

NO NEED TO BE FAST AND FURIOUS: A MEETING BETWEEN CUBAN AND U.S. PHYSICAL SOCIETIES OPENS THE ROAD FOR DEEPER RELATIONS

NO HAY NECESIDAD DE SER TAN RÁPIDOS Y FURIOSOS: UNA REUNIÓN ENTRE LAS SOCIEDADES CUBANA Y AMERICANA DE FÍSICA ABRE EL CAMINO HACIA RELACIONES MÁS PROFUNDAS

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By the end of April, an unusual black helicopter was taking shots at overwhelming speed along Havana's Malecón. On the ground, Chevrolets and Fords from the 1950's were busy playing their role as main characters in Hollywood's super-production *Fast and Furious VIII*. Indeed, after Obama's visit to Havana with a delegation of the order of 10^3 people on March, 2016, Cuba-U.S. relations have been escalating fast, at least in some very visible ways.



A meeting between members of the Cuban Physical Society (SCF) and the American Physical Society (APS). From left to right: Ernesto Altshuler (Editor of the *Revista Cubana de Física*), Laura Greene (President-elect, APS), María Sánchez-Colina (President, SCF), Amy Flatten (Director of International Affairs, APS), Juan G. Darias (Vice-president for organizational affairs, SCF), Luis Méndez-Pérez (Vice-president, SCF), Alejandro Cabo (Vice-president, SCF) and Aurora Pérez (Vice-president for financial affairs, SCF). Picture taken on March 8, 2016, at the Colegio San Gerónimo de La Habana (Picture: courtesy of San Gerónimo's staff)

The story of Cuba-U.S. relations in the field of Physics is quite different: they are not escalating so fast, and definitively not so furiously. *There's no need for that*. They have more or less always existed –in a subtler way. A moving article by Irving Lerch (then Director of International Affairs for the American Physical Society, APS) published in 2002 is a nice example of the good feelings between the numerous U.S. physics community and its relatively small Cuban counterpart. It also illustrates that the Cuban-U.S. relations in the field of Physics started to gain momentum by the end of the 20th century. Lerch's¹ article reads: “Nonetheless, this past April, more than 30 U.S. medical physicists participated in an international congress in Havana (International Conference in Medical Physics, April 8-10, 2002) and many more

¹I. Lerch, “Physics in Cuba: Partnerships And A Personal Perspective”, APS News, August-September 2002 (<http://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200208/backpage.cfm>)

are expected to attend the VIII Inter-American Conference on Physics Education to be convened July 7-11, 2003, in Havana." Miriam Sarachik, then President of the APS, participated in the latter, as well as Charles H. Holbrow, President of the American Association of Physics Teachers (AAPT), who later wrote: "Havana's cars may be old, but the conference's physics and physics pedagogy were up-to-date. Physics teachers from 14 countries in the Western Hemisphere and 12 in Europe, Africa, and Asia presented more than 200 talks and posters"². Nobel laureate Leon Lederman also attended the meeting, and even gave an interview to the Cuban press. More recently, U.S. physicists have participated in scientific gatherings in Cuba –one of the biggest being Physics and Applications of High Brightness Beams, that took place in Havana, from March 28 to April 1, 2016.

A much smaller event, however, may be more significant for the future of the Sociedad Cubana de Física (SCF). Last March, Laura Greene (President-elect of the APS) and Amy Flatten (Director of International Affairs of the APS) participated in the Latin American Workshop on Physics Teaching (TIBERO'16), organized by the Physics Faculty, University of Havana. They used the opportunity to meet with the Direction Board of the Sociedad Cubana de Física (SCF), following an invitation by its president, María Sánchez-Colina. The meeting, which took place at the Colegio Universitario San Gerónimo de La Habana –a branch of the University of Havana– was devoted to explore future roads for cooperation, in a relaxed and friendly environment. Some ideas were discussed and the Cuban physicists identified three main goals of cooperation with the APS:

1. Connecting young Cuban physicists with their U.S. counterparts.
2. Inviting senior U.S. physicists to teach courses in Cuban universities.

3. Finding ways to collect equipment donations and send them to Cuban physics institutions.

The APS has concrete plans for addressing each of these goals in the upcoming year. In 2017, APS will host a meeting of North American and Cuban physics graduate students in Washington, D.C. It also has established programs for sending senior physicists to Brazil and India, and hopes to use that as a model for future Cuban programs. It is also working with other scientific organizations toward collecting equipment donations and finding possible ways to transport them to Cuba, a nontrivial matter: while diplomatic relations between U.S. and Cuba have been successfully reopened, there are still serious restrictions as part of the embargo³.

A massive opening to U.S. Physics is not, however, a trivial matter. Due to the small size of the Cuban community of physicists, it may provoke the downsizing of the exchange with Europe and some Latin American countries like México and Brazil, which has flourished during the last couple of decades. It would also contribute to the already worrying emigration of young Cuban physicists to places with much better scientific infrastructure and economical benefits at the personal level. Those elements were also approached during the meeting between the SCF and APS members. However, the proximity of research institutions in the U.S. to Cuba, can help facilitate to train students and provide collaborations in large facilities, such as the National High Magnetic Field Lab in Florida, where Laura has just joined.

Beyond technical matters, we had the opportunity to get a feeling of the pleasant personality and human warmth of both Laura and Amy during and outside the meeting. If it is a hint of the future relations between Cuban and U.S. Physics, there must be an uplifting future in the bilateral relations.

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²Ch. H. Holbrow, "Across a Bridge to Cuba", *Announcer*, Vol. 33, issue 3, 2003 (<http://www.aapt.org/aboutaapt/reports/pres-fall03.cfm>).

³Known as "El bloqueo", in Cuba.