

A ‘simple life’ as ‘good life’? Insights from Cuban and Ecuadorian return migration

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Abstract:

This article examines the moral deliberations and value-creation strategies of Cuban and Ecuadorian return migrants who question hegemonic views of migration and strive to re-imagine life in their homeland accordingly. The alternative paths they take challenge the analytical emphasis on economic progress and social and existential mobility in studies of migration. By reassessing notions of virtuous economic practice and activating moral repertoires outside the field of migration, returnees strive to carve out a ‘simple life’ that contests taken-for-granted assumptions about the goal of their movements and the features of a ‘good life’. The precariousness of such endeavors highlights the high stakes of returnees’ responses to migration-related expectations and pressures, namely the possibility to maintain meaningful relationships and cultivate a valuable social life.

Keywords: return migration, good life, simple life, value, morality, expectation, Cuba, Ecuador

Introduction

As argued in the Introduction of this Special Issue, migration research has been permeated by the ‘developmentalist ideology’ of international organizations (cf. Simoni & Voirol 2021). In line with this perspective, migration is related to the aspiration of a ‘better life’, a life that tends to rest on taken-for-granted moral assumptions on ‘what matters’ and on what ‘better’ means for people. International indicators undergird the economic, political, and social standards to which people are deemed to aspire. In assuming that improvement in these indicators and standards is the key to ameliorate migrants’, their families’ and communities’ lives, this perspective offers very few alternative paths to conceive of what makes for a ‘good’ life, reinforcing dominant assumptions on the matter. Especially in the last two decades, anthropologists have made new headways in tackling head on the question of the ‘good life’ (Robbins 2013; Fischer 2014), urging to move beyond ethnocentric biases and normative assumptions, and to explore the plurality of conceptions of what such a life may look like in the contemporary world. Other scholars have encouraged similar reflections on cognate notions of ‘wellbeing’ (cf. Corsín Jimenez 2008; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Jackson 2011). This research agenda aims to achieve better understandings of the different imaginaries, aspirations and notions of value that guide people in their quest for a ‘good’ or ‘better’ living.

Bringing migration into the picture, Kalir emphasizes how in both popular and academic literature, the linkage between physical and socioeconomic mobility remains ‘deeply ingrained’ (2013:313). Hage (2009) alternatively framed this issue through his notion of ‘existential mobility’, namely a sense of moving forward and going somewhere. In reference to prevailing economic and political conditions, he argues that people worldwide experience living in a state of permanent crisis, which in turn generates a sense of ‘stuckedness’. Within this framework, Hage understands ‘voluntary’ migration as a way to refuse to endure and ‘wait out’

overwhelming states of crisis, relating ‘physical mobility’ to ‘existential mobility’. Structural conditions, we may argue, are thus cast as determining the possibility, or not, of improving one’s life (Kalir 2013; Jansen 2014). With the ‘virtue of being someone who aspires’ (Carling and Collins 2018:916) recently underscored in approaches to migration, the sense of movement toward something ‘better’ also stands out in Jackson’s (2011) existentialist perspective, who asserts that the aspiration toward a ‘better’ life –however diverse it may look like– is part of the human condition.

What we contend in this article is that what exactly counts as ‘good’, ‘better’, ‘aspiration’, ‘improvement’, ‘progress’, ‘moving forward’ or ‘going somewhere’ still remains largely under-scrutinized and taken-for-granted. Ethnographically grounded understandings of how our research participants deploy, cope with, and sometimes resist such notions and assumptions, help advance current reflections on migration and its consequences. More broadly, they also sheds light on people moral reasoning and shifting stances towards postulates and expectations on what drives or ought to drive their conduct, on what their aspirations and values are or should be, and on the role that migratory experiences play in the process. Our contribution lies in illustrating productive ways to further unpack and better grasp the purchase of these approaches, notions, and assumptions, putting them to the test by paying attention to the variegated responses they engender in specific cases of return migration.

Our aim is not to deny that views of migration as a way to improve socio-economic conditions and ‘move forward’ are widespread and shape many people’s aspirations to migrate, something that finds empirical evidence in a wealth of literature on the subject. More subtly, what we endeavor to show, is that while this key promise of migration has no doubt a globe-spanning impact, it cannot, in and by itself, be taken for granted as *determining* the life that migrants end up striving for. People with migration experience do not unquestionably nor always embrace the expected onward movement and upward progression that is typically associated with

migration aspirations. Focusing on cases that problematize the linkage between physical and socio-economic mobility as the quintessential driver and telos of migration, and the allegedly ‘universal’ impulse to ‘move ahead’, aspire for ‘more’, and ‘progress’ in life, we probe deeper into our interlocutors shifting and often fragile, tentative, and precarious understanding of what counts as a ‘good’ or ‘better’ life. Such understandings, we demonstrate, challenge the meaning, role, and value attributed to not only socio-economic and political structures and normative notions of improvement and progress, but, more broadly, the premise of there being an ‘existential imperative’ driving people to move ‘forward’ (the implicit directionality at stake), and that migration is essentially a means for such ‘upward’ or ‘onward’ movement.

To develop our contribution, we adopt an experiential approach, building on Jackson’s work (e.g., 2013) and on the ‘phenomenological turn’ in migration studies (e.g., Graw & Schielke 2012; Schielke 2020); our reflections endeavor to stay close to what our interlocutors told us about their experiences and their peers’ experiences, about their imaginaries and aspirations, and about their trajectories of (im)mobility. Elaborating on recent anthropological approaches to ethics and morality, we also draw inspiration from scholarship on virtue ethics, and its emphasis on the ongoing cultivation of a moral self and of a ‘life worth living’ (Mattingly 2014:9-10), a life in which one can flourish (Lambek 2010; Mattingly 2014, 2017). Equally useful for our analysis, is anthropological literature focusing on moral deliberation and questioning (Zigon 2007, 2009; Sykes 2009, 2012; Laidlaw 2014; Mattingly 2014; Keane 2015). Expanding on these bodies of scholarship, the approach we illustrate, and which we propose as an original pathway for future research, allows us grasp views of a ‘good’ and ‘better’ life in a more nuanced, open-ended way than is currently the norm in anthropological research on migration and beyond.

Our Cuban and Ecuadorian interlocutors’ project to migrate to Europe—Spain and France in the examples we present here— was originally informed by the dire political and economic

situations in their home country. In the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, Cuba was coping with the devastating economic downturn that ensued the fall of the Soviet Union. From 1990 onwards, Europe registered a sharp increase in the arrival of migrants from Cuba, their numbers raising to an estimated 120,000 by 2007, the preferred destinations being, in order of importance, Spain, Italy, Germany and France (Krull and Stubbs 2021: 179-183). At the turn of the millennium, Ecuador was experiencing the worst economic and political crisis in its recent history, provoking a large wave of migration (estimated between 500,000 to 1 million Ecuadorians; Jokisch 2014). Following the deterioration of the economy that ensued the 2008 financial crisis, which had a particularly severe impact in Southern European countries (see e.g. Knight & Stewart 2016; for Ecuadorians, Boccagni 2011; Herrera & Martínez 2015; for Cubans, Simoni 2016a, 2019), number of Cubans and Ecuadorians considered to leave their host countries. If, like other Latin American migrants, some decided to try their luck further North, such as in the UK and Belgium (e.g., Mas Giralt 2017; Ramos 2018; Lacrampe-Camus 2019; Bermudez 2020; Turcatti 2022), the protagonists of this article chose to return to their homeland¹.

In this article, we are interested in return migrants who questioned –be it only tentatively and temporarily– dominant views and promises of migration, and who strived to re-imagine their life in their homeland accordingly. Their cases stand out, as most of the returnees we met complained of economic and societal pressures ‘back home’ and longed to head back to Europe or North America. As Simoni found out during fieldwork in Barcelona (2016a, 2019), many Cubans’ returns had been incentivized by changes in Cuban migratory legislation facilitating exits and returns, and the opening of opportunities for private enterprise in a country many still saw a ‘virgin’ and full of potential for business (cf. Aja et al. 2017; Krull and Stubbs 2021;

¹ The impact of current economic, political and, notably in the case of Ecuador, also security ‘crises’, amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, on migration flows to and from these two Latin American countries, falls largely outside the scope of this article.

Bastian 2018). What Voirol found out among Ecuadorian returnees was that many were hoping to achieve back in Ecuador a life similar to the one they had had in Spain before the financial crisis, envisioning their homeland as economically flourishing. However, in both cases, actual return experiences unsettled these expectations.

Building on the analysis of specific examples, we first show how non-economic dimensions of life were (re)assessed and (re)valued, notably by delineating alternative scenarios grounded in ideals of what we characterize as a ‘simple’ life. Secondly, paying attention to our interlocutors’ ‘moral assemblages’ (Zigon 2010), we demonstrate that their understandings of such life were informed by the combination of well established, circulating narratives and value regimes, in our cases related mainly to the domains of tourism and religion. Thirdly, we look at the ensuing reassessment of the importance and value of economic concerns, and how this helped justify alternative visions of a ‘simple’ life. Fourthly, we consider the resilience of societal pressures on interlocutors who strived to cultivate such ‘simple’ life, exemplified by their peers’ unrelenting insistence on migration-related progress and economic prosperity. A way to cope with such pressure, we show, was to move ascriptions of responsibility from the realm of individual ‘choice’ to that of systemic structural constraints limiting people’s agentic capacities. Ultimately, what we show is that a virtuous, ‘simple’ life that goes against the flow in contexts where prospects of upward socio-economic mobility widely shape migrants and non-migrants expectations, remains a rather fragile and ambivalent endeavor. In spite of their precarity, such endeavors merit serious consideration in that they challenge prevailing popular and academic assumptions and have profound analytical implications for anthropological approaches to migration and the ‘good life’.

Reassessing what counts as a ‘good’ life: towards a ‘simple’ life?

In our fieldwork, we engaged mostly with middle aged, male returnees, but also with their relatives and peers who did not have any experience of migration². The idea that migration should make a significant difference in economic terms, a difference that family and close relations should somehow benefit from, loomed large in the social contexts where our interlocutors lived, much like has been shown in other areas of the world (Graw and Schielke 2012; Hernández-Carretero 2016; Bachelet 2019; Schielke 2019; Lucht 2019). These views parallel the developmentalist perspective embraced in many studies in migration, which see it mainly as a way to improve the economic conditions not only of migrants, but also of their family and community back home, in particular via remittances (see Simoni & Voirol 2021). During our fieldwork, we became interested in reassessments and contestations of such conception of migration, notably by interlocutors trying to explicitly distance themselves from dominant narratives –be it because they felt unable to satisfy expected migration promises or felt overwhelmed by the pressure of members of their social circles counting on such promises. For relatives and peers, ‘successful’ returnees ought to be able to show the difference their migration made, for instance in the form of having set up a profitable business, acquired property, and/or improved the living conditions of their relatives.

Julio³ returned to Ecuador in 2013, when he was in his mid-fifties. He had lost his job, his flat, and his savings in Spain as a consequence of the 2008 crisis. Not only did he come back alone, having separated from his wife, but he did not manage to find a job in Ecuador. This came as a

² Simoni’s ethnography builds on several fieldwork stays from 2005 to 2022 in Cuba, mainly in Havana and Viñales, and since 2012 in Barcelona, Spain, totaling 26 months. Voirol’s ethnography builds on research in Ecuador since 2001, for a total of 30 months, and more particularly on seven months of fieldwork between 2018 and 2022 in Quito and several other towns in northern Ecuador, and in Madrid, Spain.

³ In this article, personal names and certain factual details have been altered to protect our research participants’ anonymity. Quotes from participants have been translated into English by the authors, and are based on recollection after the events took place or on transcription of recorded interviews.

surprise to Julio who, spurred by President Rafael Correa's promise of easy employment for returning migrants, expected his new life 'back home' would be successful in economic terms. He was very disappointed by how his stay in Spain ended and his return unfolded.

Three months after he arrived in Ecuador, he was introduced to a Catholic group, which sent him on a retreat to a provincial town. Julio had always been Catholic, but was not practicing. As he told Voirol, thanks to this group, he underwent a reassessment of his way of life and his moral values. Since then, Julio has attended Mass and church activities (such as talks, retreats, meetings). This led him to reconsider his social relationships, paying particular attention to close relatives, like his parents, and on friendships grounded in spiritual concerns rather than material pleasures –the drinking and partying he said had characterized his life in Spain. With his church teaching him to respect one's parents under any circumstances, he became very close to his mother, looking after her until her death. He lived in a small house he inherited from her, where he had set up a carpentry workshop and worked alone. As he could not work much, due to his age and physical ailments, and charged cheap because of the competition, he earned little money, just enough to buy food and fulfil his basic needs.

In the narrative of his return, Julio conceived his discovery of the Catholic group as a pivotal moment, which helped him operate a shift in what he valued. From a life he defined as based on frivolous relationships and partying, and on conspicuous consumption of alcohol, food, clothes, requiring much economic resources, to a life grounded in the cultivation of family and spiritual relationships and on the 'basics' in terms of consumption. Julio positively assessed his time in Spain: 'The life Spain gave us was very nice. We thought we were in Paradise. We ate, we drank'. However, he affirmed that his current life in Ecuador was better, enabling him to flourish spiritually, without depending on mundane pleasures.

Julio repeatedly justified his moral stance on what he valued and what he considered as a 'good' life. On several instances, he indicated that a life with just what one needs was worthier than a

life of abundance: 'I realized that one lives better like this... with little resources' he once remarked, adding 'here, with little money, I live peacefully. There with lots of money, I had troubles'. When he had much money, he was unable to manage it 'correctly', spending it on partying, drinking, and material goods. He had invested lot of money in a flat and lost it as a consequence of the financial crisis in Spain (see Sabaté 2016). Now, with just a little income to fulfil for his essential needs, he felt satisfied.

In this case, Julio's Catholic group helped him operate a shift in terms of the 'sphere of value' (Robbins 2012; Graeber 2013) that mattered more in his life. 'Economic success' and the material abundance it afforded, were no longer 'paramount values', 'higher principles' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Lambek 2008) guiding his aspirations. Julio's reassessment of 'what matters' can also be seen as a way to decrease expectations and to deflect the sort of 'cruel optimism' that, as Berlant (2011) and scholars of migration building on her work put it, can be a source of much frustration and disappointment (Coates 2019; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). Like in the case of Egyptian migrants moving to and from the United Arab Emirates, the return experience of some of our interlocutors led to 'narrow down the scale of imagined possibilities that one can reasonably pursue' (Schielke 2019:49). While Schielke (2019) refers to the migration-related imagined possibilities, he also argues that migration experiences may widen the scope of people's actions (2020:95). Indeed, what may be fruitfully conceptualized, building on Zigon (2009), as the 'moral breakdown' experienced by Julio –namely, the disruption leading to a conscious reflection and work on one's 'moral world and moral personhood' (Zigon 2009:261) brought about by his return–, led to infuse with value 'simple' things and activities. It prompted a new 'discern[ment of] what is worthy to pursue in life', enabling him to cultivate a 'simple life', but one 'worth living' and through which he could flourish (Mattingly 2014:9). As we argue below, the tension between the decrease of

expectation and the opening of possibilities for alternative ways of life tended to pervade the everyday of our interlocutors, working simultaneously as a way to justify their ‘simple life’.

A multiplicity of repertoires and ‘moral assemblages’: moving beyond migration-centered interpretations

The reassessment of what counts in one’s life, the process of shifting the value sphere that matters the most, requires moral work on oneself, as we showed. Yet, the delineation of an ‘alternative’ life vis-a-vis the hegemonic telos of migration prioritizing socio-economic mobility and onward progress, was not drawn from scratch, and tended to rest on well-established scripts related to other powerful sources of normative ideals. In Julio’s case, ‘religion’ provided an influential and persuasive repertoire of moral discourses through which he was able to convincingly articulate his ethical deliberations. Tourism, our research showed, could act as another key vehicle helping promote other ideas and conceptions of what constituted a valuable life.

Viñales and its homonymous valley, declared UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1998, are ‘hot spots’ featured in major international guidebooks on Cuba. The prevailing tourism narrative, embraced by the thousands of tourists visiting the area, foregrounds notions of rural beauty, harmonious human-nature relationships, as well as the simple and genuine life of its honest and hard-working inhabitants (Simoni, 2018). The repertoires promoted by international tourism fruitfully converge with Frederik (2005) identification, in 21st century Cuba, of the ideal national character of the *Hombre Novísimo* –a new iteration of Guevara’s (1977) *Hombre Nuevo*. As analyzed by Frederik, this ‘new darling of the [Cuban] State’ finds its embodiment in rural ‘folk’, the ‘rural farmer or *campesino*’, critical of ‘anything motivated by money or individual gain’ (2005:402-403). Such idealized persona fits Cuban socialist narratives that

since the 1959 Revolution have characterized institutional and public efforts to bring about virtuous national subjects and citizens, in which the value of solidarity plays a key role. The juncture of these two powerful scripts –that of international tourism and the national idealization of authentically Cuban country folk– provided an authoritative and well-recognized value regime to plug into (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Lambek 2008; Graeber 2013). It constituted another principle by which to measure worth that moved beyond mainstream migrant tropes of success, advancement, progress, and aspiration. For our research participants, it became a legitimate and compelling source for articulations of value that countered dominant migration-related ones.

Gabriela is a Cuban woman in her forties, who had lived in France for six months in the early 2010s. With the relationship with her French partner turning sour, she came back to her hometown. Gabriela did not regret such return, nor had she any plans to move again to Europe. She started a tourism rental in 2012, on a hill just outside town, close to where she grew up. Coming from a very poor family of farmers, growing up with her single mother, Gabriela highlighted how she had managed to turn her life around. She praised the place where she lived, and how one's life could flourish in terms that went beyond economic success:

You see, people want to leave [migrate abroad], but they don't realize that you can live well here.... Here you always have a roof over your head, some food on the table, family... If I need some salt, I just ask the neighbor... over there [abroad] you don't even know who your neighbor is.

Gabriela's narrative resonated with what Simoni had heard many times in Cuba (2016b, 2018), and all the more in Viñales, namely the critique of the anonymity and individualism that prevailed abroad, as contrasted to the solidarity and social warmth one could find in Cuba. When Simoni explained that he was interested in Cuban migrants coming back to live in Cuba,

Gabriela made it fit nicely into this narrative, adding that indeed, many had left Viñales, but that they were all now coming back to their *tierra*, their land, answering the call of their roots. Gabriela's view of Viñales and the place where she lived had changed as a result of her interactions with tourists, as she openly recognized:

What saved me [in the tourism rental business] was the view. Because you see, at the beginning, I didn't give it any value at all. My view of this place was 'this is in bad shape, it's out of town, it's boring...' But tourists came and they were saying, 'But look at this view, this is Paradise, the birds chirping, silence...' and my first reaction was, 'But what Paradise? What are you talking about!?!' But truth is that then I started valuing it, to value the peace and quiet of the place. Same with the mountain, I never valued it before, never went walking, but now, sometimes I also join tourists and walk with them in the countryside.

The idealization of Viñales along the lines of tourism promotion narratives punctuated also the discourses of other Viñaleros who had been abroad and returned, giving them a renewed sense of pride about living in their hometown. This is the power of tourism to act as a form of ordering, as conceptualized by Franklin (2008), to 'become a place-maker by creating an entirely different way of configuring, knowing, desiring, visiting and living in places previously untouched by tourism' (2008:33). Among the ordering effects that Franklin highlights, we find 'aestheticization', consisting in the beautification of ordinary things, and 'place-making', which he describes as places acquiring and asserting a narrative of themselves as distinctive and imbued with unique values. Both these forms of ordering were at play in Viñales, as the conversations with Gabriela made clear.

What Gabriela and Julio's examples show, is how disparate value regimes circulating transnationally, through tourism and religion in their cases, could overshadow hegemonic migration-related expectations of economic progress and success, and nourish different

conceptions and implementations of a ‘good life’. Much like the aspirations, ways of life, and existential drives associated with migration, the moral dispositions of Julio and Gabriela drew on pre-existing repertoires circulating at different scales, which valorize, or even idealize what we can interpret as a ‘simple life’. A life content, for instance, with the fulfilment of basics needs, spirituality, manual activities, unpretentious country life and the appreciation of genuine sociality and nature’s gifts. Both found resources to support their ideals of such ‘simple life’ in two powerful domains of value-creation, namely religion for Julio, and tourism for Gabriela, the latter converging with national ideals of what made for Cuban genuine character.

Our analysis thus shows the interest of paying increased attention to the ‘moral assemblages’ social actors elaborate engaging with and combining ‘various institutional, public, and personal moral discourses and ethical practices’ (Zigon 2010:5). Such attention marks a key step in efforts to ‘de-migranticize’ (Dahinden 2016) research on migration, with these ‘assemblages’ affecting people with or without migration experience. This analytical move enables to highlight the limitations, and to complement and eventually also to overcome approaches of ‘migration’ that tend to explain any migration-related discourse and behavior with ‘migration’ itself, and with related assumptions about its economic as well as existential drivers, aspirations, and ambitions.

Dire economic contexts as fertile ground to cultivate a different morality

The difficult situations in which returnees could find themselves, peppered with obstacles to achieve a ‘successful’ life in economic terms, help explain delineations of moral lives that do not fit hegemonic migration scripts. As previously mentioned, embracing different value regimes is also a way to escape the pressure put on migrants by non-migrants, and to eschew the ubiquitous demands of migration to fulfil social expectations and related obligations (on the

latter, see for instance Graw and Schielke 2012; Gardner 2015; Scalettaris et al. 2019; Elliot 2021; Borisova 2023). In the cases of Julio and other returnees, economic constraints provided a fertile ground to reassess priorities and question a certain morality, opening new paths rather than restraining possibilities (cf. Schielke 2019). For Cuban and Ecuadorian returnees, a valuable and fulfilling life was possible once we shift the criteria for assessing value, and downplay the importance of certain expectations (see Schielke 2019).

A pathway we both observed was embedded in economic scarcity itself and the valuing of thrift. Economic criteria were thus still at play, but to foreground virtue in ways that deviated from hegemonic narratives of material success, upward mobility, and progress.

Juan Manuel, a returnee in his seventies when Voirol first met him in 2018, was keen to valorize frugality and thrift. He recounted how in Spain, which he had left in the early 2010s, he had embraced the ‘consumerist way of life’ of Spaniards. He spent lavishly on clothes, watches, and perfumes, amongst other luxury items. Six perfumes, he said he always had, one for each day, costing up to 80€. In hindsight, Juan Manuel criticized such consumption patterns. He regretted that –had he not been guided by such futile material pursuits– he would have been able to save money for his family. Being ‘economical’ is what he now conceived as good practice in life, independently of the economic context at stake. When Voirol met him, he bought foodstuffs at the market once every two weeks, as doing so was much cheaper than purchasing less quantities at a time in grocery shops. He used water and electricity sparingly, recycling, for example, his washing machine water to clean the balcony of his house. Juan Manuel and his wife did not go out nor travelled for tourism much. ‘It’s too expensive’, argued Juan Manuel, telling Voirol that he preferred to watch TV reports on Ecuadorian tourism destinations, enough to give him the sensation to be visiting those places. Juan Manuel had few clothes, wore one t-shirt during three or four days and bought a new clothing item only when another one was worn out. ‘One does not need much to live well’ –he liked to say.

Juan Manuel also told Voirol that he was not ambitious and, unlike others, did not feel the need to accumulate money. He was unconvinced that ‘ambition’ itself was worthy, as many claimed. This illustrates the adoption of a rather different perspective on what counts as ‘good’, when compared to ‘aspirations’ as described in much migration scholarship. Juan Manuel referred to the pressure he felt when acquaintances repeatedly advised him to try such and such entrepreneurial activity to make money and progress. Valuing a ‘simple life’ and being satisfied with his small pension and the rent of the one-bedroom flat he owned on the ground floor, Juan Manuel shared with Voirol his embarrassment. The awkwardness of feeling social pressure to undertake profitable business activities while he felt not need to do so, as well as the recognition of his inability to set up any such an economic enterprise. His lifestyle and discourses questioned not only the drive towards capital accumulation, but also the very notion of ‘ambition’, two key aspects of dominant narratives on migration’s drives and goals.

Yordanis is a Cuban man in his forties, of very humble origins, who had come back to live in his hometown of Viñales after almost twenty years in France. Having channeled over 100,000 euros into Cuba in the few last years, he had seen his fortune vanish –‘*se fue*’ (it’s gone). In 2019, he explained to Simoni how his migration-related wealth had profited his Cuban partner, relatives, close friends, and acquaintances, and mostly went into the construction of a house, planned to function as a tourism rental, which he struggled to complete and had recently put on sale. As Simoni visited again Yordanis a year later, he found him all the more destitute, having sold most of his clothes and expensive household appliances, including the plasma TV he had been so proud of. However, he kept an upbeat mood. Yordanis liked going fishing, and with Simoni stay coinciding with tobacco harvesting season, he could see him going daily to help a family of farmers he had known since his youth. Walking back home in the evening –to the unfinished house where he still lived but on which construction had stopped– after a long day toiling in the fields, Yordanis told Simoni how others in Viñales looked scornfully at him, in

his dilapidated farmer cloths and rubber boots. '*Se le apretó el zapato!*' (his shoe got tight), joked Jacob, Simoni's friend, explaining him that this was an expression used to evoke one's worsening and dire economic situation. Reacting to such judgments, Yordanis evoked the satisfactions that going to work in the fields gave him. He spoke admiringly of the farmers whom he labored with, virtuous and genuine people, and praised the very simple but delicious meal shared during lunch break, mostly rice with beans.

The 'simple life' embraced by Julio and Juan Manuel, much like the praising of genuine simplicity of Gabriela and Yordanis, may be seen as part of a search for stability afforded by scaling down expectations and aspirations, echoing Schielke's (2019) analyses of Egyptian migrants' experiences. Stability could bring relief, comfort and allow people to project themselves into the future in ways that are harder to imagine when subscribing to hegemonic narratives of progress via migration. Additionally, the pursuit of what was socially expected from migration could come with high emotional cost, which our interlocutors were not willing to endure, at least in that period of their lives (cf. Schielke 2019; Borisova 2023). No matter how widespread and compelling hegemonic migration narratives and expectations could be, our examples highlight a range of ways of deflecting them. Such ways may be unpredictable, or exceptions to the rule, to a certain extent, but it is by taking them on board in our analyses, that new insights for reflecting on migration and the 'good life' may be gleaned.

Social pressure and the precarious temporality of a 'simple life'

Julio could rely on the other members of his Catholic group to validate his embracing a 'simple life' and reaffirm its principles. Gabriela found a receptive audience in the ethnographer and tourists to her valuing of 'simple things' in Viñales. However, both Julio and Gabriela, much

like Juan Manuel and Yordanis, could easily feel estranged when engaging with other peers, prompting a sense of dis-attunement from their social milieus.

This is exactly what Voirol uncovered when he talked with 44 year-old Modesto, from the city of Esmeraldas on the Ecuadorian north coast. Modesto claimed that he had achieved the goal he had set himself when he first undertook his migration project. He bought a house in the neighborhood where he grew up. He told Voirol that it would have been a shame if he had come back without anything to show, as if his time in Spain had been wasted –a discourse very much aligned with dominant expectations on migration. Even if he was not able to open a bar, which had been his second goal, he now lived close to his family and ‘his people’ (*‘mi gente’*), ‘happy’ (*‘alegre’*) people, and next to the beach, which gave him much satisfaction. He felt ‘at home’ and praised the attachment to ‘his land’ (*‘mi tierra’*), which he deemed priceless: the smell of the sea, of the fresh fish on the beach and the taste of local dishes. However, Modesto had not been able to find employment since his return, having tried several unsuccessful businesses (e.g., rice and beer wholesale). He worked as waiter for punctual events, but longed for a permanent job. This made his economic life precarious. Furthermore, his relatives did not hesitate to take advantage of him. For instance, four of Modesto’s siblings lived in his house without contributing to any of its running expenses (such as electricity and water), as if wanting to remind him that his migratory project, not to be cast as a failure, had to prove economically sustainable for him and his family. Modesto, however, strived to act in ways that supported his vision of a good life. He spent time with his father (who lived in Modesto’s house), he asked every morning the blessing of his grandmother, he chatted with his neighbors and old friends on the street, he met ‘nice’ and ‘cheerful’ people, and went daily to the beach to exercise and swim in the sea. Modesto openly flagged up these aspects of his current life as invaluable. He refrained from asking contributions from the relatives living in his house, so as to maintain smooth relationships with them.

A moral life different than expected in the societal milieus one lives in, seen as going against the flow, needs to be carefully cultivated, as a virtue, in the day to day, through acts, behaviors and discourses (see Lambek 2010; Das 2012; Mattingly 2014). What we may approach as ‘marginalized’ moralities, could hardly be a long quiet river, and work was constantly required on one’s moral self to keep them alive. In this sense, we cannot really sustain the idea of a return to an unquestioned, unproblematic new everyday moral life, which according to Zigon (2009) is the goal of ‘ethical moments’, geared at ending a ‘moral breakdown’. Gabriela, Julio, Juan Manuel, Yordanis, and Modesto constantly needed to convince themselves and to justify their newfound values to others acting as bearers of dominant moral frameworks, who did not relent putting pressure on them. In both Cuba and Ecuador, people singled out as ‘(ex-)migrants’ were expected to embrace the shared values of economic success and progress in life, and to show how migration made a significant difference in these terms. It is worth noting here that a successful economic life was also what had motivated our returnee interlocutors to migrate in the first place, and something to which they (had) most likely aspired. For those who did not experience migration, migration overdetermined what migrants were and should be, informing continuous pressure on the latter.

This made our interlocutors’ attempts to carve out what we characterize as a ‘simple life’ hard to keep up in the long run, all the more so when the economic context, as had been the case both in Cuba and Ecuador, kept deteriorating. In spite of praises of a ‘good simple life’ in Viñales, what we currently see on the ground is a striking rise in people leaving for abroad, something that is also occurring in Ecuador. The most severe outflow of Cubans since the 1959 Cuban Revolution is underway, with a staggering 300,000 Cubans reaching the US in 2022 alone, representing slightly less than 3% of Cuba’s 2021 population (Albizu-Campos Espiñeira and Díaz-Briquets 2023). As Simoni was told in his last stay in the summer of 2022, proportionally, among the Cubans making it to the US, people from Viñales stood in the top

position when compared with other Cuban municipalities. Evidently, and while Simoni had no way of verifying the accuracy of such statistics, the trope and appeal of a ‘simple life’ in Viñales, was not as compelling or widespread enough to hold back many of its inhabitants, especially young Viñaleros, from leaving. In this context, the returnees who stayed in the rural town, could be easily seen as failures and fools for not migrating again. Among the cases presented here, Gabriela, whose tourism rental business was widely recognized as a model of success in town, has stayed. Yordanis, on the other hand, returned to France shortly after Simoni met him in 2020, to ‘make money’ –as he put it in a phone call they had in 2022– his longstanding connections in Europe helping him cover at least the flight back there. This raises the question of how much returnees’ praises of a ‘simple life’ and their staying in Cuba could be taken seriously by other Cubans. More often than not, such praises were easily dismissed as an excuse to make up for lack of economic success, or the impossibility to leave again, which only increased societal pressure and a sense of dis-attunement.

Such was the case of Jorge, a Cuban man in his mid-forties and longtime friend of Yordanis, who had been back in Viñales for just over a year when Simoni first met him in 2016. Jorge had left Viñales for France in 1997, where he had worked in construction. With the help of a rich French friend, who had been impressed by the beauty of the place once they visited Viñales together for holidays, Jorge had invested in land, and started building a big house near Gabriela’s, his sister. In August 2019, he finally obtained the license to start renting for tourists, but business was low, with much competition in town and few visitors around. In one of the repeated conversations Simoni had with him about life in Viñales, compared to France, Jorge told him: ‘I don’t need much [to live well]. My wife, my daughter, my peace of mind, that’s what’s important for me, and to be happy...’. They were sitting in his porch when he digressed about such ‘good life’, looking at the sun setting over the town, and he exemplified his words

by drawing attention to their surroundings, the landscape, the freshly caught fish that was grilling in front of them, a simple but genuine meal...

At other times, Jorge liked to ironize about the incongruities of life in Cuba and the government's inaptitude at letting people 'grow' and realize their potential. One day, he went so far as to say that, in Cuba, one was simply not allowed to *pensar diferente* ('think differently'), and so there was ultimately no point in making big plans based on new, ambitious, and original ideas. We may see this as an overstatement, a provocation. However, when tapped into, such stance also had concrete consequences in terms of Jorge's relations with others, and his sense of agency and possibility. Analytically, we may argue that Jorge sought to extricate himself from the expectations of material success that weighed so heavily on migrants like him. By externalizing responsibility and diminishing the measure of autonomy and agentive capacity to affect his life and living condition, Jorge was lowering the pressure on him to make a migration-related difference. He could thus re-embed himself in a more levelled social realm in which everybody had to live and make do within very limited conditions of possibility. Returnees like Jorge, we argue, sought to find relief in 'being acted upon', as a way to modulate agency and responsibility. Be it in Ecuador or Cuba, we were both confronted with situations where our interlocutors gave up the idea of having 'choice', and claimed to be determined and oppressed by the 'system'. This allowed them to bypass dominant expectations, and could be supported by commending the benefits of a 'simple' life. In this sense, shifting responsibility, and the 'choice' of a simple life, may be seen as connected⁴. In any case, the moments in which our interlocutors claimed to be powerless could hardly last for long. They ultimately had to live with others who constantly recalled them their duties as relatives and peers, and, crucial for our argument here, as returnees and people who had had the chance of being abroad, and who therefore were expected to fulfil migration's widely expected promises.

⁴ As Trémon (2018) shows in the case of people with and without a migratory background in a village in Shenzhen, China, conceptualizations of 'choice' or 'nonchoice' often come retrospectively.

In Ecuador, even if Modesto insisted on his valorization of family ties, longstanding friendships, and ‘his land’, economic precarity and social pressure kept weighing heavily; while unswerving in his assertions of what mattered most for him, he often looked rather frustrated. The first times Voirol met him, Modesto told him that he would never go back to Spain, as he very much preferred his life in Esmeraldas with his family and friends. However, when Voirol visited him just before and after the pandemic, Modesto was pondering the possibility to head again to Europe, given the dire economic context in Ecuador. In the case of Juan Manuel, in spite of disinclination for ‘business’, he eventually bought a van to go with his son to working-class areas of Quito to sell cleaning and bathroom items. And while Julio stated so many times that he would not go back to live in Spain because he would just end up with the life he had there before –marked by much wasteful drinking and partying– he applied to have his Spanish residency permit back. He eventually obtained it, and travelled to Madrid in May 2023, where he currently lives.

Our interlocutors might have strived to carve out and develop alternative views of an ideal and virtuous life, but social pressures, and probably also the coexisting desire to improve their economic condition and to enjoy some measure of material comfort, could ultimately gain the upper hand over their non-conformist ways of living. In contexts such as Cuba and Ecuador, alternative lifestyles and the embracing of a ‘simple life’ may be seen as temporary strivings that made sense and emerged in specific moments of our interlocutors’ lives. Proclamations and modes of living that went against the grain of what was expected could thus resemble experiments of ‘how life might or should be lived’ (Mattingly 2014:15). Attempts always peppered by moments of critique and reassessment, by the opening and closure of paths and possibilities –something that brought uncertainty and a certain amount of incoherence, in the long run, to one’s life trajectory (Mattingly 2014:20, 123).

Conclusion

The cases we analyzed in this article show that, vis-a-vis migration research frequent sweeping assumptions on the nature of migrant aspirations and the ‘good life’, efforts and struggles pointing in different directions merit more ethnographic and analytical attention. These alternative paths cannot be subsumed under overarching claims about what migrants seek, aim, and aspire for: neither reductive views of economic progress –still perpetuated in much of migration studies’ scholarship–, nor subtler conclusions on the aspiration for social or existential mobility, as opposed to ‘being stuck’ –as developed by scholars like Hage and Jackson. The paths we uncovered have so far been mostly neglected or superficially addressed, and call for further research. Closer scrutiny of what comes to count as a life worth living among our returnees research participants, and of their pointing to the value of a ‘simple life’, enabled us to question the appropriateness of reducing migrants’ aspiration for something better to the imperative of a ‘forward’ or ‘upward’ move. As we showed, some returnees reassessed what counted as virtuous economic practice, foregrounding the value of thrift, simplicity, frugality in contrast to dominant and taken-for-granted views of economic success and progress via migration. Others drew on different moral repertoires that held much purchase, for instance, in the realms of religion and tourism. In all cases, a combination of moral reasoning and concrete practices –including the shifting of responsibility and the relinquishing of ‘choice’– supported ideals of ‘simple life’.

Expanding on Schielke (2019, 2020), we argue that, in some cases, a dire economic and political context can become a driving force to reassess one’s moral presuppositions and to elaborate alternative valuations that can help relieve societal pressure, leading to the emergence of unexpected and understudied exemplifications of a valuable life. A life deemed worth living, that clearly departs from both popular and academic assumptions on migration’s ultimate drives

and telos. Through ‘moral assemblages’ (Zigon 2010), we also showed how returnees strive to pluralize what counts as a ‘good’ life and how experimental and non-linear this process is (Mattingly 2014). The particular cases we analyzed lead us to ask if the search for alternatives to the hegemonic expectations of migration is actually not rather the norm than the exception. If, as we showed, the espousal of this narrative was never really abandoned, we argue that it was neither completely nor blindly embraced.

Living and promoting a ‘simple life’ in contexts in which people overwhelmingly support narratives of economic success, and redouble such expectation in the case of migrants, however, is no easy task. Our interlocutors often ended up feeling estranged and dis-attuned from the world they lived in. Even if returnees disagreed with dominant moral conceptions of how one should live, they could hardly isolate themselves and feel indifferent to the judgments, evaluations, and pressures of relatives and peers. The latter made strong demands, to which they had to respond with commitments that showed that they cared for their relatives and peers (see Keane 2015; Dyring et al. 2017; Zigon 2021). The returnees’ embeddedness in social life was at stake, and there was much to lose and to gain in how they dealt with the collective expectations weighing on them. Most of our interlocutor, we have seen, ended up migrating again, the element of personal will and ‘choice’ in re-embracing migration’s hegemonic promises hard to disentangle from the societal milieus to which their lives – ‘simple’ or not – were intimately related.

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