

**Study on the Food Problem in Cuba from the Perspective of Negative Reciprocity and Food Nationalism: An Interpretation from Cultural Anthropology**

*Estudio sobre el problema de la alimentación en Cuba desde la perspectiva de la reciprocidad negativa y el nacionalismo alimentario: una interpretación desde la antropología cultural*

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**Abstract:** This study examines the historical evolution of Cuba's food shortage through a dual theoretical framework incorporating negative reciprocity and food nationalism. It explores how the state-managed food distribution system has transformed over time, transitioning from a mechanism of resource allocation to an instrument of social governance, particularly in the context of economic transitions and shifts in the global landscape. Unlike conventional analyses of food scarcity, which predominantly focus on market influences or supply-demand imbalances, the Cuban case provides a unique perspective on how food availability is deeply embedded within governance structures

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and how it shapes state-society relations. This study argues that a reliance solely on food imports or market liberalization is inadequate to address the structural challenges within Cuba's food system. Instead, it proposes the development of a «new food contract», one that integrates community-based food autonomy, cooperative agricultural models, and the decentralization of food supply networks. The Cuban case not only extends the applicability of negative reciprocity theory in the study of contemporary economic systems but also offers critical insights into governance models in transitioning states, the social functions of food distribution systems, and the intersections between food policies and collective identity formation.

**Resumen:** Este estudio analiza la evolución histórica de la situación alimentaria en Cuba, para lo cual se aplica un marco teórico dual, basado en la reciprocidad negativa y el nacionalismo alimentario. Se examina cómo el sistema estatal de abastecimiento alimentario ha experimentado transformaciones, pasando de ser un mecanismo de garantía de recursos a desempeñar un rol en la gestión social, especialmente en el contexto de transición económica y los cambios existentes en el mundo global. A diferencia de los estudios convencionales sobre escasez de alimentos, que suelen centrarse en el impacto del mercado o en los desequilibrios entre oferta y demanda, el caso cubano permite explorar cómo la disponibilidad de alimentos se vincula a la estructura de gobernanza, y puede influir en la configuración de la relación entre el Estado y la sociedad. En tal contexto, el artículo propuesto plantea que, una estrategia basada exclusivamente en la importación de alimentos o en la liberación del mercado podría no ser suficiente para abordar los desafíos estructurales del sistema alimentario. Se propone la necesidad de analizar la viabilidad de un «nuevo contrato alimentario», que incluya enfoques como la autonomía alimentaria comunitaria, los sistemas de agricultura cooperativa y la descentralización de las redes de

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suministro de alimentos. El caso cubano no solo permite ampliar la aplicación de la teoría de la reciprocidad negativa en el análisis de los sistemas económicos contemporáneos, sino que, también, ofrece elementos para comprender los modelos de gobernanza en Estados en procesos de transformación, la función social del sistema de abastecimiento de alimentos y la relación entre las políticas alimentarias y las dinámicas de identidad colectiva.

**Keywords:** economic transition, food governance, food nationalism, food scarcity, negative reciprocity.

**Palabras clave:** escasez alimentaria, gobernanza alimentaria, nacionalismo alimentario, reciprocidad negativa, transición económica.

Since 2021, Cuba's food shortage crisis has exhibited distinct characteristics that challenge conventional frameworks for analyzing food insufficiency. This phenomenon extends beyond mere supply chain disruptions, reflecting a broader interplay between state governance, socioeconomic rights, and institutional adjustments within the socialist system. While most existing studies have applied Amartya Sen's theory of «entitlement» to attribute food scarcity to market failures and structural vulnerabilities (Sen, 1981) the Cuban case suggests a more complex and nonlinear transformation of food distribution systems in socialist states, particularly during periods of economic adjustment.

Three key structural shifts illustrate this complexity. First, the universal food rationing system (*libreta de abastecimiento*), originally implemented to ensure basic food security, remains operational. However, in recent years, the Engel coefficient for Cuban households

has surpassed 70%, indicating that food-related expenditures have become an increasingly disproportionate financial burden. Second, the introduction of freely convertible currency (MLC) stores has diversified product availability, yet it has simultaneously exacerbated consumption-based social stratification. A minority of the population with access to foreign currency now dominates the consumption of high-end products, while the majority remains dependent on the rationing system, reinforcing economic inequalities. Finally, the sociopolitical significance of food access is evolving: food distribution policies no longer function solely as mechanisms for economic regulation but also serve as sites of social expectation formation and perceptions of distributive justice. These transformations necessitate a reassessment of the «resources-pathways-entitlements» analytical framework within socialist economies, where food security is not exclusively dictated by market mechanisms but is also embedded in state-society relations, governance strategies, and evolving political narratives.

To comprehensively analyze the evolution of Cuba's food crisis, this study employs an analytical framework grounded in negative reciprocity and food nationalism. Drawing on Marshall Sahlins' theory of exchange, the concept of negative reciprocity serves as a lens through which to examine how the food distribution system undergoes transformation during economic adjustment periods and how the state and society renegotiate their respective roles in food provision. In this context, food supply functions not only as a mechanism of social welfare but also as a strategic tool for governance reconfiguration.

Empirical data indicate that during this transitional phase, the cost of food access has escalated significantly. In Havana, food expenditures now account for over 70% of household income, while caloric intake levels have declined relative to the revolutionary period (Cruz y

Álvarez, 2023). These shifts underscore the intersection between food policies, economic stratification, and political governance, contributing to a broader understanding of state-society relations in times of crisis.

Simultaneously, the concept of food nationalism offers a critical framework for understanding food as both a cultural and political symbol. According to Ichijo (2020): «food nationalism plays a central role in shaping national identity and collective memory through consumption practices» (pp. 215- 223) In the Cuban context, the state-controlled food distribution system has historically served not only as a means of ensuring basic subsistence but also as a mechanism for reinforcing national identity and historical consciousness. Over the decades, the Cuban government has deliberately utilized food policies to institutionalize the connection between agricultural production and national development. However, ongoing economic adjustments have disrupted consumption patterns, altering public perceptions of food culture and state provisioning legitimacy.

Recent studies indicate that younger generations exhibit a declining identification with socialist food traditions, while social media has played an instrumental role in diversifying the discourse surrounding food access (Garth, 2013). For example, in 2023, the hashtag #SobrevivirCuba emerged as a critical reference point in public debates on food security, shifting discussions beyond state provisioning to incorporate themes of community cooperation and domestic food production. This evolving discourse reflects a transition in food acquisition strategies, marking a departure from traditional dependence on state-controlled supply mechanisms.

This study aims to address the following key questions:

1. How has the Cuban state adapted its socioeconomic policies through food distribution to sustain the food supply system?

2. In what ways has the mechanism of negative reciprocity influenced food access and shaped public perceptions of the state-run distribution system?
3. How has food scarcity contributed to the transformation of food culture and consumption patterns in contemporary Cuba?

By examining these dimensions, this study contributes to a broader scholarly discussion on the intersection of food security, state governance, and socio-economic adaptation in socialist economies.

The findings indicate that since 2021, Cuba's food scarcity crisis has been accompanied by a broader transformation in the governance of the socialist state. As the concept of «a decent meal» undergoes social redefinition, changes in consumption practices, food access strategies, and public perceptions of distribution equity have become increasingly pronounced (Garth, 2019). Within this evolving context, food has transcended its traditional role as a subsistence resource, emerging as a site of social negotiation and adaptation, where state policies, economic constraints, and cultural reinterpretations converge.

This study not only examines the contemporary challenges facing Cuba's food distribution system but also explores how food culture has evolved across distinct phases of the country's recent history. By integrating the theoretical frameworks of negative reciprocity and food nationalism, this research expands existing debates on food crises within global economic and political transitions. Moreover, it provides critical insights into food security governance in socialist economies, emphasizing how state intervention, informal food networks, and shifting public expectations shape the resilience and adaptability of food systems under conditions of scarcity.

## **From Balanced Reciprocity to Negative Reciprocity: The Evolution of Cuba's Food System**

Marshall Sahlins' seminal anthropological framework identifies three fundamental forms of reciprocity: generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity. The type of reciprocity employed, according to Sahlins, is contingent upon the social distance between the actors involved in the exchange. Generalized reciprocity — prevalent in kinship-based relationships— operates on long-term trust without an expectation of immediate return. Balanced reciprocity, characteristic of community-based exchanges, involves direct and equivalent value transactions. In contrast, negative reciprocity emerges in contexts where social distance or power asymmetry is pronounced, leading to unequal exchanges or transactions conducted under coercive or imposed conditions (Sahlins, 1972, pp. 193- 204).

However, the Cuban food distribution system challenges the conventional applicability of this framework, particularly within a state-controlled socialist economy. Unlike in market-driven economies, where negative reciprocity primarily manifests in economic transactions, Cuba's highly centralized redistribution structure embeds negative reciprocity within state-citizen relationships, cultivating a network of institutionalized dependency. In this context, negative reciprocity in Cuba's food system manifests in two distinctive forms:

1. Institutionalized Negative Reciprocity: The universal food rationing system (*libreta de abastecimiento*) functions not merely as a means of food distribution but as a contractual exchange wherein the state provides subsidized basic goods in return for political allegiance. This system operates through economic allocation mechanisms, legal frameworks —such as the 1962 State

Distribution Law— and political mobilization strategies, including special provisions during national commemorations.

2. Inverted Stratification through Food Access: In conventional models of negative reciprocity, dominant groups extract resources from peripheral or subordinate sectors. However, in Cuba's socialist framework, negative reciprocity functions internally, structuring access to food through economic stratification. For instance, the introduction of freely convertible currency (MLC) stores has established a segmented food access system, where a minority with access to foreign currency dominates high-end food consumption, while the majority remains reliant on state rationing and informal markets. Moreover, price disparities in MLC stores —where certain staple goods cost up to 230% more than global market prices— not only generate state revenue but also reinforce structural dependency on remittances from the Cuban diaspora.

From a historical perspective, Cuba's food distribution system has undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting from a model of balanced reciprocity to one characterized by negative reciprocity. This transition can be analyzed through three distinct periods, reflecting broader shifts in state governance, economic structure, and political ideology.

During the initial decades of the Cuban Revolution, food distribution served not only as a mechanism for ensuring basic subsistence but also as a strategic instrument for state governance and ideological consolidation. The introduction of the state-run rationing system (*libreta de abastecimiento*) in 1962 institutionalized a three-tiered structure of reciprocity, embedding food access within the broader framework of state-society relations:

1. Guarantee of Basic Subsistence: Initially covering 85% of the population, the rationing system expanded to achieve universal coverage by the 1970s. Through the state-controlled food procurement network (Acopio), the government centralized the acquisition and redistribution of agricultural products, ensuring a daily caloric intake of 1,800–2,200 kcal per person.

2. Institutionalization of Social Identity: The rationing system was not merely an economic mechanism for regulating food access; it also functioned as a political governance tool. For instance, during the Second Agrarian Reform of 1962, farmers who resisted state-imposed market conditions faced restrictions on access to essential goods, effectively intertwining food security with political compliance.

3. Food as an Ideological Instrument: In 1963, the state newspaper *Granma* published an editorial asserting, «bread does not only satisfy hunger; it also nourishes revolutionary fervor». Field interviews conducted in 2021 revealed that elderly Cubans recall the «memory of maize flour» as a symbolic representation of the link between the Revolution and food security: «The maize on our plates came from the land, but also from Fidel's promise»

Despite the relative stability of this system, its growing reliance on external resources introduced structural vulnerabilities. In 1972, Cuba joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), transitioning to an economic model heavily dependent on Soviet assistance. This arrangement established a compensatory exchange mechanism, whereby sugar exports were traded for oil and basic foodstuffs, reinforcing Cuba's dependence on external supply chains. However, this structural reliance on external actors would later expose

critical economic weaknesses, which became evident in the severe food crisis of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in Cuba losing 73% of its food imports, triggering a severe crisis within the state-run food distribution system (Cuban Academic Reports, 2020). In response, the Cuban government implemented a series of policy adjustments, attempting to establish new balances in reciprocity while gradually shifting toward marketization. This transition was characterized by three key transformations:

1. **Market Liberalization and the Legalization of Foreign Currency:** In 1993, the Cuban government legalized the circulation of the U.S. dollar and reopened agricultural markets, partially reducing the state's monopoly over food distribution. These reforms allowed for a limited reintroduction of private market mechanisms, enabling farmers to sell surplus production directly to consumers outside of state procurement channels.
2. **Structural Adjustments in the Distribution System:** The introduction of foreign currency stores (MLC stores) was initially designed to cater to specific economic groups, such as workers in the tourism sector, who were granted access to imported goods through foreign remittances or state salaries paid in hard currency. This shift deepened economic segmentation, wherein access to food became increasingly tied to economic privilege rather than universal provisioning (Garth, 2019, pp. 424- 442).
3. **The Symbolic Transformation of the Rationing System:** Despite a drastic reduction in the variety and quantity of rationed goods, the political function of the rationing booklet (*libreta de abastecimiento*) remained intact. By 2019, the rationing system covered only 23% of the population's caloric needs, yet the state

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continued to reinforce its symbolic legitimacy through periodic supply adjustments and state-led narratives portraying the libreta as a safeguard of revolutionary social justice.

Empirical data from 1993 to 2000 reveal a structural shift in food consumption patterns: the proportion of state-rationed food declined, while dependence on informal markets and remittance-based supply chains increased significantly (Eckstein, 2004). This period marked a fundamental realignment in Cuba's economic landscape, where state distribution mechanisms increasingly coexisted with expanding informal networks, signaling the emergence of a hybridized food system.

With the 2021 monetary unification reform (*Tarea Ordenamiento*), Cuba's food system entered a new phase of readjustment, characterized by further fragmentation and economic instability. Three key transformations define this period:

1. Disruptions in the Supply Chain: Inflation led to a sharp increase in food costs, and by 2023, the average Cuban salary (4,000 CUP) had lost approximately 80% of its purchasing power compared to 2019 (Cruz y Álvarez, 2023, pp. 109-125).
2. Reconfiguration of Food Access: Informal trade and remittances became the primary compensatory mechanisms, mitigating the decline of state provisioning but also deepening socioeconomic stratification.
3. Community-Based Strategies: In response to uncertainty, urban sectors began developing local self-sufficiency initiatives, such as balcony farming and small-scale community agriculture.

To sum up, since 1959, Cuba's food distribution system has undergone a fundamental transformation, transitioning from a model of balanced reciprocity, characterized by universal provisioning guarantees, to a negative reciprocity framework, wherein access to essential resources has become increasingly stratified. Initially, the rationing system (*libreta de abastecimiento*) functioned as a social contract, in which the state guaranteed basic welfare in exchange for political loyalty. This model was based on centralized redistribution, ensuring that food security remained a core pillar of socialist governance. However, following the post-Soviet economic crisis and subsequent market-oriented adjustments, this equilibrium was progressively dismantled. The state's role in food provisioning weakened, and access to food became increasingly differentiated, shaped by remittance flows, informal markets, and foreign currency transactions. As a result, food distribution in Cuba has evolved from a mechanism of universal entitlement to a highly segmented system, where economic disparities dictate access to essential goods. This transition not only reflects broader shifts in state-market relations but also underscores the reconfiguration of social hierarchies and governance mechanisms in contemporary Cuba. Understanding this shift provides critical insights into how socialist economies adapt to crises and negotiate the boundaries between state intervention and market forces in food security governance.

### **The Construction, Evolution, and Social Response to Food Nationalism in Cuba**

In the process of socialist state-building in Cuba, food has served not only as a fundamental necessity for survival but also as a central instrument in the ideological governance of the state. Through a series of strategic interventions, the Cuban government has actively cultivated food nationalism, reinforcing the intersection of resource

distribution, cultural identity, and social mobilization. This process has evolved across three key dimensions:

1. The Construction of an Official Culinary Discourse: A notable example is the state-sponsored television program *Cocina Revolucionaria*, which aired during prime time and instructed citizens on how to prepare meals using rationed ingredients. The program promoted the substitution of wheat flour with corn flour to align with state-imposed supply constraints. Beyond practical guidance, these programs incorporated revolutionary slogans such as «Innovation is a duty of the revolutionary», linking everyday culinary practices to socialist ideological commitments.

2. The Standardization of Consumption Spaces: State-run restaurants prioritized the use of locally sourced ingredients to reduce dependency on imported goods and to reinforce state control over food supply chains. For instance, in an effort to promote food sovereignty, potatoes were substituted with plantain leaves (*plantago*) as a staple ingredient in public dining spaces. These modifications reflected broader governmental efforts to institutionalize consumption patterns in alignment with national economic policies.

3. The Symbolization of Commemorative Foods: On significant national occasions, such as July 26th (National Rebellion Day), the government distributed «revolutionary food packages», which included canned goods featuring national symbols and chocolates imprinted with political slogans. These products functioned not merely as sustenance but as material expressions of national identity, transforming food into an instrument of political cohesion within the collective dining experience (Garth, 2017).

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By embedding political narratives within food policies and consumption practices, the Cuban state has utilized food as a mechanism for both governance and social mobilization. This integration of ideological discourse into everyday food practices highlights the broader role of food in shaping national identity and sustaining political legitimacy within socialist Cuba.

With the end of the Cold War, Cuba's food supply system underwent profound structural transformations, prompting an adjustment in the symbolic framework of food nationalism. These changes can be observed across three key dimensions:

1. **Shifting Symbolism of Certain Foods:** A representative example is the changing perception of beef consumption. In 1965, state propaganda framed the consumption of beef as an act of revolutionary support, portraying it as a symbol of social progress and collective well-being. However, amid growing scarcity, beef transitioned from being a widely accessible commodity to a luxury item available only to select segments of the population.
2. **Diversification of Consumption Spaces:** Following the legalization of the private sector in 2010, the proliferation of privately owned restaurants (*paladares*) introduced greater culinary diversity, incorporating an increasing presence of international dishes such as pasta and pizza. In response to this shift, state-run dining halls adapted by integrating hybrid menus —such as pasta with plantain leaves— blending traditional ingredients with contemporary consumption patterns to maintain competitiveness.
3. **Intergenerational Transformation of Food Memory:** Younger generations in Cuba exhibit a weaker identification with the socialist food model compared to older cohorts. While older adults nostalgically recall products such as Soviet canned meat, younger

generations associate imported powdered milk from *Moneda Librementemente Convertible* (MLC) stores with modernity and upward social mobility. This transformation has contributed to a widening generational divide in perceptions of state provisioning versus market-based food access.

In Cuban everyday discourse, the concept of *comida decente* (decent food) extends beyond the material composition of meals to encompass broader cultural and ethical values. This notion is structured around three fundamental criteria:

1. **Material Composition:** A meal is expected to include animal protein (meat or dairy products), a carbohydrate, and vegetables. The absence of any of these components renders the meal inadequate by the standards of «socialist nutrition».
2. **Culinary Norms:** While the use of substitute ingredients is generally tolerated, the incorporation of more than three alternative products into a dish often leads to its classification as *comida engañosa* (deceptive food). In certain communities, the excessive reliance on soy protein as a meat substitute has sparked debates about the authenticity and nutritional value of meals.
3. **Social Relations:** Food consumption is conceptualized as a space for familial and communal interaction. «The increased prevalence of fast food and fragmented eating practices is often perceived as a deviation from socialist collective values, signaling a shift toward individualistic consumption behaviors» (Garth, 2019, pp. 424-442).

These evolving interpretations of food and nutrition reflect broader social transformations in Cuba, illustrating how economic constraints

and policy adjustments shape not only material access to food but also the symbolic and cultural meanings attributed to dietary practices.

As food shortages have intensified, established dietary norms have undergone significant adjustments and reinterpretations, leading to broader societal debates regarding the transformation of food culture and its implications for family life. In response to these shifts, different social sectors have developed strategies of reinterpretation and resistance, which can be categorized into three key areas:

1. **Revising Traditional Recipes:** Within the online community *Madres Cubanas Solidarias*, the concept of «Revolutionary Recipes 2.0» has emerged as an adaptive strategy, encouraging the modification of traditional dishes using ingredients available through informal food networks. For example, some households have created «soy scramble» (*revoltillo de soya*) by utilizing chickpea flour and coffee grounds to simulate the texture of ground meat. This phenomenon highlights the interplay between food innovation and economic necessity.
2. **Public Protest Expressions:** In 2023, the *Marcha del Plato Vacío* («Empty Plate March») was held in Havana, where demonstrators carried altered versions of *congrí* (a traditional rice and beans dish, prepared without meat) as a symbolic critique of growing food insecurity and the inadequacy of state food provisioning. This protest exemplifies how food shortages have not only economic but also political ramifications, as food access increasingly serves as an indicator of governance legitimacy.
3. **Transnational Food Interactions:** Cuban diaspora communities have reinforced their ties with the island through the shipment of *paquetes nostálgicos* («nostalgic packages»), which contain products emblematic of the Revolutionary period, such as powdered

milk and block sugar. These shipments serve a dual purpose —not only as material assistance to relatives in Cuba but also as a mechanism for maintaining cultural continuity and transnational identity between the diaspora and the island.

Food nationalism has historically served as a central pillar of state governance in Cuba, shaped through rationing policies, ideological narratives, and symbols of national identity. However, shifts in the global economy and changes in the domestic supply structure have led to a reconfiguration of its meaning. In the early decades of socialism, food distribution was institutionalized as a demonstration of the State's commitment to social welfare. Yet, amid the current economic crisis, the food distribution system has ceased to function as a universal safety net and has increasingly become a marker of social stratification.

On a global scale, food crises have frequently prompted identity redefinitions. A notable example is Russia's «potato nationalism» following the collapse of the Soviet Union, wherein the potato emerged as a symbol of resilience in the face of economic turmoil (Ries, 2009). However, the Cuban case follows a distinct trajectory: rather than producing a new unifying national food symbol, food scarcity has instead accelerated the fragmentation of the revolutionary food ethic. This process underscores the Cuban government's deep reliance on the contract of food reciprocity. When the state fails to guarantee an adequate food supply —one that aligns with socially constructed expectations of «decent food»— the symbolic capital of the Revolution diminishes, eroding public trust in the government's ability to maintain the foundational promises of socialist governance.

Through an analysis of the 2011 *Lineamientos* and ethnographic field data, this study identifies a three-tiered feedback cycle that illustrates

the interdependence between food distribution, governance, and social dynamics in Cuba:

1. **Material Cycle:** The progressive reduction of state food rations has led to an expansion of informal markets, which in turn has diminished state revenue, further constraining the government's ability to sustain food distribution programs. This cycle reinforces the increasing role of non-state actors in food provisioning and highlights the limitations of centralized supply mechanisms.
2. **Cultural Cycle:** As traditional food items lose their symbolic significance, generational memory surrounding revolutionary-era food practices weakens, prompting shifts in consumption patterns. These transformations contribute to the gradual reconfiguration of food nationalism, as younger generations engage with new forms of culinary identity that diverge from state-sanctioned narratives.
3. **Political Cycle:** Challenges in food distribution have resulted in differentiated access, privileging certain social groups —such as those with access to remittances or foreign currency— while marginalizing others. This uneven distribution fosters growing perceptions of inequality, ultimately undermining public trust in state governance and eroding the legitimacy of the socialist social contract.

Within this framework, food is not merely a material necessity but a critical instrument in the reproduction of cultural identity and the maintenance of state stability. As food scarcity continues to reshape access, consumption, and public perception, the trajectory of Cuban food nationalism will remain deeply intertwined with broader questions of state legitimacy, social equity, and governance resilience.

## **Conclusion: The Evolution of Cuba's Food System and Its Governance Implications**

The evolution of Cuba's food system provides a paradigmatic case for understanding how state policies, market dynamics, and social practices interact to shape food access. In this context, food is not merely a material commodity; it also serves as a marker of social identity, a repository of historical memory, and a platform for political recognition. When the symbolic framework of food nationalism is destabilized, everyday food practices can evolve into mechanisms of resistance, adaptation, or even strategies for reconfiguring social order. As such, food transcends its function as a basic necessity and emerges as a key indicator of transformations in state-society relations. This perspective not only deepens the analysis of food nationalism but also contributes to broader debates on food security and governance in transitional economies.

This study extends existing theoretical frameworks in three key areas:

1. Reinterpreting Negative Reciprocity in the Welfare State Context: Traditionally, negative reciprocity has been employed to analyze exchanges characterized by power asymmetries in market-based economies. However, in welfare state contexts, food distribution systems may adopt a distinct form of negative reciprocity, wherein universal provisioning schemes —such as Cuba's rationing system— become instruments of resource control and political regulation. This process is driven by the selective provision of goods and the symbolic management of distribution. A prime example is the establishment of *moneda libremente convertible* (MLC) stores, which have created a segmented food access system. These stores not only serve as commercial channels for imported goods but also

introduce economic and symbolic barriers that redefine traditional food access structures and reshape the state's role as a provider.

2. The Politics of Resistance in Food Nationalism: Food nationalism in Cuba is not a unidirectional discourse imposed by the state but rather a dynamic system in which interactions between the state, the market, and civil society generate ongoing reinterpretations and resignifications. In response to shifts in the food supply system, Cuban citizens have not passively accepted state narratives but have instead developed strategies of «symbolic inversion» to redefine and contest official discourses on food. However, resistance does not always dismantle existing hierarchies; it may also reproduce new forms of social exclusion. Field research suggests that urban consumers often stigmatize informal market products, arguing that their origin is uncertain or that they destabilize the food economy. As such, contested food practices not only challenge established power structures but also reinforce new social boundaries. Food access, therefore, is not solely an economic issue but also a symbolic space where power relations and social values are continuously negotiated.

3. Rethinking the Role of Food Security in Political Stability: Conventional studies on economic crises typically argue that recessions impact political stability through financial and commercial mechanisms. However, the Cuban case demonstrates that when the stability of food supply systems is undermined, social reconfiguration processes may follow trajectories distinct from those of traditional economic crises. The transformation of Cuba's food nationalism has coincided with shifts in state-society relations, underscoring that food access is not only an economic concern but also a determinant of public perceptions of governance and state legitimacy. These findings suggest that food security is not merely

a question of resource availability but plays a fundamental role in shaping institutional trust and social cohesion.

Building on these insights, this study argues that Cuba's food crisis is not simply a matter of supply and distribution but reflects broader structural shifts in state-society relations. Policy solutions based solely on food imports or market liberalization may be insufficient to address the systemic challenges embedded in Cuba's food distribution model. This system does not merely manage material resources but also shapes collective identity and governance structures.

In this context, constructing a renewed food security framework — grounded in state-society cooperation— could enhance the resilience of Cuba's food system. One potential strategy is the development of Community-Based Food Autonomy (CFA) programs. In other developing countries, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) models have proven to be effective in improving local food security and strengthening community organization. Exploring the feasibility of such approaches within the Cuban context presents an important avenue for future research.

From a broader perspective, the Cuban case offers critical insights for other nations undergoing economic transitions. Food supply systems not only influence material living conditions but also play a central role in shaping social trust and governance strategies. Striking a balance between state regulation and market mechanisms remains a common challenge for many transitioning economies. In a global landscape where food crises are becoming increasingly frequent, understanding food as both an economic resource and a cultural-political factor is essential for designing sustainable and inclusive governance strategies.

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