

Martin Holbraad – Keynote Lecture at Finnish Anthropology Conference
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The values of money: poverty in the dual economy of contemporary Cuba

In view of its moral, economic and semiotic connotations, the least that can be said about the word 'value', if not the idea of it, is that it is polysemic. Some anthropologists have sought to make virtue of this, linking the three senses substantially to produce a unified anthropological theory of value – most dazzlingly David Graeber. Nevertheless, a nagging feeling remains that such attempts at theoretical consummation may in part be effects of what might not be much more than homonymy. Asking, for example, how moral 'values' are linked to economic 'value' has an air equivalent to asking, fancifully perhaps, what filial and erotic relations have in common, on the grounds that we may use the word 'love' to describe either.

As a supplement, if not a corrective, to such theoretical ambitions, this paper treats the connections between the three senses of 'value' as an ethnographic object. Based on ethnographic research in Cuba over the past decade, the paper examines how a pervasive sense of what Cubans call the 'crisis of values', expressed in the post-Soviet period Fidel Castro called 'Special' as a shift in Cuban people's sense of 'poverty' (what they call 'necesidad'), is linked to the encroaching dollarization of the Cuban economy and its effects in the field of everyday consumption. So changing conceptions of poverty, and the sense of moral malaise with which they are associated, are analysed here as a function of the shift in what I call 'paradigms of consumption': from the moral order of socialist distribution (at its height before 1990), which was directed towards guaranteeing the satisfaction of what the Revolutionary state defined as the people's 'needs', to a 'raw' mercantilism that has become increasingly prominent during the post-Soviet period, and is intimately associated with the legalization of the dollar from 1993 onwards. However dollars, I argue, are not just the emblem of a new moral disorder. They also function as its main catalyst, inasmuch as they expand the realm of 'need' by stripping it of its (socialist) moral essence through what I shall call a logic of 'commensuration'. Underlying this account of Cubans' experience of poverty since the 1990s, then, is an argument about the catalytic power of money itself in processes of moral transformation.