

A Short, Sad History of Cuban-American Academic Collaboration Since 1997

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As some readers of *LASA Forum* will know, I am a North American historian, hardly an expert on Cuba. But as my tenure as President of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) was winding down in the mid-1990s, I began to wonder what we in the United States could do to promote greater academic and intellectual exchange with Cuba. For some years ACLS had an informal brief as the principal U.S. manager of academic relations with the socialist world, most especially in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. In the late 1980s we made contact with the People's Republic of Mongolia, and in early 1990s we began to engage seriously in Viet Nam. A few years later it occurred to me that ACLS should see what we could do in Cuba, which seemed so close to the United States in ways that transcended geography.

Joining forces with Ken Prewitt, then the President of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), and taking advantage of the good offices of the Vietnamese ambassador to the UN, I arranged a visit to Havana for Ken, myself, and a prominent University of North Carolina chemist in the spring of 1997. We were introduced to various ministers, visited the Universities of Havana and Santa Clara, and were generally given the Cook's Tour of western Cuba. At the end of our brief trip we were introduced to Ismael Clark and Sergio Pastrana, the president and foreign secretary of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, which was at the time being revived and reorganized (it celebrates its centennial this year). At the time, of course, a number of individual U.S. scholars, universities, and institutions (notably the Smithsonian), had well-developed contacts with the Cubans. My hope was therefore to establish national-level contacts with the aim of raising the level of intellectual trust between the two countries.

We were later told that the Academia de Ciencias de Cuba would be our partner organization on the island, and I set about raising funds to begin a program of cooperation with the Cubans. From the start (as had been the case with my work in Viet Nam), our principal funder was a small New York organization, the Christopher Reynolds Foundation, led by its formidable executive director, Andrea Panaritis. There were not many U.S. foundations willing to make grants for Cuban activities (a situation that has, alas, changed very little to this day), but at the time the MacArthur Foundation was interested and had a strong program officer for Cuba, Kim Stanton, and they too offered us support. Ken and I organized a joint ACLS-SSRC group, which we called the Working Group (WG) on Cuba in order to proceed. I was (and remain) the chairman, and we recruited other U.S. nationals to serve from time to time. Louis Perez, the distinguished historian of Cuba from UNC, Chapel Hill, was one of the original (and most crucial) early members, but we also took on board scholars with other relevant interests, such as the noted tropical health physician (then from the Yale Medical School), Michele Barry. The Cubans appointed three members representing the full range of academic interests (including an immunologist from the Instituto Pedro Kourí), and we solidified the WG with the Mexican political scientist, Luis Rubio. The very able and energetic Eric Hershberg, then the SSRC Latin American staffer (and now the Director of the Latin American Studies Program at American University) was for many years the executive officer of the WG—and he is now a full member of the group.

Our original plan was to constitute the WG as a re-granting agency, passing along the funds provided by Reynolds and MacArthur (and other, smaller, funders) to groups and individuals in both Cuba and the United

States on a competitive basis. Although I don't think we ever had more than about \$150,000 to distribute per annum (including our administrative costs, which we tried to keep very low), we developed a modestly ambitious range of programs. We provided support for Cuban cultural infrastructure projects (libraries, archives and museums), for joint research projects (between groups of scholars in the two countries), for the translation of Cuban academic writing into English, for the support of travel for Cuban scientists to international scholarly meetings, for the travel of Cuban scholars to the United States, for the purchase of U.S. scholarly books for Cuba and for seminars by prominent U.S. scholars in Cuba. The grants were made by the WG twice a year, and these meetings (one in each of the countries—Havana for the winter meetings!) were lessons in what sorts of scholarly activities each country was prepared to support. Each of these projects was exceedingly modest in terms of grant size, and the range of actual scholarly collaboration was fairly narrow—usually based upon already-existing Cuban-American relationships in fields such as public health. But for a brief period of time it seemed as if we might be at the starting point of what might become a normal pattern of scholarly interchange. When I say “normal,” however, you will have to remember that I had been involved primarily in scholarly exchanges with socialist countries for a decade, so that even though the Wall had fallen in most other parts of the world, I knew what it was like to take the scholarly Wall for granted.

But of course by the mid-1990s conditions for scholarly exchange between Cuba and the United States, which had never been good, began to deteriorate rapidly. The most obvious precipitant of change was the shoot-down of the *Hermanos al Rescate* planes in February, 1996 and the subsequent

(March, 1996) passage of Helms-Burton bill, which in effect removed control of the Cuban embargo from the White House to the Hill, and made Cuban policy even more a political football. The most notable impacts for academics were increased restrictions on Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) Treasury licenses, the tightening of regulations on U.S. travel to Cuba, a clamping down on the issuance of U.S. visas to Cuban visitors to this country—along with reciprocal constrictions by Cubans. For reasons that had everything to do with politics and nothing to do with the life of the mind, newly restrictive administrative regimes in both countries narrowed the range of the possible for the WG. There were really two problems: one was that the new regulations placed most of the activities we had funded outside the line of what was permissible; the other was that even fewer U.S. funders were interested in the mission of the WG, apparently intimidated by the deteriorating state of the bi-national relationship. Our problem was that it was not clear which types of activities were politically sustainable.

Luckily, the Ford Foundation began to work in Cuba in 2000, and we were able to work out with them a program to do (politically acceptable) cultural heritage work with Cuban libraries and archives. We set up an international Standing Committee on Libraries and Archives in 2001, and began cooperating with the Archivo Nacional, the Biblioteca Nacional and several major scholarly libraries in Cuba, including those at the Instituto de la Historia de Cuba and the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüísticas. The principal U.S. participants in this libraries-and-archives project (which continues still) have been Anne Kenney (now the Director of the Cornell University Libraries) and Dan Hazen of Harvard (formerly the Latin American bibliographer and currently the head of collections at

Harvard). The Standing Committee has worked to assist in the training of Cuban specialists in conservation and preservation, and helped to mount an important, island-wide initiative on disaster planning. These Ford-funded library activities have made a real difference in Cuba, I think, but it has been frustrating to realize that they have been almost the only sorts of joint projects still politically feasible. Apart from them, the WG has been able to sustain a series of cultural forums in partnership with Luisa Campuzano of the Casa de las Americas (one of the Cuban members of the WG), and we hope to resume workshops by prominent U.S. scholars in Cuba this year. Additionally, for several years we also worked on a very satisfying project to digitize the manuscripts left in Cuba after the departure and death of Ernest Hemingway. These are now held at the Museo Hemingway (housed in his Finca Vigía in Havana), with microfilm copies at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston.

The fact that President Bush had, in the end, been elected by Cuban-American votes in Florida in 2000 had led both to a tightening of the already restrictive regulations of the Clinton administration, and had seriously escalated the anti-Castro rhetoric of U.S. policy. I can speak only for myself, but I found it quite disappointing that the new Obama administration did not reverse Bush's highly restrictive Cuba regulations in 2001. My hope had been that the WG would be able to return to the modestly broad programs it had developed in our first years in Cuba, but President Obama did not see fit to loosen the regulations until a few months ago. The result is that there is now considerably more flexibility as of spring 2011 (as I write), but the truth is that we have not yet gotten back to where we were prior to Helms-Burton.

Meanwhile, of course, a good deal has changed in Cuba. To mention only the most

obvious facts, Fidel Castro has been replaced by his brother, Raúl, who has begun what may turn out to be a significant change in the structure of the Cuban economy. But it is not yet clear where the new privatization policies are headed, or to what extent they will succeed. Nor is it at all clear what impact, if any, the political changes on both sides of the Florida Straits will have on academic and cultural relations between the two countries.

I have been writing about the activities of the WG for the past decade, but of course much more has been going on than comes under our purview. SSRC itself, largely due to the efforts of our magnificent staffer, Sara Doty, and the indefatigable Eric Hershberg, has been working with Cuban economists in an effort to look ahead to possible economic futures for the island. Several universities, including my own, have begun undergraduate programs at the University of Havana. Both universities and groups of U.S. scholars have been able to work with Cuban counterparts on projects of common interest. I am not sure that anyone knows what the full range of these projects might be, for there certainly is no central point for recording what they do. Individual scholars, both faculty and graduate students, have continued to travel to Cuba and to work there very successfully in a number of fields. So clearly there is a working connection between the intellectual lives of the two countries, and there is always a danger of underestimating what cannot be counted accurately.

But I have to say that my impression is that Cuban-American academic and intellectual relations have mostly gone downhill since 1997, and it is hard for me to be optimistic that they will dramatically reverse course anytime soon. These are hard times in Cuba, economically and politically (when were they not?), and it is clearly a difficult

ON THE PROFESSION

Cuba and the United States: New Opportunities for Academic Diplomacy

KATZ *continued...*

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time for the Cuban academic world. But I still feel the same now as I did when we began the WG—that scholars of good will in the United States have to do what they can to collaborate with and sustain our colleagues in Cuba. Some day it will be better. Won't it? ■

The easing of the U.S.-Cuba travel ban announced by the Obama administration this past January 14, has generated expectations of a new era of academic collaboration between the United States and Cuba.¹ Academic communities in both countries are now preparing for the revival of the scholarly exchanges that were virtually frozen during the eight years of the Bush administration.²

The new travel regulations constitute a small but positive change in U.S. policy towards Cuba.³ A first reading indicates that they may elevate the frequency, diversity and intensity of contacts to the levels recorded in the final years of the Clinton administration. The new measures correspond to the campaign discourse of President Obama, the implementation of which has been very slow to materialize under a process plagued by fears of the reaction of the U.S. extreme right wing.⁴

A large number of U.S. academics were gratified by the recent announcement since, in some ways, the new regulations resulted from the pressure brought to bear by U.S. scholars and, to a lesser degree, by their Cuban counterparts. And beyond academic exchanges, many value the new regulations as an important sign of political flexibility that might reduce the tensions between the two countries.

In Cuba, many academics and intellectuals feel that the new regulations have weakened the reactionary influence of the extreme right wing in the United States, strengthened after the midterm elections. On the other hand, they recognize that the measures, in line with the views expressed by the Cuban government,⁵ do not constitute substantive changes in U.S. policy toward Cuba.⁶ Analysts recognize that the measures, as explained in U.S. government documents, are meant to re-launch the “people to

people” contacts that the administration hopes will bring about a “democratic opening” in Cuba.

Such recognition suggests the possible negative impacts of these new measures. While many prominent Cuban intellectuals have expressed their support for academic and cultural exchange with the United States, there are conflicting positions within Cuba regarding academic collaboration. These positions cover a broad spectrum, ranging from the least enthusiastic—those suspicious of the exchange who argue (not without reason) that, once again, Cuba faces a situation conducive to the promotion of the internal counterrevolution as expressed in the White House document⁷—to those who recognize that academic exchange offers multiple opportunities for the country and for the strengthening of the Revolution, related risks notwithstanding.

The truth is that we are facing an extremely complex scenario and cannot ignore the changes in Cuban government circles responsible for setting policies and making decisions on the island. In Cuba, new actors have emerged who may not have an historical memory of the development of exchange, especially during the so-called “golden years” between 1993 and 2001.⁸ Let us mention a few numbers illustrating the effects of the Clinton policy called Track II, and the intensity of the links at that time. In 2003, Cuba occupied fourteenth place on the list of preference of U.S. students for exchange trips.⁹ A total of 760 universities in the northern nation had requested licenses from the Treasury Department to carry out various academic activities in Cuba.¹⁰ At the same time, on average, thirty to forty faculty members and researchers from Havana University travelled to the United States each month.¹¹