The Social Science Journal 52 (2015) 503–515

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij

The Cuban paladar: Ideological subversion or substantiation?

Ariel Taylor[a], Daniyal Zuberi[b,*]

[a] Department of Political Science, University of Victoria, Canada
[b] Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and School of Public Policy and Governance, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor St. W, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 20 September 2013
Received in revised form
19 November 2014
Accepted 20 November 2014
Available online 5 December 2014

Keywords:
Cuba
Service sector
Paladares, Neoliberal reform
Post-socialist transition
Ethnography

ABSTRACT

The findings of a qualitative, in-depth exploration of Havana's rapidly expanding private sector, reveal that paladares – privately owned Cuban restaurants – are not, as previously suggested, antithetical to Havana's political status quo. Instead the negotiation between the state in, and toleration of, private enterprise in Havana has become the foundation for a host of double standards and informal regulations that manifest themselves in two distinct business models. While at the same time inherently capitalistic, modestly successful paladares help contribute to the socioeconomic endurance of Havana's social doctrine despite their high levels of regulation. On the other hand, elite paladares routinely challenge political and social ideologies, yet remain largely immune to retribution. The findings contribute to the understanding of the context of Havana's informal second economy and the ongoing U.S. embargo.

1. Introduction

Since their legal inception in 1993, paladares – privately operated restaurants in Cuba – have been subject to widespread political and social scrutiny, particularly within Cuba itself. In the wake of domestic economic decline, Fidel Castro first introduced a limited degree of economic liberalization in order to ease the state's financial strain. Paladares were among a handful of professions authorized for self-employment. However, fear that too much liberalization would undermine the ideological and social tenets of the revolution initially hampered the sector's development. A return to centralized planning in the latter half of the decade effectively stalled the granting of new licenses and drove many existing businesses underground (Henken, 2008). When Raúl Castro assumed political leadership in 2006 the domestic economy stagnated and reforms were introduced to stimulate economic growth. Self-employment reemerged as a viable economic strategy for many unemployed and underemployed Cubans. Since 2006, the industry has experienced considerable growth and contributed to a fundamental transformation of Cuban society (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2013).

Additional reforms in 2011 provided new opportunities for Cuban entrepreneurs, but tensions remain between the social and ideological commitments of the state and the economic realities it continues to face. It is within this delicate political context that this study analyzes the Cuban paladar and its broader significance for Cuba's political future. Few scholars have employed ethnographic or qualitative methods to explore the day-to-day existence of paladares; consequently, the scholarship to date lacks nuance of their social and political significance, and this study aims to address this gap in the literature. While some argue that paladeres represent a subversive political potential, the findings of this ethnographic and qualitative research reveals a more complex picture: Some paladares simultaneously fulfill revolutionary and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 416 978 3264.
E-mail address: daniyal.zuberi@utoronto.ca (D. Zuberi).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2014.11.005
0362-3319/

economic objectives. That is, that while some paladares certainly contribute to the capitalization and commodification of Cuban society, others serve to reinforce the social and political achievements of the Cuban revolution, despite the economic logic on which their operation is based.

2. Literature review

Cuba's secondary or informal economy has long been the subject of academic interest. Feinberg (2013) provides the most recent in depth examination of informal labor across Cuba's growing service sector and finds that, despite attempts at reform, informality persists. While numbers are notoriously difficult to authenticate, Fienberg estimates that as many as 2 million enterprising Cubans can be counted among both the formal and informal private sector (2013, p. 2). Officially, at the beginning of 2008, upwards of 300,000 people were deemed "disconnected from work" and 20% of Havana's working-age population was unemployed (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2013, p. 122). Cuban scholars continue to call for increased economic decentralization within the country's socialist context to allow for more self-management among Cuba's people (Vidal-Alejandro, 2012; Hérnandez, 2010; Vidal-Alejandro & Pérez-Villanueva, 2010; Espina, 2010).

Since taking office in 2006, President Raúl Castro has built on the reforms first initiated under his brother Fidel in 1993, and allowed for the carefully managed development of a sector of self-employed workers. One group of entrepreneurial Cubans have emerged as both highly successful and equally contentious, helping to both stimulate Cuba's lagging economic growth and igniting a national debate over the future of socialism more broadly. The Cuban paladar has been the subject of much attention both domestically and internationally. Privately owned and operated restaurants, often operating out of home kitchens and dining rooms, paladars provide a unique dining experience to visitors eager to escape the state-dominated tourist market. In many ways, their peripherality has been both their best asset and biggest hurdle.

Henken (2008) provides the most comprehensive study of paladar constitution, operations, and governance and concludes by highlighting their subversive potential for Cubans who aspire for both independence and financial gain. Ritter (1998, 2000, 2005) likewise contends that excessive taxation of paladar operations promotes evasion and leads to informality, depriving both the system and society of important allies. Most recently, Feinberg (2013) argues that many Cuban entrepreneurs embrace informality as a way to promote autonomy and avoid stringent and sometimes volatile regulation. Trumbull (2000), along with Jackiewicz and Bostler (2003), argue that the rigorous regulation of paladar operations is reflective of their potential to disrupt the status quo, and therefore a perceived danger to the Cuban state. That paladares represent a significant shift in political and popular discourse about the future structure of Cuba's domestic economy is certain; however, this article argues that paladar ownership and operations is not, as Feinberg (2013), Henken (2005, 2008), Ritter (2000, 2005), Trumbull (2000), and Jackiewicz and Bostler (2003) suggest, necessarily indicative of their ideological subversion and that more nuance exists than previously articulated.

Although some paladar owners have amassed substantial resources, many continue to lead frugal and often spartan material lives. Though grievances abound among this modest population, many paladar owners maintain their ideological and political support for socialism and take a measure of pride in their contribution to Cuban society. Though many scholars have predicted the inevitable, if not imminent, downfall of Cuba's Communist regime (Aguirre, 2002; Otero & O'Bryan, 2002; Roberg & Kuttruff, 2007), this research demonstrates that such prophetic calculations fail to consider the complex and often contradictory legacy of economic reform experienced by Cuban people and the daily negotiations many make between politics and ideology.

2.1. The expanding role of paladares: background

The Cuban state, strained by economic shortage brought on by Soviet dissolution, came to rely directly on a small but significant private sector to help prop up government services by providing goods and revenues the Cuban state could not. Legally sanctioned in December 1993 under Fidel Castro, licensed micro-enterprises quickly expanded across Cuba's urban centers, growing from 70,000 to 140,000 within the preceding six months (Henken, 2008, p. 171). However, government response, while initially tepid, quickly became hostile. Ritter (2005) notes that although informal employment has long existed in communist Cuba, legalization of the initial 156 micro-enterprises was driven largely by the informal sector's growing ubiquity. Though economically important, the government remained concerned that self-employment would undermine the mentality of socialism long articulated by the state in its Battle of Ideas (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2013, p. 23).[1] By 1997, Fidel Castro was openly criticizing entrepreneurs for their materialism and greed (Henken, 2001, 2005, 2008; Ritter, 1998, 2000, 2005). A number of regulations were also introduced in order to curb their profitability and limit the sector's growth. High rates of taxation, stringent licensing procedures, and operational restrictions worked to marginalize entrepreneurs and by 2001 the official industry was in stark decline. In reality many Cubans simply took their businesses underground (Feinberg, 2013; Henken, 2005, 2008; Ritter, 1998, 2000, 2005).

The shift toward liberalization that initially facilitated the official operation of paladares was short-lived. By the mid-1990s centralized planning reemerged as official dogma, and Cuban entrepreneurs were vilified for their

[1] The Battle of Ideas, is an expression employed by Fidel Castro to combat misinformation on the part of foreign media campaigns, and through which he explicitly promoted five political objectives: (1) the liberation of the five Cuban men incarcerated in Miami for espionage; (2) the end of the Helms–Burton Law, Torricelli Act, and other forms of the U.S. blockade; (3) the end of the world economic crisis that threatens humanity and particularly the Third World; (4) world peace; and (5) education and culture (Flikke, 2007).