

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

In this context, the fundamental task of those who favor collaborative efforts should be the planning and implementation of orderly and coherent activities designed and enacted by prestigious institutions that serve to guarantee academic standards. Undoubtedly, these collaborative efforts will have the noble collateral effect of defusing the hostility that has prevailed for more than a half a century between the governments of the two nations.

These considerations are crucial to prevent the academic collaboration between Cuba and the United States from becoming bogged down in an atmosphere of mistrust that weakens and distorts it. The academic and cultural exchange between Cuba and the United States has its own life and is part of the histories and identities of both countries. It will continue and will grow with the support and the implementation of new communication and information technologies. It is the responsibility of academics from both sides to keep it going.

The situation at the beginning of 2011 marks a real possibility of stimulating Cuba-based research on the United States,¹² and, even more so, U.S. scholarship on Cuba. With regard to the latter, we expect the continuity of prior lines of research as well as the appearance of new ones. We would expect, as before, the emergence of joint research projects in the fields of social and natural sciences, as well as the opening of new programs and research centers focused on Cuba. Particular attention from researchers will surely be devoted to such subjects as the updating of the Cuban economic model and its related social impacts; the dynamics of race relations in Cuba; the presence of women and youth in political, economic and social development; and the mutual knowledge of legal systems, urban problems and social development. In the natural sciences, attention will be paid to

environmental issues and climate change, policies of extreme-event management, marine biology, nanotechnology, biomedical research, traditional herbal medicine, theoretical physics and chemistry, among other matters of interest to U.S. researchers. At the same time, Cuban professors and researchers will travel to the United States more frequently for research and graduate study or to offer lectures and courses in U.S. universities.

The results of such collaborations appear to be very promising. They could trigger an avalanche of publications, academic events co-sponsored by Cuban and U.S. institutions, joint panels at LASA Congresses, Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) and the National Association of Foreign Studies Abroad (NAFSA) meetings, and much more. One might even consider another visit to Cuba by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), similar to the one organized in September 2003, which marked the first meeting of university presidents of the two nations. A meeting of officials of major institutions of higher education in the United States and Cuba could also be promoted. The meeting could take place coincident with the biannual congress that gathers professionals interested in issues of higher education. These congresses, organized by Cuba's Ministry of Higher Education, are held in Cuba with significant local and foreign participation.

The current situation offers, moreover, a rare opportunity whose life seems safe only in the period leading up to the beginning of the next U.S. presidential term in January 2013. The opportunity should not be lost. Should the Republicans win the presidential election in 2012, relations between Cuba and the United States could enter extremely difficult times. This is not an extraordinary prediction. We might consider that

nowadays—beyond the explicit consciousness and determination to take advantage of the current opening—the effort to promote academic exchange is not an easy task. The new Republican majority in the House of Representatives apparently stands ready to dismantle, as soon as possible, the little built by the current U.S. administration.

The XXX Congress of LASA is to be held in San Francisco from May 23 through May 26, 2012. LASA has played a crucial role in promoting academic exchanges between Cuba and the United States,¹³ and, as the Congress returns to a U.S. venue, the occasion will be a time of celebration and reflection. The celebration is justified by the lifting of travel restrictions imposed in August 2004 and by the commemoration of thirty-five years of the Cuban presence in LASA.¹⁴ The reflection prevails because, necessarily, we should think about the future of academic exchange.¹⁵

We are already working in this direction. We are organizing a special workshop of the LASA Cuba Section. The agenda will contain, among its most important points, discussion of the proposal to create an independent organization, based in the United States, to promote academic exchange and Cuban studies.¹⁶ This is a worthy project that faces obstacles arising from practical issues, including those related to funding, the definition of the core areas of interest, membership, and many others. It requires further analysis and design and cannot be undertaken in haste or with improvisation.

Such an entity could be used to collect and disseminate information useful to all those interested in Cuban studies (including the U.S. students who have attended semester programs operating in Cuba). Such a database would allow the spread of

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educational and cultural exchanges between the two countries. In turn, that entity could make recommendations and suggest measures to boost ties between the academic communities of the two countries and help to spread good academic practices. Among its tasks surely will be the provision of advisory services to institutions and organizations interested in establishing curricula and organizing academic and cultural events, activities still affected by rules and regulations that require applying for licenses and obtaining permission to conduct research.

In short, we dare to say that intellectuals and academics, Cubans and Americans, should work together to help remove the obstacles to collaboration. We should work to take advantage of the currently open window of opportunity, and to become, once again, *de facto* ambassadors—main actors in a sort of academic diplomacy that promotes a better understanding between our two countries. That must be our modest but decisive collaboration. And also, we should demonstrate, again, the infinite force of reason, knowledge, dialogue, and cooperation.

Endnotes

- ¹ The author is grateful to Rafael Hernández and Jorge Domínguez who extended an invitation to join the TEMAS-Harvard University working group, which met in February 2010 in Havana, Cuba. The meeting resulted in the publication of two articles useful to this discussion, one by Sheryl Lutjens, “Corrientes académicas y culturales Cuba-Estados Unidos: temas y actores,” *TEMAS*, 62-63 (Havana, Cuba), April-September 2010: 124-135, and one by Milagros Martínez Reinosa, “La diplomacia académica: los intercambios culturales entre Cuba y Estados Unidos” *TEMAS*, 62-63, April-September 2010: 136-148).
- ² For a comprehensive study of the limitations on academic exchanges between Cuba and the United States during the administration of George W. Bush, see: Kimberley Stanton, comp, *Retreat from Reason: U.S.-Cuban Academic Relations and the Bush Administration*, Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWG), Washington, DC, 2006.
- ³ “Cuban Foreign Ministry Statement.” Havana, January 16, 2011. *Granma*. January 17, 2011: 1.
- ⁴ Arboleya Cervera, Jesús. “Trying to understand Obama,” *Cubarte*, special electronic newsletter, Year 9, Number 5, January 21, 2011, Havana, Cuba.
- ⁵ Cuban Foreign Ministry Statement. Havana, January 16, 2011, *Granma*. January 17, 2011: 1. Abel Prieto, Minister of Culture of Cuba Speech to Cuban TV, in the opening ceremony of the Casa de las Americas Prize, January 17, 2011.
- ⁶ Milagros Martínez, notes taken from discussions at the meeting of Cuban academics, to discuss the measures of January 14, 2011. Vice-Rector for International Relations at Havana University, Cuba, February 2, 2011.
- ⁷ Press Release from The White House. Office of the Press Secretary “Reaching out to the Cuban People.” January 14, 2011, Washington DC.
- ⁸ Milagros Martínez Reinosa, “La diplomacia académica: los intercambios culturales entre Cuba y Estados Unidos,” *TEMAS*, 62-63, April-September 2010: 136-148.
- ⁹ Sheryl L. Lutjens, “National Security, the State, and the Politics of U.S.-Cuba Educational Exchange,” *Latin American Perspectives*. Issue 150. Vol. 33. Number 5. September 2006: 58-80..
- ¹⁰ Kimberley Stanton, comp, *Retreat from Reason*, op. cit.
- ¹¹ Interview with Carmen Castillo, International Relations specialist from the University of Havana. Havana, Cuba, January 25, 2011.
- ¹² Milagros Martínez, interview with Luis René Fernández Tabío, Deputy Director of the Center for Hemispheric Studies and the United States, at the University of Havana, February 3, 2011, Havana, Cuba.
- ¹³ See Jorge Domínguez, “The Never-Ending Cold War: The United States, Cuba and LASA’s Battle for Academic Freedom,” *LASA Forum*, XXXVII, 2, Spring 2006, and Milagros Martínez, “Una pelea cubana contra los demonios,” *LASA Forum*, XXXVII, 4, Fall 2006.
- ¹⁴ The first group of Cuban scholars who travelled to the United States to participate in an academic activity, did so in October 1977.
- ¹⁵ Sheryl Lutjens, “Corrientes académicas y culturales Cuba-Estados Unidos: temas y actores,” *Temas*, 62-63, April-September, 2010: 131-133.
- ¹⁶ Discussion of the idea of creating a special group to promote academic exchanges between Cuba and the United States began in 2004 when the author and five others participated in a study of Bush administration policy that produced the *Retreat from Reason* report. ■