Cuban material culture: Modernity, utopia, socialism

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by

María A Cabrera Arús

I.

Since it is my privilege to open the panel, before entering into the topic of my presentation, “the politics of materiality in socialist Cuba”, I would like to introduce the term “material culture” as a category of analysis of society. Material culture studies are interested in understanding the effects of the reciprocal action between, on the one hand, society, a collective of human beings, and, on the other hand, the non-human environment in which this collective exists—and this includes technology, consumer goods, gardening, etc. I want to insist in the bi-directionality of this process, by virtue of which both socio-political dynamics are inscribed in the built environment, and objects and artifacts of the built environment have an effect in society. The first of these processes being unquestioned (I mean, the effect of society on the material), the latter came into the attention of social scientists much more recently.

Just in recent times have social scientists felt at ease with the idea of the material environment physically blocking or favoring behaviors, and symbolically communicating meanings, values, and memories. By this I don’t mean that there was no interest before in the topic, but rather that it has now become trendy and worldwide studied.

In the very last years, indeed, the category of material culture has been applied to the analysis of both contemporary, post-1990 Cuban reality and, to a lesser extent, the republic. Numerous
books like the ethnographic accounts of the Special Period by Rosenberg (2009) and Perttierra (2011); Whitfield’s (2008) analysis of the representations of the Special Period in Cuban contemporary literature; Loss and Prieto’s (2012) and Puñales-Alpízar’s (2013) approaches to the traces of the Soviet influence in Cuban present imaginary; and even the cultural readings of early-twentieth century Cuban history by Pérez (1999) and Hyde (2013), Hyde focusing on the modern movement in particular; as well as a number of panels, symposiums, and articles have appeared in electronic and printed mediums just in the last years.

These and other works have greatly contributed to form a more or less legible picture of the symbolic elements associated with consumption and the representations of materiality during the republic and the late-twentieth century Special Period. The first years after the revolutionary takeover have extensively been approached as well from perspectives that, if not directly involved with the material culture studies, refer to the drastic changes in the material culture during those years and some of the consequences they brought for the legitimation of the newly proclaimed socialist regime.

However, the time when Cuba was most heavily under the influence of the Soviet Union, namely the 1970s and 1980s, is mainly absent from the scholarly literature on Cuban material culture. Most socio-historical narratives come to a halt during what has been called the *Quinquenio gris* (the gray quinquennium, from 1970 to 1975), only to reappear in the 1990s, ignoring the years of Soviet-style socialism in Cuba. As a consequence, a sharp divide exists, in historiographical terms, between before and after the triumph of the rebels and the years that followed the seizure of power by Castro, as well as between before and after the Special Period.
Naturally, the secrecy with which the Cuban regime managed its own statistics, the restrictions imposed to foreign researchers doing fieldwork and archival research in Cuba, and the political constrains weighting over Cuban social scientists during the 1970s and 1980s contributed a great deal to that. As a consequence, the bustling and diverse meanings that material culture acquired during Cuban socialism have eluded socio-political analyses—as well as the fact that these meanings were both engineered from above as much as sprung from everyday practices. Moreover, the possibility of accounting for permanence and continuity in Cuban twentieth-century culture is also hindered by such a fragmented and incomplete history. This is one of the reasons that led me to focus my undergoing dissertation research into this period, my interest being in assessing the social and political dynamics created, affected, or instantiated by the material culture of Cuban socialism while, at the same time, contributing to identify elements of continuity and change in Cuban twentieth-century culture.

In the remaining minutes, I will chart what in my opinion constitutes the four principal components of the material culture of Cuban socialism, drawing on their specificities and possible effects in the social and political imaginaries. I must say, first, that this is an ongoing research project, so far based on preliminary research conducted during last summer in Cuba, as well as my own experience in the country, numerous and engaging conversations with friends, and my work as the author of the blog *Cuba Material*. Some of these ideas first appeared in the blog and were developed and discussed with readers. I hope that this clarification will encourage you to share your opinions on the topic, either after the presentations of professor Rubio and mine or by visiting cubamaterial.com.
II.

At a first glance, the different periods of Cuban history seem to be associated with a particular material culture, most notably the so called Special Period. Today, Cuba is represented by ruins, collapsed buildings, makeshift solutions, and vintage Detroit automobiles, that is, “architectures of necessity” and “technological disobediences”, as defined by Cuban artist Ernesto Oroza (see architectureofnecessity.com).

In the same way, we identify the pre-Columbian island with Taino pottery and tools, as well as with the only piece of furniture known to this culture, the dujo chair, aimed for the exclusive use of the Indian chief. During the four centuries of Spanish colonization, we were taught, a Creole material culture emerged, out of the adaptation of Spanish and European influences to the local conditions. Wooden rocking chairs, taburetes, hammocks, wickerwork furniture, stained glass windows, jalousies, guardaveinos, and lithographs from the cigar industry acquired a particularly national form, shaping behaviors today associated with Cuban character and traditions.

Likewise, with the proclamation of the republic, as if trying to catch up, in any possible sense, with the long-time independent neighboring countries of America, early twentieth-century Cubans developed a noticeable predilection for modernity and material well-being (Pérez 1999), manifested as an appreciation for the products of innovation and technology, an appetite for consumption, and an association of domestic comfort with the acquisition of mass consumer goods, especially electrodomestics, and automobiles, most of them produced in the U.S. ¹ This appetite was typical not only of the upper classes, but also of the wide middle-class sectors. Even

¹ In 1958, there were 170 thousand automobiles in Cuba, only comparable to New York City and, during the 1950s, Havana was the city that had more Cadillacs per capita in the world. (Pérez 1999)
the lower strata, according to historian Louis A. Pérez (1999), were also imbued with the desire to participate and access modernity. Pérez (p. 328) asserts that “nothing was as central to Cuban claim to modernity as [the] possession and application of technology to ordinary life”. As far as we know, in 1959, for instance, Cuba had more TV sets and telephones than Costa Rica, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Panama, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, neighboring Caribbean nations, combined (Luxenburg 1981).²

Correspondingly, the revolution of 1959, and the subsequent socialist regime, portrayed themselves as renovating and modernizing projects as well. The new socialist modernity was different, though, from the modernity represented by North American forms, in terms of its selling strategies, stylistic attributes, social impact, practices related, symbolism, and the relation between citizens and the state supported by them.

The products that heralded modern socialist material culture were not advertised, advertising being banned and marketing agencies nationalized in the early-1960s. They were not periodically re-styled either, to stimulate consumption. Competition between brands did not exist, and prices were not assessed according to the capitalist criterion of maximizing profits. They spoke the language of functionality, yet they lacked other attributes traditionally associated with modernity like luxury, pleasure, packaging, distinction, and differentiation. They, moreover, catered to the domestic sphere, having a low public impact. Because of all these features, as well as because the limited offer of goods available, socialist modernity was an austere, discreet, and I would say incomplete, modernity.

² According to figures, in 1960 Cuba had 73 TV sets per 1,000 habitants (compare to U.S. 308, Europe 81, and Latin America 11) and 152 radios per 1,000 habitants (compare to U.S. 941, Europe 269, and Latin America 96) (Ward and Devereux 2012).
On the other hand, socialist material culture was a much politicized one, the state being the unique mediator between goods and citizens. If there was anything particular to socialist modernity, it was its clearly political, vertical, top-bottom character. Socialist modernity was not negotiated through or sprung from market dynamics. It was rather imposed from above, engineered as an instrument to the service of the state. It negotiated consent and discouraged dissidence, being a form of self-regulation and a barometer of the popular mood. Socialist modernity was also pedagogical, teaching citizens (professionals, production workers, farmers in agricultural cooperatives, teachers, state administrators, army officials, and veterans) that hard work and, more important, revolutionary behavior, were the ways approved by the state for upward mobility. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1975), summed it up as revolutionary will.

However, if, instead of seeing history as different successive chapters, we look at the elements of continuity on its narrative, Cuban material culture also provides plenty of them. It shows colonial and pre-colonial codes being appropriated by modern architects and designers in the 1940s and 1950s, tendency that continued during the first years after the revolutionary take over, when nationalistic values and a national style were promoted by the state. This perspective also shows that, when national codes and values were abandoned, under the pressure of the Kremlin, for the universalistic scholasticism of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the aspiration (and disposition) to consume modernity that animated Cubans during the pre-revolutionary years did not vanish, but rather was channeled toward the consumption of the new, state-sponsored socialist mass-consumer goods. In some areas, moreover, no visible contradictions existed between modern socialist and capitalist aesthetics—socialist cars, for instance, matching pretty well with pre-socialist modernist structures and spaces. Other continuities may be found if this line of thinking
is explored, with the added benefit of bringing a more organic perspective of twentieth century Cuban culture and a better understanding of the present of this nation.

Yet, by zooming into the socialist period, we will find that its material culture is also diverse, shaped out of multiple influences. Even the paradigmatic years in which the influence of the Soviet Union in Cuban culture and politics was stronger were, indeed, affected by multiple material cultures, definitively not the homogeneously socialist modernity sought after by the regime.

These material cultures can be grouped into four principal components. Only one of them is constituted by the state-sponsored socialist material culture, and includes both mass consumer goods imported from the Socialist countries, mainly from the Soviet Bloc but also from the Popular Republic of China and other allies; and mass consumer goods produced by the national industry. The dynamics produced by each of these groups in the social and political imaginary varied.

A second component of the material culture of Cuban socialism is the pervasive pre-revolutionary capitalist material culture, in some cases attached to new meanings that totally differed from their previous original signification. Another component comprise the contemporary capitalist material culture that was brought into the country by professionals and political cadres that occasionally travelled abroad, as well as by foreign technicians, tourists, and visiting exiles. Finally, makeshift objects and solutions created to counter scarcity, and artisanal products, usually circulating in the black or semi-legal market, make the last group.

These four components, which again I will name pre-socialist capitalist material culture, socialist material culture, contemporary capitalist material culture, and makeshift, indigenous, and
artisanal material culture, shaped public and private spaces in socialist Cuba, and influenced, in specific ways, everyday practices and social dynamics and imaginaries. Their signification was, though, far from uniform or consistent. Each one of these components was not only affected by the different politics played by the Cuban regime and the diverse, sometimes contradicting, economic policies that it did implement in the last half-century, but also had a particular effect on them. Their signification also varied according to social variables like family income, educational level, political participation, socio-political status, profession, family, geography, cultural background, relatives abroad, and age. Their impact varied, as well, according to the type of material culture involved, that is, electrodomestics, automobiles, architecture, fashion, and furniture affected, in different ways and with different consequences in the social imaginary, their meanings.

For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s, some socialist electrodomestics and automobiles, assigned to party nomenclature, high-level state administrators, and accomplishing or internationalist professionals, were rather attractive sought-after goods, especially Ladas, yet in terms of domestic furniture (or architecture) socialist material culture performed very badly. During the same period, the state could not satisfy the demand for fashion, which was thus served by artisans and seamstresses, gifts from abroad, or through the adaptation of old pieces of clothing.

Moreover, the four components of the material culture of socialism mixed among each other, creating polysemic *bricolages*. Not even the products that better represented the socialist modernity were free from additions of capitalist material culture or indigenous inventions. *Ladas*, for instance, arguably the maker of automobiles that scored higher in socialist Cuba, were upgraded with *Pioneer* audio systems and colored windows, and *Krim* and *Caribe* black and white TV sets were added strips of colored paper to the screens to simulate a color TV.
In conclusion, the material culture of Cuban socialism was not a homogeneous cluster. It, rather, allowed for continuities with the past and introduced external influences in the social space. Multiple and intermingled material cultures, each one responding to specific social relations and values, sustained everyday practices and communicated meanings and memories to Cubans. Some of their components gained political capital to the regime, stimulating what was considered revolutionary behaviors, discouraging dissidence, showing the intentions of the regime (and the ability of the communist utopia in general) to provide the material conditions for a modern life, and, on a symbolic level, sometimes maybe even displacing de facto pre-revolutionary North American mass consumer goods to a proto-modernity, that is, exactly to the antipodes of what they originally represented. Yet these were pyrrhic victories, hindered by the effect of the three other components of the material culture of socialism in the social space, the inability of Cuban industry to respond to consumers’ demand for modern mass consumer goods, the aging of socialist modern aesthetics, and the irresistible allure of contemporary capitalist mass consumer goods. It was in this multi-referential *ajiaco* or *bricolage* that the Cuban socialist citizens built their private and social worlds, and not in the Manichean categories of the language of the Cold War.