

## WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES

### **Channels and barriers in the nascent dialogue between Cuban and foreign anthropologists**

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Anthropology in Cuba finds itself at a critical juncture. The generation of Cuban anthropologists trained in the 1970s and '80s in the Soviet tradition of ethnography are gradually retiring, leaving the helm of key institutions in the field to younger colleagues. These younger generations of scholars, however, have not been afforded opportunities for systematic training on the island, since longstanding attempts to establish degree programs in social and cultural anthropology in Cuba have not yet been successful enough to produce new cohorts of fully trained anthropologists. Thus key institutions conducting anthropological research in Cuba today<sup>1</sup> are staffed by researchers whose most thorough training is often in other disciplines, and for whom texts written in the Soviet tradition remain the prime points of theoretical and methodological reference. As a result, much of the excellent research that is conducted by Cuban anthropologists (or scholars conducting ethnographic research in contiguous fields) connects only partly with the kinds of questions and debates one might associate with “global anthropology” – that is to say, the anthropology that continues to emanate primarily from Europe or North America.

At the same time, following the country's gradual openings to erstwhile adversaries in the capitalist world during the post-Soviet crisis of the 1990s, Cuba now hosts dozens of foreign anthropologists every year who come primarily from European and North American universities in order to conduct fieldwork on the island. While permission for fieldwork requires foreign anthropologists to conduct their research under the aegis of local institutions able and willing to sponsor it, these

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<sup>1</sup> Among others, these include, in Havana, the Instituto Cubano de Antropología (ICAN), the Instituto Cubano de Investigación Cultural “Juan Marinello”, the Fundación Fernando Ortiz, and some parts of the University of Havana, the Casa del Caribe and the Universidad de Oriente in Santiago de Cuba, and the Faculty of Social Sciences in the University of Cienfuegos.

institutionalized relationships do not necessarily involve a substantial intellectual engagement with local scholars. So, we now have a good two or three decades of writings by European and North American researchers who have been able to spend substantial periods of fieldwork in Cuba, often for doctoral and postdoctoral research, as in my own case. Hardly ever translated into Spanish or made available within Cuba, these works are rarely read by Cuban scholars. Conversely, other than classic works by Fernando Ortiz and his students written mostly before the revolution of 1959, works by Cuban anthropologists tend to be referenced by foreigners studying different aspects of Cuban society mainly, if at all, as a matter of courtesy. Serious intellectual engagement between local and foreign anthropologists of Cuba is remarkable mostly for its absence.

This is of course not an unusual state of affairs. Much has been written about the neo-colonial structures of contemporary anthropology (Trouillot 1991; Asad 1995; Allen & Jobson 2016), its uneasy and sometimes fraught relationships with local intellectual traditions (e.g. Herzfeld 1987; Chakrabarty 2000), as well as the possibility of “world anthropologies” (Lins Ribeiro & Escobar 2006) that might counter the hegemony of “global anthropology” (Cuban colleagues will no doubt sooner call it what it is, namely “Western anthropology”). To be sure, thinking through the Cuban case in this context would involve reckoning with the particular weight Cold War geopolitics adds to these issues (e.g. the sad episode of the expulsion of Oscar Lewis and his research team from the island in 1970 [Rigdon 1983, see also Fornet 2013] has for many years colored official perceptions of Western anthropology on the island). It would also have to take into account the ways in which Fernando Ortiz’s legacy sets Cuba apart from countries with less eminent local traditions of anthropology.

Here, however, I limit myself to commenting on three ways in which channels of communication between anthropologists *in* Cuba and foreign anthropologists *of* Cuba can be widened, so that dialogue between them might also be intensified. The first concerns efforts that are already being made on both sides, to bring Cuban and foreign researchers into more symmetrical forms of engagement. Conferences are one way. For example, there’s the “Evento” that the Institute of Anthropology (ICAN) host biannually in Havana, which has grown to a major international event. Conversely, from the side of the foreigners, last year the Canadian Association of

Social and Cultural Anthropology (CASCA) held its annual conference in Santiago de Cuba. As overall organizer, Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (whose essay on memory sticks and plastic bags appears in the present feature) put great care into ensuring that Cuban anthropologists were integral to the program, making “CASCA,” as Cuban colleagues quickly began to refer to it, as much an event for Cuban anthropology as it was for Canadian colleagues.

Teaching and research are also part of this picture of growing symmetry in this dialogue. One example is the Diploma in Anthropology that ICAN has been offering for a number of years, with ambitions to get it approved as a Masters’ program in association also with the University of Cienfuegos, who also offer one. Under the tutelage of Pablo Rodriguez for a number of years, this has become a forum in which Cuban anthropologists teach the rudiments of anthropological history, theory, and method alongside non-Cuban colleagues who are on visit to the country – often combining teaching with fieldwork or other research projects. Indeed, in this context a series of collaborative research projects are now being pursued, bringing Cuban and non-Cuban researchers together in ways that allow everyone to learn from each other. For example, there is the ongoing project on the history of Cuban anthropology, run in collaboration among researchers at ICAN, at “Juan Marinello” (which has a particularly dynamic program of international collaborations), and anthropologists at French as well as Mexican universities, including Emma Gobin, an interview with whom is included in this feature. On a smaller scale, for the past few years, I have been coordinating an exercise in team ethnography with scholars and students from ICAN and other research institutions, looking ethnographically at different aspects of the state-subsidized system for the distribution of food. Such on-the-ground collaborative work, I suggest, allows otherwise divergent traditions of anthropological research to be exposed to each other, creating the kinds of partial connections (Strathern 2004) through which new opportunities for anthropological practice open up for all involved.

The second major development that has the potential to intensify the dialogue between Cuban and Euro-American traditions of anthropology are the growing numbers of Cuban students who are pursuing master’s and doctoral degrees abroad – not only in Europe and North America, but also in Latin America, with Mexico in particular fast becoming a prime training ground for young Cuban anthropologists.

Regardless of whether their research is on Cuban topics, this new generation of scholars are plugging themselves into conversations in contemporary anthropology that have thus far had little traction in Cuba. Indeed, one might say that Cuba is living through a pattern that is broadly familiar from other nations that have transitioned from being just objects of anthropological research to being also its producers (e.g. see Gefou-Madianou 1993 for one of many discussions of this transition in other national contexts). Young scholars from these “peripheries” of “global” anthropology go to study at its “centers” (mainly France, the UK and the US), and then, armed with sophisticated training, return to their homelands to found and develop new anthropology departments (often doing battle with older local schools of folklore studies and other ethnological traditions), which then produce home-grown scholarship and newly localized anthropological debates and perspectives. To be sure, if Cuban anthropology is on such a path of transformation, at present it is only halfway there, since we have yet to see a significant wave of scholars returning to the island from their studies abroad. Indeed, to the extent that study abroad is at present an important avatar of migration for many Cubans (Berg 2014), it is uncertain whether such a return will occur. That will no doubt depend partly on whether academic structures in Cuba will be able to provide the conditions for returning academics to establish themselves.

This brings me to my final point regarding the relationship between Cuban and non-Cuban anthropologists, which has to do with a certain divergence of expectations on either side as to the role of anthropology itself. Again, without going into broader debates about the hegemonic characteristics of Euro-American anthropology, it is worth pointing out the effects of the common Cold War image (which I have conjured here also) of a Cuba that was previously “closed” to anthropologists from the West and that has since the 1990s been “opening up.” Often this way of thinking about the situation in Cuba tends to be bolstered by a somewhat indignant sense of entitlement on the part of European and North American scholars. This is typically founded on the default expectation that countries the word over ought to welcome foreign fieldworkers, since social and cultural research – when all is said and done and the requisite ethical committees have all duly been cleared – is a good thing, as well as a largely innocuous one.

To take my own example, when as a doctoral student in the late 1990s I arrived in Havana from the UK to do my PhD fieldwork, I found out that my proposal to study the role of uncertainty in everyday life, focusing on the relationship between divination and various forms of gambling, was not welcomed by the local academic authorities who I had hoped (in fact, assumed) would be granting me a student visa. People's sense of uncertainty at the time of the Special Period, and only a few years after the rafters' crisis of 1994, was not a suitable topic for a young and basically clueless researcher from Europe. The very mention of the word – *incertidumbre* – in the research summary I intended to present to the authorities set off alarm bells. In one of our meetings at the then Centre (now Institute) of Anthropology, which is an agency of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (CYTMA), my informally assigned mentor duly took out a pen and deleted repeated instances of the word on the page of my proposal, doing me what he knew was a favor. In any case, as I was told, gambling was (and remains) illegal in Cuba, so the prospect of having a foreigner investigate illegal activities was certainly out of the question. Somewhat begrudgingly, I ended up reformulating my project as a study of Afro-Cuban divination, putting the experience down to the closed character of Cuban socialism, and its tendencies to “censor” social research that was deemed too sensitive for political reasons.

Whether my interpretation of what happened rings true or not, here I wish only to draw attention to its normative character. A putative “freedom” or even a “right” to do research anywhere one wishes and on any topic one deems appropriate is set up as an entitlement, so that the frustrations of such expectations in a place like Cuba are cast as an aberrant divergence from what is right and proper. In fact, in my subsequent experience working in Cuba, this sense of anthropological entitlement (if we may call it that) can be a major barrier in forging relations of genuine respect with Cuban anthropologists, including the institutions in which anthropology is practiced – and respect and its lack (*falta de respeto*), as any ethnographer of Cuba knows, is a major concern in Cuban sociality at large (e.g. Härkönen 2016, 118-122). Cuban scholars, of course, may have their own frustrations with official restrictions on particular topics and kinds of research. However, the idea that social research can be assumed by default to be a matter of the freedom of choice, and that the world at large can be assumed to be one big open field in which anthropologists (funded and

supported by “global” institutions lodged in Europe and North America) can roam freely to conduct research on anything and everything, clashes fundamentally with the way social research has been understood throughout the revolutionary period in Cuba, and still today. In particular, it clashes with the basic alternative Cuba has sought to present to “bourgeois” intellectual traditions, namely, that research gains its value by the contribution it can make to the national project (*proyecto nacional*) of revolutionary transformation that was initiated in 1959 and which, as far as the government and its academic institutions are concerned, continues today. If liberal conceptions of intellectual production imagine research as encompassing the whole world within its scope (viz. anything and everything can be studied), the revolutionary process in Cuba flips that around: revolution is meant to encompass everything, including within its cosmogonic, world-making scope any projects researchers might seek to propose for themselves (see also Holbraad 2014; 2017a; 2017b; 2018). Research, in this view, is understood as taking place “within” the revolution, and gains or loses value in relation to the revolution’s aims. As Fidel Castro put it so pithily in his famous “Words to the Intellectuals” speech of 1961, “within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing” (Castro 2012).

While obviously the nature and value of intellectual production in general, and social research in particular, are as subject to debate in Cuba as they are anywhere else (e.g. Pogolotti 1977; UNEAC 2016; cf. Martínez Pérez 2006), the basic idea that research is part of a larger national project, and not merely an end in itself, is a common point of reference for academics and officials alike. Visiting researchers’ tendency to ignore this, or treat it merely as a bureaucratic obstacle, or a peculiarity of local political culture, is itself a barrier to a fully symmetrical engagement with Cuban colleagues. Cubans are of course used to dealing with visitors who do not take these considerations into account, and that is part of what constitutes these foreigners as, precisely, foreign. But the implicit value judgement in the liberal stance of free and all-encompassing research, according to which Cuban conceptions and sensibilities of what constitutes research are ultimately dismissed as parochial, can also be grating – a sign of arrogance. The requirement, obviously, is not for foreign anthropologists to embrace Cuba’s national political project, or render the aims of their research compatible with the revolutionary authorities’ objectives. It is, however, to take seriously, as a basic point of reference for Cuban intellectual life, these ideas

about what research is for, and to take them into account as a significant condition for efforts to forge channels of meaningful communication and collaboration with Cuban colleagues.

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