

**WORKSHOP:**

**“NO ES FACIL”: EVERYDAY LIFE IN CUBAN SOCIETY DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD**

**Date: 25 March 2015**

**Time: 5.00pm**

**Location: UCL - Institute of the Americas, 51 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PN**

Organised by Daliany Kersh

Hosted by UCL – Institute of the Americas

Promoted by the International Institute for the Study of Cuba



**Programme**

5:00 – 5:10 - Introduction - Daliany Kersh

5:10 – 5:30 - Cuba: The Special Period – the response to Armageddon - Francisco Dominguez (Middlesex University)

5:30 – 5:50 -Travels in 'new Numancia': Resistance and survival strategies in the 'Special Period' 1992-1995 - Stephen Wilkinson (International Institute for the Study of Cuba)

5:50 – 6:10 Women’s Informal Employment during Cuba’s Post-Soviet Economic Crisis, 1990-2005 - Daliany Kersh (Roehampton University)

6:10 – 6:30 - ‘*Toda la vida hemos estado en periodo especial*’: the Millennial Generation - Professor Elizabeth Dore (Southampton University)

6:30 – 7:15 Q & A session for the panel

7:15 – 8:30 – Reception

## *Speaker abstracts and biographical notes:*

### **“NO ES FACIL”: EVERYDAY LIFE IN CUBAN SOCIETY DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD**

Following the nationalisation of US-owned industries and the enforcement of the trade embargo in 1960, Cuba became almost totally dependent on the USSR for financial solvency. The Soviet trading block accounted for 85 per cent of Cuba’s external trade; purchasing Cuban sugar and nickel at above world-market prices, offering the island considerable loans and selling it oil which would not be affected by fluctuating market prices.

The faltering and subsequent demise of the Soviet system into the 1990s signified the sudden loss of Cuba’s international economic trading network and the near collapse of its own economy. On 29 August 1990, the then President Fidel Castro formally announced the “Special Period in Times of Peace” in the national newspaper *Granma*. This signalled that the country was in dire straits and that drastic measures, even involving the opening of the economy, would be needed in order to salvage the Socialist system and maintain all the progress the revolution had hitherto achieved.

This event marked quite possibly the worst economic crisis ever experienced by a Latin American country and the most significant change in the revolution since the first few years of its inception. It was no longer possible to maintain a decent standard of living on an average state wage, which ranged from US\$7 minimum salary per month to US\$15 on average for a highly trained professional. Everyday life was also characterised by shortages of food, basic consumer goods, transport, fuel and lengthy power cuts.

This “*No es Facil*” Special Period seminar brings together a range of academics from different disciplines, all experts on Cuba, who will discuss the issues faced by ordinary Cuban citizens who, for well over a decade, courageously attempted to navigate their way through such a hostile economy.

Daliany Kersh, Seminar Director

## **Abstracts and Speaker Bios**

### **Cuba: The Special Period – the response to Armageddon - Francisco Dominguez**

By 1997, six years after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the apocalyptic predictions about Cuba did not materialise. Nor did the predictions about the inevitability of the rise of capitalism that were abundantly prophesied by some specialised economic media. My presentation aims to examine the consequences of the demise of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe on Cuba’s economy and society and the agile and creative response of the island’s state and government to such a devastating development (Cubans refer to the Special Period as ‘Armageddon’). However, a crucial feature of these developments is that their full import can best be understood if contextualised, which is how this paper intends to discuss its topic.

Dr. Francisco Dominguez is a senior lecturer at Middlesex University, where he is head of the Centre for Latin American Studies, and secretary of the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign. Dominguez came to Britain in 1979 as a Chilean political refugee. Ever since he has been active on Latin American issues, about which he has written and published extensively.

## **Travels in 'new Numancia': Resistance and survival strategies in the 'Special Period' 1992-1995**

**Stephen Wilkinson**

This paper will focus on the period 1992-1995 when the island was in danger of an economic meltdown, and examine the effects that the severe food, medicine and energy shortages had on the population's health, attitudes and well-being during that time. It takes its title from an article in the *El Pais* newspaper published at the time, in which it was argued that rather than submit to the yoke of the North Americans, the population of Cuba would, like the citizens of the peninsular city of Numancia before the Romans, resist to the point of mass suicide.

It will draw on statistical and literary sources as well as anecdotal evidence gathered during the author's time spent living in Havana for two periods - the first during July and August 1992 and the second for three months in the winter of 1995-96. The paper concludes that contrary to popular belief, this intense part of the Special Period did not erode the socialist consciousness of the population and that a broad and well-informed political understanding of the nation's plight prevailed. Paradoxically, however, while the privations of daily life and the shortages reinforced and calcified notions of resistance and 'lucha' in some sectors they engendered a sense of cynicism and futility in others, producing a complex pattern of personal and collective responses to the crisis the legacy of which remains within Cuba today.

Dr. Stephen Wilkinson is Chairman of the International Institute for the Study of Cuba and Editor of the *International Journal of Cuban Studies*. Stephen lectures at King's College London and the University of Buckingham. His current research investigates the biotechnology sector in Cuba: 'Socially responsible enterprise in Cuba: a positive role model for Corporate Social Responsibility?' written with Denise Baden, recently appeared in the *International Journal of Cuban Studies* (Vol.6.1), Pluto journals, London UK.

## **Women's Informal Employment during Cuba's Post-Soviet Economic Crisis 1990-2005**

**Daliany Kersh**

Women's relationship to work is particularly important in the Cuban context given the revolution's policy to fully immerse women into the workforce. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, women represented 38.9% of state workers. However the "Special Period" economic crisis, which followed this historic event, meant that the state could no longer afford to employ everybody and the value of the state wage considerably devalued.

This talk aims to consider how women looked for alternative ways to earn money in a hostile post-Soviet economy. I argue that women were disproportionately affected by the crisis and many had to look for "flexible" and clandestine work from home or within the neighborhood in order to deal with their augmented domestic responsibilities. I will use oral histories and press archives to discuss two of these alternative ways; "*cuentapropismo*" (self-employment), and "*la lucha*" (the struggle). These words are synonymous with the "Special Period" in Cuba and are key examples of how alternative earning-strategies played a significant role in Cuban women's daily lives within this changing economic landscape

Daliany Kersh is a final year History PhD student at Roehampton University. Her thesis focuses on the changes to women's domestic and productive work during the Special Period crisis. She is the Director of this event and has presented her research on Cuba at 5 other academic conferences. She has spent extensive time in Cuba over the last four years, both living with ordinary Cubans and conducting press archives and 30 oral history interviews. She completed her Masters in Latin American Studies at the Institute for the Study of the Americas.

## ***'Toda la vida hemos estado en periodo especial': the Millennial Generation***

**Professor Elizabeth Dore**

*'Yo creo que toda la vida hemos estado en periodo especial lo que unas veces mas fuerte y otras veces mas floja.'* —Mario, San Isidro, Habana Vieja

A UK-Cuban research team I directed conducted oral history interviews with forty-five Cubans now in their twenties and thirties - the millennial generation. Drawing on interviews with four young Cubans, I will analyse how memories of everyday life during the Special Period reflected differences in family circumstances (aka social strata) and racial identity.

Elizabeth Dore is a Professor Emeritus of Latin American Studies, University of Southampton, and Associate Fellow, Institute of the Americas, University College London. Her forthcoming book, *Cubans' Lives* (Verso) tells the stories of Cubans born in 1970s & 80s, the millennial generation. Her articles on Cuba have been published in *Nueva Sociedad*, the *Hispanic American Historical Review* (forthcoming), *Oral History*; *La historia oral en Cuba* (CENESEX).