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Engaging with Rich and Sally Price

Speaking Dutch, Suriname, Saamaka country, Klaaskreek, anthropology and history, the Moravian Evangelical Church, Maroon societies, my Chinese hammock, scarification, art, a trip to Amsterdam by train, Jews, plantations, plantation slavery, freedom, fieldwork... I don't know which made the biggest impression ... or had the longest effect on me. Perhaps it's the relevance of history to anthropology, of the past to the present, of archives hidden away to battles that otherwise make no sense.

I have never taken a time as timeless, a written record as too generic to be revealing, or a familial account to be just a cultural system of consanguinity and affinity. And I have never taught or written about the culture of the so and so.

When thinking about Suriname, something took me to the archives of the Moravian Evangelical Church, the Jewish cemetery in the middle of the northern Amazon, and the maps of Maroon settlements along the region's many rivers. How they got there and why they got there intrigued me much more than how the Saamakas lived or organized themselves.

And later, as an anthropologist in Israel, I was more intrigued by the labeling of some people's past as *moreshet* (heritage) and other people's past as *tarbut* (culture)—and that this occurred within Israeli Jewish society, and was not even a way of separating and downgrading Arab/Palestinian communities within Israel. And, of course, here in New Orleans for my dissertation research I was drawn to the census accounts, legal dockets, and old newspapers from the late eighteenth century, the nineteenth century, and much of the twentieth century rather than to details of the current relationships, stories of discrimination, or patterns of marriage, occupation, or residence. Of course I was interested in the present, but it made no sense without looking at the past. Time was relevant in each case, and it was the framing and objectification of temporal processes that caught my eye.

I came to admire Sally's daring critique of museum practices for how they drew on the invisible while ordering things that were totally visible, making the present and the past deeply intertwined rather than "other" to each other. But I looked at many things besides art objects, museum holdings, and displays. The invisible understandings, the tacit, the already taken-for-granted, and the unsaid became my focus wherever I worked.

Enter my current obsessions: (1) with Israel's current decimation of Gaza/Hezbollah/Palestinian communities, and (2) with turn-of-the-twentieth century Cuba. In a sense, they both deal with time, make time central, and make the past relevant.

Take the first. As a long-time student of Israel and current Secretary-General of the IUAES (the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences), it was logical that I would participate in the drafting of a World Anthropological Union (WAU) statement on Israel and Gaza in Spring 2024. It was a hell of a week of compromise, hair-pulling, and arguing, and I nearly pulled out, but in the end I didn't. The result, a compromise all the way around, was praised by some and thought a disaster by others. Now in the aftermath of a November 2024 WAU conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, much of the membership that was there wants a much stronger statement, restricting it to what Israel has been doing in Gaza. I have come to agree with the large majority of those anthropologists present at the General Assembly in Johannesburg. I have never been a fan of Benjamin Netanyahu, but his actions (and his government's actions) now infuriate me. I realize that my

work on Israel was timed—done and written at a time when Israel was complicated but not run by a very right-wing vision of the country. Notice the emphasis on time here as well. And notice how I responded to an invitation to speak about Israel's war with Gaza at the July 2024 Brazilian Anthropological Association conference in Belo Horizonte.

Key elements of my response were as follows:

(a) The latest war—the current war—I wrote, is one of at least 18 since 1947. The list includes the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the current Israel-Hamas war, but it also includes the 1950s-1960s Palestinian Fedayeen "insurgency," the 1956 Suez Crisis, the 1967-1970 War of Attrition, the 1971 to 1982 Palestinian Insurgency in South Lebanon, the 1982 Lebanon War, the 1985-2000 South Lebanon conflict, the 1987-1993 First Intifada, the 2000-2005 Second Intifada, the summer 2006 Lebanon War, the 3-week Gaza War (or Operation Cast Lead) that took place between December 2008 and January 2009, the 2012 Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip also named the Operation Pillar of Defense, the 2014 Gaza War called Operation Protective Edge, the Syrian Civil War and the Iran-Israel conflict during the Syrian Civil War, and the 2021 Israel-Palestine crisis also known in Israel as the Operation Guardian of the Wall. These named wars mean that few years since 1948-1949 have been free of war, violence, death, and near-death—both for Israeli Jews and for Palestinians. Does it justify the unbelievable and relentless bombing and destruction of Gaza (and now much of Lebanon as well)? No, but it does explain a great deal of it.

(b) So, what happened to the original vision of the State of Israel that most anthropologists and friends in Israel wanted? The original vision and original State were socialist in ideology and infrastructure. Most of the people I came to know over the years were liberal rather than socialist, but they were never right-wing like Netanyahu and his supporters.

The truth is that the Israeli Left has lost many voters, self-identified people, and political party members over the past decades, but especially in recent years. From dominant and in charge in the 1950s and 1960s, they are now very much in the minority in Israel. During the past sixty years, the Left has gone from dominant and in charge to less than 25% of the voting public.

It is there, of course, but it is severely weakened. A friend there on the Left told me a while ago (but since this war began) that the Left in Israel is quite paralyzed. I am so horrified at the expansive, destructive bombing, and on-the-ground actions in Gaza that I have not accepted invitations to go to Israel since all this started in October 2023, but notice my approach. It presents the State of Israel—even its horrible current war—not as Israeli culture, not as Jewish culture, and not as Middle Eastern culture, but in terms of time. What will happen in the near future is hard to tell. At my most pessimistic, I think the current Israeli government will vastly overreach (including taking advantage of the change in government in Syria) and end up losing an all-out war in the Middle East, resulting in the opposite of what it seems to want now. At my most optimistic, I think the current Israeli government will be toppled at home by a mixture of citizens, Jews and Palestinians, who will see Israel's demise as inevitable unless it changes drastically.

Now let me turn to my other current obsession: the beginning of the twentieth century in Cuba. Yes, I have returned to the Caribbean, even to Cuba itself, the place where I was born. But this is really not a project about contemporary Cuba; it is a project about the first decade of the twentieth century. Why? As I get older, I keep thinking about my grandparents, all of whom were born in the 1890s, and all of whom spent their childhood and youth living

during the two U.S. occupations of Cuba (1899-May 1902 and 1906-1909). That realization has played a major role in my thinking about the U.S., the many ways it has claimed and challenged nationalism and sovereignty over the course of the past century, and the many ways the nation-state system is a false description of life on this planet, though paradoxically a continuing aspiration for many.

In looking at the early years of the twentieth century, I try to think about what Cuba was like then and what role the U.S. occupation played, both in the U.S. and in Cuba. Some of the work draws on my deceased father's written memoirs, but I also draw quite a bit on the many volumes of reports from (and by) the U.S. military government in Cuba. Of special interest are the public works of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a group always claiming political neutrality and practical consequences, but using Cuba to test its hypotheses about sewage systems and paved roads. I am interested in their role in Cuban society but also their role in U.S. occupations, U.S. imperialism, and nation-ness in general. When I first looked at some of this material about 20 years ago, I was struck by the many photographs of before and after engineering projects, and their inclusion in these volumes of reports to the U.S. government. Now I am wondering why their work was deemed important. Little in published and online reports of the activities of the Corps of Engineers even mentions their work in Cuba—or really anywhere outside the U.S., and there is even less discussion of its role in claiming or challenging U.S. policies of expansionism. Yet I am convinced that it has always been political, rather than apolitical, supportive of U.S. expansionism, though in seemingly quiet ways. Here is where Sally's work has had a major influence on me. It is the invisible hand of occupation that I am trying to uncover, and I do so by trying to imagine living in Cuba in that first decade of the twentieth century.

I have long known about the Platt Amendment, forced on the Cuban constitution by the U.S. government amid occupation and only allowed to be repealed in the 1930s. That it allowed the U.S. to intervene in Cuba politically, economically, and militarily any time the U.S. government considered it necessary was a total and very visible affront to any notion of Cuba's sovereignty. But I am actually trying to look at the minutiae of everyday challenges to Cuban independence and the role of the presumed apolitical changes the U.S. made in Cuba well beyond the Platt Amendment.

The paradoxes of it all also strike me as relevant, and not just to Cuba and Cubans. One example is that my maternal grandmother, born in January 1899, was a very committed Cuban citizen and became the only person in my immediate family never to become a U.S. citizen (though she lived in the U.S. from 1961 to 1996 when she died at the age of 97). She also never learned much English, and I don't think that was just because she was old. She left Cuba because of the Castro regime, but she could not leave her aspirations as a citizen of Cuba. It was not out of naiveté. On the contrary, she was quite aware of the corruption, dictatorships, U.S. economic presence, and class inequalities in Cuba, but she longed for an independent Cuba that was better than what she experienced in the bulk of her life, and she aspired for true sovereignty for Cuba.

What does that have to do with Rich or Sally? It's not the Caribbean itself, nor is it just a question of researching particular events in the past. It is a question of the intermingling of the present and the past and the way a close analysis of perfectly generic things can lead to a broader analysis—in this case, of nation-ness and aspirations, paradoxes, materiality, and the people caught up in it.