

## *Suite Habana*

Screening and Panel Discussion

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Graduate Center, CUNY

6 PM to 8:30 PM

### **Comments by Discussant:**

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It is a pleasure to be here tonight. Thanks Raúl (Rubio) for moderating this panel discussion. I also want to thank Mauricio Font and the *Bildner Center* for organizing it, and Jerry Carlson for curating the Cuba Film series.

This is the second time that I watch *Suite Habana*, both times at the Bildner Center. As I watched tonight's film, four (4) resounding economic topics came to mind: (1) austerity, (2) the deteriorated state of Cuba's residential housing stock, (3) the insufficiency of salaries and pensions, particularly after the collapse of the Socialist Bloc in the early 1990s, and (4) emigration.

Let me briefly explain or expand of each of these topics. But, before doing that, I think that we must consider the film's historical context. *Suite Habana* was filmed in 2003, exactly 10 years after the worst year of the "Special Period." The "Special Period" – known as the "*Periodo Especial en Tiempos de Paz*" – was initiated (or officially declared) in early 1990. It started as an energy conservation program intended to save 150,000 tons of crude oil, followed by a Food Program designed to substitute food imports and reduce Cuba's external sector dependency.

### **1) Austerity**

The Special Period was characterized by a wide range of austerity measures, which consisted of several phases.

Phase I, which began on May of 1990, consisted of the following measures:

- Shutting down the *Che Guevara* nickel plant
- Delaying the opening of the oil refinery in Cienfuegos
- Reducing fuel deliveries by 50% to the State sector and 30% to the non-State sector
- Cutting electricity consumption by 10%
- Using draft animals (e.g. oxen, horses, etc.) to replace trucks, tractors, combines and other mechanized equipment in agriculture

Phase II, which started on September 1990, further expanded the austerity measures by:

- Closing factories and textile mills
- Reducing cement output and production of construction materials due to lack of imported inputs; cement production, for instance, fell by 62.5% from 4,000,000 tons in 1990 to an estimated 1,500,000 tons in 1992
- Cancelling or reducing social programs (for the first time since the 1959 Revolution)
- Reducing the number of buses in circulation or operation; between 1990 and 1992, urban trips were reduced by 25%, and rural trips by 50%
- Rationing cooking gas and kerosene supplies
- Increased food rationing

Phase III, took place between 1991 and 1992, and included:

- Further cuts in electricity consumption of 20% in the State sector and 10% in the non-State sector
- Reductions in bus trips in the City of Havana (25%),
- 30% reduction in gasoline deliveries

There is an abundance of macroeconomic statistics that illustrate the impact of the economic crisis of the 1990s on the Cuban economy. In the interest of brevity, I will only mention three (3):

- a) Cuba's merchandise exports declined 75% between 1990 and 1993.
- b) The country's merchandise imports, most of which were provided by the Socialist Camp, fell by 72%.
- c) At the onset of the Special Period, 75% to 80% of Cuba's merchandise trade was conducted with the CMEA and the USSR.

## 2) **Deteriorated State of Residential Housing Stock**

In various scenes of *Suite Habana* we can observe the deteriorated state of Cuba's residential housing stock. While housing has been a historical problem in Cuba, and the housing stock experienced notable deterioration since 1959, this process was intensified after the Special Period.

As of 2013, according to data published by the National Housing Institute and Cuba's National Statistics and Information Office, an estimated 50% of the country's residential housing stock is considered to be in "poor" condition. Cuba's housing deficit (i.e. the imbalance between the supply and demand for housing) is estimated somewhere between 750,000 and 1,000,000 units.

## 3) **Insufficient Pensions and Salaries**

The film highlights, intentionally or not, one of the major challenges confronting the Cuban economy since the Special Period: the insufficiency of pensions and salaries in terms of real (i.e. inflation adjusted) purchasing power. Several scenes show "Amanda," a 79 year old, retired textile worker, walking the streets of Havana (around Prado), selling "*cucurruchos de mani*" (packets of peanuts); later, as the day comes to an end, she appears sitting on her dining table preparing her "inventory" for the next day.

Given the deteriorated conditions of her living quarters, and the meager belongings that she shares in her humble, run-down, home with her husband, one can assume that “Amanda” represents the countless numbers of Cuban senior citizens who must work “para resolver” and to supplement their meager State pensions (which are paid in Cuban pesos –CUP).

Another character that appears in the film, which appears to also work outside the State sector to supplement his income, is Juan Carlos, a 37-year old doctor who works for a State-owned catering services company (that provides food catering services to the tourist sector). Juan Carlos works on “the side” as a clown. Although the captioning shown at the end of film indicates that he does this because he dreams of becoming an actor someday, like many Cuban doctors it is highly likely that he also does this to survive (i.e. to supplement his State wages). His relatively low living standard is exemplified by the fact that rather than driving a car to work, like most doctors in most parts of the world, Juan Carlos rides a bicycle, and shares his modest – but relatively well-maintained home – with his mother and his brother – who decides to migrate to the US presumably in search of a better life.

#### 4) **Emigration**

*Suite Habana*, like many other Cuban films of the Special Period, deals with the thorny issue of emigration, although in a very particular way. Migrating is seen by many Cubans as a quick solution to all their problems.

Other films deal with this issue in various dimensions, some of the most recent ones include: *El cuerno de la abundancia* (2008), *Havanastation* (2011), *Doble juego* (2013) and *Conducta* (2014).

Emigration has been and remains a major issue in Cuban society. *Suite Habana* presents its most intimate face when it shows the image of Juan Carlos (the doctor) riding his bike to the airport to meet his mother to bid farewell to his departing brother, who is leaving for Miami. The scene also contains images of other Cubans, some leaving, some arriving, some crying, some smiling, but all torn in their own ways by the push and pull of migration that for centuries has characterized and marked our nation, and has shaped and defined the Cuban national identity and the Cuban spirit.

Thank You.