privileging moral incentives over material retribution as a rupture with the capitalist system and bourgeois mentalities where self-interest was the only trigger for workers. As we will see, moral and material incentives were always mixed in practice. The tension rests rather between
self-sacrifice and reciprocity. In Guevara’s understanding, revolutionaries must be prepared to sacrifice themselves until death for the revolution, for the promise of a new society in a utopian future. However, revolutionary discourses and politics also heavily relied on the promise of rapid changes and lifestyle improvements for all, especially the workers and the peasants. Participation in the revolutionary process was presented as selfless and unconditional but also associated with radical changes aiming to improve living conditions for the people here and now. How did these registers of sacrifice and reciprocity materialise in Arenas? How did they shape the policies, the lives of its dwellers and the images of the state?

Self-sacrifice and Reciprocity in Arenas

In the early 1960s, leaders from the National Land Reform Institute (INRA) decided that Arenas, an isolated sparsely populated territory, would be turned into citrus plantations oriented toward export to the Soviet countries. Estates above sixty-seven hectares were nationalised and turned into state farms. INRA planned the creation of massive infrastructure including a new town, roads, dams, and villages to relocate displaced peasants and to host the workforce coming from the whole province. In the 1970s, as the plantations expanded, local leaders convinced small farmers who owned land in the perimeters of the plantations to give their land to El Estado (the state) in exchange for a modern apartment in the new town with water and electricity, a job in the plantation or a retirement pension for the older ones. Renouncing private property over land was framed as a revolutionary act but it came with counterparts: El Estado would provide for good living conditions for the peasants and their families. Joining state farms was also the only way to access modern agricultural techniques, to be freed from painful manual farm work and to enter the socialist welfare system (retirement, maternity leaves, holidays, etc.). The new town of La Victoria, with its cinema, restaurants, theatre, and sports complex was designed to provide a modern and urban way of life in the countryside. Between the 1960s and the beginning of the 1990s, Arenas’ state plantations organised the territory and the lives of people around wage work on the state farms. Within the planned economy, El Estado came to control all resources that would be granted according to needs and merit. Reciprocity was a core value that structured the practices of the planned economy.

All Arenas’ inhabitants were ‘formed in the Revolution’ (Holbraad 2018): they attended the new schools, worked on the state farms, and benefited from the new leisure infrastructure. In the 1960s and 1980s, for most, the transformation of the territory around state plantations embodied hopes for progress, equality, and a better life. In a context of unprecedented reduction of inequalities, many were able to access modern housing. Until today, for them El Estado (the state) is not just an idea; it is embodied in very concrete realities: most of the land ‘belongs to the state’, tractors, trucks, warehouses ‘are of the state’ (son del Estado). El Estado has a monopoly on the import and distribution of consumer goods. It is also the main employer. El Estado is a fetishised entity that intervenes in almost every aspect of
their lives. While most of the working population is employed in the ‘state sector’, to use official administrative categories, my interlocutors often position themselves against those ‘who are from the state’. By this, they mean the cuadros.

In Arenas, the cuadros share the same social origins as the farmers they manage, they are often relatives or neighbours. Most of the time, they became enmeshed in the revolutionary system in their early teens as a result of both selection and commitment. Both cuadros and ordinary people were affected by the deep economic and food crisis of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, the Cuban state is no longer able to provide good living conditions for the population: salaries and pensions have been devalued, the state no longer acts as the sole provider of housing or food, and the responsibility for their own subsistence is once again placed on individuals and families. The Cuban government embarked on a process of decollectivisation of land and ‘de-statization’ of agricultural production in 1993 (Valdés Paz 2009). Arenas’ plantations were abandoned in the 2000s. While some former state farms were transformed into cooperatives and tried to diversify their production, the rest of the land was progressively distributed in usufruct to individuals who were willing to cultivate it or abandoned. Although the whole structure of agricultural production changed—from wage work in state farms’ plantations to diversified small-scale farming—the same cuadros remained in leading positions. Cuadros from the state farms and the escuelas al campo were sent to lead the organisations now in charge of supervising the farmers such as cooperatives, local delegations of the ministry of agriculture.

While the conditions of living and farming changed drastically since the 1990s, registers of self-sacrifice and reciprocity kept mediating understandings of the relations between people and El Estado. Nowadays, these notions are used to make sense of the distinction between those who feel moved by revolutionary ideals which fuels a sacrificial commitment to work and those who do not feel concerned anymore. Emotions framed within revolutionary socialisation produce ‘boundary work’ (Mitchell 1991) where cuadros and ordinary people distinguish themselves while relying on each other for informal and subsistence coping strategies to make ends meet.

‘Those Who Are from the State’: Affects as Boundary Work

Despite low wages and precarious living conditions which have led many inhabitants of Arenas to focus mostly on the fight for their own subsistence, cuadros keep on making the state work with a disconcerting optimism. They endorse and promote often contradictory policies that come from the national level. They deploy great energy to run the agricultural sector and convince the farmers to produce and sell food to the state with few resources. They are making the state daily by implementing its policies but also by embodying it for the others and especially farmers, who are often also neighbours or family members. My point is that the production of the state through the interactions between cuadros and ordinary people in Arenas cannot be read as a mere relation between dominants and sub-
alterns where the cuadros would benefit from their position. In turn, emotions are crucial to understand cuadros investment in running the state in order to support the revolution. In the light of general disaffection, affects produce boundary work (Mitchell 1991).

Cumplir: Satisfaction and Self-sacrifice

Antonio’s joy and enthusiasm are driving forces behind his boundless commitment to work. On the day he saw Fidel Castro in the clouds, Antonio had just come out of a meeting with his supervisor in his living room. The latter had come from the provincial capital because Antonio was suffering from joint pains in his hip that prevented him from completing the ‘Land Report’ (Balance de tierras). This is an annual national census included in the policy of land distribution in usufruct, a set of measures aimed at conceding unused state-owned land to those who wish to farm it for a period of five to ten years. Antonio had to inspect all the beneficiaries of his company’s lands located in the municipality. That year, despite his repeated requests, the company did not provide him with transportation to visit the farmers scattered kilometres away from the town, so he did most of the work on foot and alone since his assistant refused to work under these conditions. Antonio made his rounds without complaint, almost enthusiastically. As his hip began to ache increasingly, he had to stop.

Antonio is used to pushing his physical limits to fulfil his objectives and commitments (cumplir), disregarding his own health and prioritizing work over his family obligations, which is often reproached by his relatives. In fact, the work of a cuadro and activist within the Communist Party is very time-consuming. The weekly meetings of the Party take place in the evening. The weekends are often busy with training sessions or voluntary work, and bank holidays are devoted to political ceremonies. Farmers often come to Antonio’s house or stop him in the streets to ask about their usufruct application or to complain about a neighbour not respecting plot boundaries or issues with the administration. Antonio is almost always on duty, and his work and political commitments are deeply embedded within his social life.

In 2022, five years after seeing Fidel in the clouds, Antonio is still in charge of the land for the state firm and an active party member. He has also been elected as a delegado del poder popular, a five-year, unpaid, elected mandate to represent his neighbourhood at the municipal council (Assemblea Municipal del Poder Popular). His hip has not got any better, but he is still rushing all day long to fulfil his duties as best he can. One morning, as we hurry in Antonio’s horse cart to fit his busy schedule full of ‘commitments’, I ask Antonio if he ever gets tired:

Antonio: Like physically or…?
Marie: Well, everything.
A: (laughs) it’s not easy. From very young, I got responsibilities. One got formed into this (uno se formó en eso)…. When you fulfil, they implicate you and they complicate you (cuando cumplies, te implican y te complican)…. One is like that (uno es así).6
The night before, in front of his wife and a good friend from the neighbourhood, he was complaining about the extra work he had to do as a delegado. Teasing his friend, he joked how his neighbours didn’t love him since they had chosen him to handle this heavy load of work and problems. I eventually asked if he liked the job. While giving a positive answer, he commented: ‘When you get to spend so much time working in the schools you get used to satisfying, to answering people’s problems, and this gives you satisfaction.’

Antonio explains his commitments referring to his career history, how from a very young age he got in the revolutionary system and how this forged him as a person. Antonio got enrolled into in his early teens to become a teacher in the escuelas al campo while his birthplace was undergoing radical changes with the development of state plantations. The rest of his commitments and his career seem to unfold from this starting point, where he chose to become a teacher. He evokes the ridge between duty, the chain of commitment and personal choices in his saying, ‘cuando cumples, te implican y te complican’, which is as catchy and meaningful in Cuban Spanish as is it hard to translate. *Cumplir* stands for fulfilling one’s commitments, and it is the basis of revolutionary militancy but also of work routines in the planned economy where the main goal is to cumplir (fulfil) the plan. *Cumplir* is connected to the idea of self-sacrifice both ideologically and in the very practical ways *cuadros* perform their work. You must fulfil your commitments whatever it takes. Within the planned economy, *cuadros* are personally responsible for the fulfilment of the plan, or at least for having done everything that was in their power to do so. Antonio says he must *cumplir* as a self-evident explanation that justifies going through the Land Report when his hip hurts or accepting whatever tasks arise from being a delegado.

Antonio also underlines how all of this is not just a question of choice. When you do what is expected from you, ‘they’ implicate you (*te implican*), you get to have more and more responsibilities within this system, the last of it being appointed as delegado. It is very difficult to say no when you are a *cuadro* because one of the main expectations is to sacrifice yourself for the revolution, which means putting aside your preferences to go where you are most needed without questioning. The last part of the sentence, ‘*te complican*’, could be translated as ‘they complicate you’ or ‘they make things difficult’ and carries the idea of being caught in a net of obligations: it is then difficult to evade your duties, to say no, or leave the system. Retirement often appears as the easiest way to leave one’s duty without failing on one’s commitments.

Antonio remains optimistic and full of energy. In the explanation he gave me—‘You get used to satisfying, to answering people’s problems, and this gives you satisfaction’—Antonio underlines another dimension of *cumplir*. It is not only an abstract and hierarchical endeavour: to fight for ‘the revolution’ or to fulfil your commitments regarding your hierarchy or your fellow *cuadros*. *Cumplir* is also ‘solving people’s problems’, making things work, ‘finding solutions’. Indeed, *cuadros* have the discretionary power to ‘find solutions’ and they are expected to do so, to be ‘creative’. At the local level, they are the gatekeepers of all the state resources and
of bureaucratic procedures as well. If they want to ‘solve’ a problem, they know how to manoeuvre, whom to contact to make things work. They activate reciprocity networks within institutions but also with ordinary people who are asking for help. Amid shortages and scarcity, they are able to help and improve people’s lives. Antonio highlights the feeling of satisfaction it gives. He likes to be response-able in the sense given by Donna Haraway that is capable of responding to others (Haraway 2008, 69–93).

Emotions such as satisfaction are a trigger, the fuel for cuadros long-lasting commitments. But it also participates in unifying the somehow disjunct and contradictory dimension of what cumplir means and entails in practice. Cumplir is a watchword for cuadros which articulates the registers of self-sacrifice and reciprocity. As an injunction, it acts as a leitmotif towards a sacrificial commitment to work within the state’s hierarchy, since cuadros must account for their fulfilment before their superior and their fellow cuadros. As a relational practice, cumplir fuels a reticular economy of reciprocity which connects the official system with informal coping strategies. Cuadros try to solve people’s problems and by doing so, they do or return favours which make them integral participants of the reciprocity economy that sustains everyday coping strategies. At the same time, while El Estado is no longer able to provide for the needs of the population, cuadros frame these relations as reciprocity between El Estado that they embody and el pueblo.

¿Pa’ que? Ordinary Disinvestment

During the Land Report, Antonio’s assistant, Dayma, often refused to go with him to inspect farmers or went home at noon because she felt that she shouldn’t work if transportation and lunch were not provided. Antonio, without ever questioning Dayma’s decision, would leave alone. While Antonio puts into practice central values of revolutionary morality such as fulfilling commitments, self-sacrifice, and exemplarity, Dayma refuses to ‘sacrifice’ herself to fulfil the revolutionary orders without compensation. Dayma’s refusal refers to the idea of a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the revolution embodied by the state. Like many, she increasingly refuses to participate in revolutionary institutions such as voluntary work and limits her investment in wage labour. It is more than just a moral dilemma: since her salary doesn’t cover her needs, Dayma must make ends meets by other means which requires time and energy. A common answer when someone is confronted about his disinvestment is the very short rhetorical question ¿pa’ que? literally ‘what for?’, voiced in a provocative and outraged tone. This expression which usually closes the conversation epitomises the posture of most Arenas inhabitants: why should they work, have a hard time, for something that does not allow them to make a living? It also highlights the structural changes that have taken place since the 1990s, especially the growing recommodification of consumption. Before the 1990s, most goods and services were not available to purchase but were distributed to deserving workers who illustrated themselves by good performance at work and by their participation to revolutionary activities.
such as voluntary work. Housing, holidays, the acquisition of household appliances which were previously accessible only through the state system of reciprocity is now only available for purchase at high prices and unaffordable for people who work ‘for the state’, in the state sector, or receive pensions. Those who can afford it in Arenas are those who have family members abroad sending remittances and some farmers and taxi drivers making good money.

Most people must complete incomes with side activities which fall under what they call la lucha (the struggle). The vocabulary they use borrows from the register of self-sacrifice—people say they must ‘fight’ (luchar), ‘invent’ (inventar), ‘solve problems’ (resolver)—underlying the continuity with the revolutionary process rather than a rupture. Cuadros are no exception, and they too must rely on la lucha to make a living. Some retired cuadros returned to work to cumulate their pension and their salary as it is very difficult to find a qualified workforce to replace them. Antonio and his friends cultivate a plot of land to secure food and make extra money.

There is also a gendered dimension to disinvestment. While the revolution promoted gender equality at work since the 1960s, domestic labour remained women’s work. ‘Professional women,’ must assume a ‘double’ or ‘triple day’ cumulating domestic, professional, and political duties. The harshness of the 1990s and the increasing burden of caring for relatives, as the state delegated this task to families (Destremau 2021), led many women to disinvest work and to refuse cuadros positions. In Arenas, the cuadros are almost all men in their fifties or sixties. An agronomist in her fifties once told me how she turned down an offer to become the president of the coop. ‘Why should I do it?’ she stated, ‘I have better things to do! It’s a lot of trouble.’ Cuadros’ roles are also constructed around male ideals which makes it more uncomfortable for women and less indispensable (Rosendahl 1997). Usually, when women say they must sacrifice themselves, it is for their family.

Ordinary people do not or no longer feel concerned by the injunction to follow cuadros example. They distance themselves from moral injunctions and the ‘feeling rules’ of the revolution by disinvesting in their work and deserting political ceremonies. They feel that El Estado no longer fulfils its promises of reciprocity and therefore no longer has the right to demand their sacrifice. The affection and commitment of the cuadros are faced with the disaffection of the rest of the population who may find the commitment of the cuadros commendable or ridiculous and blind. These practices of distinction fuel boundary work (Mitchell 1991) between ‘los del Estado’ (those who embody the state) and the rest. The case of Dayma, who works as an assistant on the Land Report, shows that this emic distinction is not so much based on whether one works for ‘the state’ but between those who are committed, including emotionally, to the revolution and those who no longer feel really concerned and are just trying to make a living.

This co-production of reciprocal boundaries between a ‘them’ (the cuadros who ‘are of the state’, the revolutionaries, the communists) and an ‘us’ (the ordinary people) operates an emic distinction between state and society. According to Timothy Mitchell (1991, 2009), this ‘boundary work’ is essential to the production of the state effect, that is, to the idea that the state exists as a coherent whole external
to individuals. Lasting emotions such as joy and enthusiasm or indifference fuels this boundary work and the production of the state by identifying who is from the state and who is not. This is even more important because the distinction is not self-evident at all: cuadros share the same social origins as the people they manage, and they engage in informal activities with them to make a living. In many social scenes, this boundary is blurred or omitted even though everybody knows who’s who.

When is this boundary work visible, and what does it produce? In the next section, I focus on formal interactions between cuadros and farmers. Since participation is the basis of the revolution, ordinary people’s disaffection and distancing is a problem. Cuadros try to challenge the farmers’ disinvestment through what they call ‘political work’.

**Fighting Disinvestment with Political Work**

In the agricultural sector, cuadros have the difficult task of making farmers grow food and raise animals to ‘feed the country’ within the planned economy and with very limited access to inputs which means they must manage scarcity. National leaders regularly urge cuadros to go ‘on the field’ to visit the farmers. Visits and inspections are important and ambivalent part of cuadros work: they mobilise alternatively the registers of reciprocity by negotiating scarce inputs in exchange for farmers’ production and the register of sacrifice relying on a top-down process of control and moralisation. As we have seen, more and more people reject the injunction to self-sacrifice and favour the register of reciprocity which articulates their historical experience of state building around plantations in Arenas and their daily experiences of la lucha. Attempts to reinstate a register of self-sacrifice are generally met with contrasting affects. Pinker and Harvey (2018) have shown that ethnographic description of the intensity mixed with uncertainty and ambiguity that is characteristic of affects allows us to perceive how state power emerges and is negotiated.

**Dealing with Affects during Inspections**

I have followed Antonio on several occasions on his inspection tours for the Land Report. One day in March 2017, we set off on foot to a village, six kilometres from the town of La Victoria. Antonio knows the area like the back of his hand. He also knows all the inhabitants of this village who were his neighbours. He was the professor of some of the youngsters. Usually, when he passes through the village, he greets everyone and sometimes stops to exchange news or to solve some issues with a farmer. On that day, however, he came not as a neighbour but as a representative of the state enterprise who formerly ran the plantations and now distributes wasteland in usufruct. As is often the case in Arenas, Antonio inspected people he knows.

The Land Report consists of inspecting all the producers who have received land in usufruct to assess the proper use of the land and the ‘productive impact’ of the measure, that is whether access to the land has led the farmer to increase the
sale of his crops to *El Estado*. Most of the time we did not visit the plots. Antonio explained to me that he knew who produces and who does not. Fifteen times during that day, we repeated the same procedure. Antonio arrived at the home of a farmer and announced our visit. We sat down at the dining room table and Antonio asked to see the usufructuary’s papers: his identity card, his usufruct contract, and his production contract with the cooperative. The farmer or his wife then went to get some papers folded in three or four lengthwise and kept in a plastic bag. Antonio checked the papers, I assisted him in filling in the inspection forms. This operation was conducted in a heavy silence. Our interlocutors were visibly uncomfortable, tense and on the defensive. Antonio then asked a series of questions to which the farmer answered in a laconic and evasive manner, especially when he did not fulfil his obligations.

A negative report and significant breaches can lead to a procedure to terminate the usufruct contract. In the tension of the inspection, fear manifests itself in varying degrees that are difficult to estimate. Farmers often complain that *El Estado* can take back the land at any time, and these inspections where the good use of the land is assessed come to reinforce this idea. In practice, however, everyone knows that few contracts are terminated. There is plenty of fallow land in this area available for distribution. Often, the land is returned by the usufructuaries because they think the effort is disproportionate to what they can get out of it.

The inspections’ tense atmosphere reveals, above all, the position in which it places the farmers. Indeed, it is difficult to fulfil all the obligations associated with the usufruct contract. Farmers are often caught out by bureaucratic criteria that sometimes seem abusive or unattainable, such as the total eradication of *marabú*, a particularly tough weed that invaded the abandoned plantations and requires bulldozers to remove while farmers only have machetes. Relying on the register of reciprocity, they often argue that *El Estado* should provide for a tractor if they are to eradicate *marabú*.

Antonio is sensitive to the tension and knows the farmers’ defence. During inspections he was conciliatory and tried to express his remarks without sounding like he was criticising. He systematically noted in the comments section the complaints and problems faced by the farmers: neighbours’ animals breaking fences and destroying crops, the lack of barbed wire and inputs, the cooperative not supplying seeds or fertilisers in time or not having insecticide when crop pests appeared. Antonio never contradicted the farmers; he even made jokes sometimes to show that he understood and sympathised. At the end of the interview, when he had to write down what the farmer had to do to remedy his shortcomings, he always gave them the maximum deadline and tried to discuss the measures with the person, making sure that they were realistic.

Despite Antonio’s benevolence, his conciliatory tone, his attempts at jokes, the inspection situation imposed itself with force. The inspected farmers were put at fault. The distance between the inspector and the inspected seemed incompressible despite Antonio’s efforts and the fact that he knew these people at least from afar. The farmers contributed with their coldness, and what I perceived as anger, defiance
even resentment, albeit tinged with fear. They reminded us that Antonio was not on their side. During the inspection, he was embodying the state.

The scene also contrasted with the cordial if not warm relations that Antonio develops with farmers at work. Antonio often solves land conflict by negotiating individually with the parties. Recently, he convinced a farmer to remove the fence he had built in a disputed area with his neighbour. Instead, he committed to facilitate a land extension in an unused plot on the other side of the road because he knew this farmer was serious and would make good use of the land. The farmer thanked him with an antiparasitic medicine Antonio was desperately seeking for his pigs. When he went back to see the neighbouring farmer who was complaining about the fence, Antonio concluded ‘cumpli contigo’, literally ‘I fulfilled my commitment with you’. This interaction, like many ordinary encounters between cuadros and farmers are framed within the logic of reciprocity. In other occasions, cooperative leaders can request more production from a farmer who was granted inputs on the basis that ‘El Estado cumplio contigo’ (‘the state fulfilled its commitment with you’). Conversely, farmers often complain that they fulfil the plan every month, but they are not granted anything. Plan fulfilment is always a negotiation that unfolds through personal relationships built by cuadros with the farmers. These personal negotiation set all parties as co-dependent: cuadros need the farmers to produce to fulfil the plan, farmers need land and inputs, as well as support with bureaucratic procedures. Daniela, the wife of one of the biggest farmers of the area, described these personalised relations as a matter of trust and mutual respect.

How does one explain the contrast between farmers’ warmth when they cultivate personal relations with the cuadros and their coldness during inspections? While negotiations relying on the grammar of reciprocity are at the centre of the work routine, inspections such as the Land Report come in contrast to re-establish hierarchies between cuadros and peasants (campesinos) and to moralise their failure to properly cultivate the land.

‘Political Work’

Inspections are one aspect of what Arenas’s cuadros call ‘political work’ (trabajo político), an injunction that comes from the top of the state. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Manolo, an old cuadro, defined this imprecise concept for me: political work consists of informing the peasants (campesinos) of national orientations and new regulations by means of pedagogy and sanctioning those who do not respect the rules or do not achieve the objectives (no cumplen). He considered this work necessary because ‘campesinos have a very low cultural level’. He added that it was especially important to convince the campesinos to increase production despite the lack of means; they must continue to make efforts and to find solutions because the peasants often justify their low production levels by the fact that they do not have tractors and inputs. He concluded: ‘But if everyone thinks like that, what will the population eat?’ Antonio gave me a slightly different definition of political work. He sees it as an activity of mediation, which consists in identifying and solving
problems furthering the revolution. Therefore, political work is about creating spaces for people to express their problems and finding solutions to them.

Both definitions echo the conceptualisation of the mission of cuadros by the historical leaders of the revolution and the legal framework that still organise cuadros’ work. Political work relies on the logic of self-sacrifice, on the necessity for unity and for people to sacrifice themselves and fight against all odds to perpetuate the revolution. Political work challenges farmers’ detachment and their refusal to sacrifice by negating the argument of reciprocity and stating the moral duty of people to commit to defend the revolution even if the state is not able to fulfil its promises. Resistance to it is disqualified as a lack of understanding. Therefore, even if there are no fertilisers, no oil for the irrigation system, farmers must keep growing food because if not ‘what will the population eat?’ It is framed like a life-or-death issue in a warlike mobilisation vocabulary.

But, as I have previously stated, cuadros are also conceived as intermediaries who can feel and understand what people are experiencing and give feedback to the national leaders. Antonio focuses rather on this part of the ‘political work’ in his practices of inspections. Writing down all the comments of the farmers in his reports is a way to transmit them to his hierarchy. He also performs emotion work (Hochschild 1979) to show himself affable in addition to his verbal efforts to present his reports without offending farmers. During inspection, he is aware that he embodies El Estado, but he seeks to embody a firm but benevolent state, willing to understand the difficulties of the farmers and to provide solutions. Yet even if Antonio is determined to ‘solve’ farmers’ problems, he is often unable to provide material solutions. Structural problems are at stake that he is unable to address. Faced with his powerlessness, Antonio often simply reiterates revolutionary moral injunctions to farmers: to work hard, to do their best, to sacrifice, to show goodwill, to seek solutions.

To evade the material needs of the farmers by opposing them with moral injunctions seems legitimate to cuadros because they suffer from shortages too, and they too sacrifice themselves daily. These are self-imposed orders. But for farmers, inspections and moralising calls to order are often experienced as humiliations, hence the affective reaction to inspection. To attribute, explicitly or not, their failure to fulfil usufruct contracts to will rather than to shortages is to consider them as ‘bad farmers’ or even as good-for-nothing when they are struggling to produce. Consequently, the injunctions to increase sales to El Estado seem rather unwelcome to them because they believe that it is up to El Estado to give them the means to cultivate the lands. Political work here produces the opposite of what it is intended for. Instead of buying the official discourse of unity, where every Cuban should participate for the survival of the revolution, inspections and the unpleasant affects it produces conduct farmers to reinforce the image of El Estado as the unfair, monopolising, omnipotent cause to their problems. Farmers’ affective reactions and cuadros’ emotion work fuels the boundary work which states cuadros are ‘from the state’ and farmers are not. Political work is a mundane occasion for the state effect to be produced in Arenas.
Conclusion: Unruly Affects and the State Effect

Affects and emotions participate in building the state and producing the ‘state effect’ (Mitchell 1991). They are also crucial to the ethnography of such processes. Affects have been a battlefield of the Cuban Revolution since the 1960s. Revolutionary leaders have explicitly theorised the role of emotions in the creation of true revolutionaries willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of humanity. These ‘feeling rules’ have shaped what cuadros should be and one way or another led a group of Arenas’ cuadros to go into raptures when they saw a cloud that looked like Fidel Castro. The very mission of cuadros, as the intermediaries between leaders and the people, was to maintain the affective connection that was deemed to exist between Fidel Castro and the masses. Nowadays, cuadros keep acting with an impressive dedication and optimism to make the state work. However, ‘the political work’ to convince the rest of the population to do the same does not work anymore. Furthermore, it might produce the opposite by fuelling disinvestment and resentment. Farmers, like many ordinary people reject the injunction to sacrifice themselves for the revolution because they consider that El Estado isn’t providing for them anymore, and therefore, they don’t owe the state anything. They favour a register of reciprocity which structures their daily lives in the planned and the informal economy. Cuadros affective commitment to the revolution is met with growing disinterest producing a ‘boundary work’ between ‘those who are from the state’ and the rest.

Emotions and affects therefore need to be historicised. They’re inseparable of ideas of justice and morality that arise from practices. Registers of reciprocity and sacrifice have structured people’s experiences of the planned economy and the political system for more than sixty years. They have fed images of El Estado: farmers perceive it as an unreliable entity which has a monopoly on the land and the economy, cuadros see El Estado as a machine that needs everyone’s efforts to function in order to build a revolutionary society. These diverging visions of the state, informed by practices and situated experiences, trigger emotions but are also triggered by them. Affects help to account for the retroaction between state as images and state as practice but also between temporal scales (long-term policies and present interactions) and scales of government (from the local cuadros to national orientations).

Marie Aureille is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris and at the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Politique. Drawing on multispecies ethnography, her dissertation examines changing power relations in farming within decollectivisation policies in Cuba and the production of the State through farmers and cooperatives inclusion in the planned economy.

Email: marie.aureille@gmail.com; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7115-6668
Notes

1. All names and locations have been anonymized to protect my informants whom I thank for their trust and help. To avoid putting them at risk, some of their distinctive social features and part of their stories were modified in such a way that do not affect the general argument of the paper. I would like to thank Pauline Jarroux, Susanne Verheul, Sophie Andreetta, Luisa Enria, Kataryna Soroka and Élodie Edwards-Grossi for their insights and feedbacks on earlier versions of this article.


3. For a critical review of analyses of bureaucracy in Cuba see (Geoffray 2012: 40–46) and in Soviet regimes (Dubois et al. 2005).

4. ‘El revolucionario verdadero está guiado por grandes sentimientos de amor’ (Guevara 1977: 15).


7. The delegado does not run for office; he or she is proposed by the assembly of neighbours and then elected among the names that have been suggested. It is possible to refuse the task, but it is considered as a service to the community and to the Revolution, and usually the delegados only refuse or leave office when they have strong health or family issues.

8. ‘Selling to the state’ means selling one’s production in the planned economy, usually to a state-owned enterprise through a cooperative of credit and services (CCS).

References


