

The First 50 Years

A Social Experiment

Sol Tax, Paul Fejos, and the Origins of
Current Anthropology

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Current Anthropology was born out of a meeting of minds of two remarkable individuals. Sol Tax and Paul Fejos were very different personalities, almost polar opposites in their biographies and temperaments, yet they had in common unusual daring, an expansiveness of vision that acknowledged few limits, and a belief in anthropology that went beyond its scholarly value.

Paul Fejos, born in Hungary to once-landed gentry, was cosmopolitan, multilingual, multitalented. During World War I he rode with the hussars and flew as a pilot with the air cavalry. He completed medical school, then became a theatrical and film director, first in Europe and later, to considerable acclaim, in Hollywood (a review of his first movie was headlined "Introducing You to Mr. Paul Fejos, Genius"). He came to anthropology by chance, through ventures as an explorer, ethnographic filmmaker, and self-taught archaeologist and ethnologist. After saving the life of Axel Wenner-Gren on a tiger hunt, Fejos persuaded him to establish the Viking Fund in 1941, which 10 years later was renamed for its benefactor. Fejos was a charismatic figure, master of the extravagant gesture, five-times married, whose influence on anthropology through the Wenner-Gren Foundation (WGF) was guided as much by his own instinct as by the advice of the professionals who counseled him.

Sol Tax was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Russian Jewish immigrants, secular despite their descent from rabbis, socialist in their political leanings. Tax was small and shy but also entrepreneurial as a boy (Stocking 2000, 173).¹ He discovered anthropology through Ralph Linton at the University of Wisconsin, then completed graduate studies at the University of Chicago, later his long-time academic home. He did extensive fieldwork in Middle America, but his forte was more organizational than theoretical. Tax was earnest, hard-working, personally unprepossessing, a family man. His approach to the world, as summarized by Stocking (2000, 172), was "a mix of liberal democratic enthusiasm, relativist humility, and universalist hubris."

Fejos and Tax met up as members of the National Research

Council's committee on Latin America, and they worked together on a comprehensive state-of-the-art conference on Middle American ethnology in 1949. Tax edited the conference volume as well as three volumes of the concurrent International Congress of Americanists. At this time of postwar expansion of anthropology, Fejos was envisioning a more ambitious role for the WGF, beginning with a massive international symposium in 1952 that he thought of as "a concrete basis on which to erect its future policies" (Fejos 1953, v). Under the presidency of A. L. Kroeber, and with a planning group that brought in eight other major figures, its goal was to inventory the totality of what was known to anthropology at the time. Fifty papers presented at the symposium were published as *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory* (Kroeber and International Symposium on Anthropology 1953). After the symposium Tax was brought in to oversee the task of condensing and editing the voluminous transcriptions of the discussions (Tax [and others] 1953). During the 1950s Tax was also developing an "action anthropology" program, serving (with vigor and innovation) a term as editor of the *American Anthropologist* (1952–1955), and organizing an elaborate celebration of the Darwinian centennial (which included a musical reenactment of Darwin's life) as well as an equally ambitious event that brought together diverse North American tribes and factions in the American Indian Conference in Chicago in 1961.

But it was with the project that became *Current Anthropology* (CA) that Tax moved firmly into the role of master impresario of world anthropology. His contemporary Margaret Mead was better known to the public for her advocacy of anthropology on a world stage, but she did so mainly as an individual enterprise. Tax, in contrast, was an institution builder, and his efforts were directed primarily at the anthropologists themselves. CA became his vehicle of choice. He did not, however, set aside other activities, and toward the end of his editorship, he also took on the task of hosting the 1973 International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (ICAES) in Chicago. True to form, for him this was not merely a matter of coordinating some meetings; he planned for the Congress to yield some 300 volumes (of which 92 were actually published), and he may be the only conference organizer in the history of anthropology to stage a full-scale opera in honor of the event, commissioning no less a figure than Gian Carlo Menotti for the assignment (Stocking 2000, 211).

1. In addition to the publications cited, sources for this article were the files on CA and Tax in the Wenner-Gren archives and in-house publications such as annual reports of the WGF. The most valuable source on Paul Fejos was Dodds (1973), itself based largely on Fejos's own account in the Columbia University Oral History Archives of his life. Many of the events and anecdotes recounted there stretch credibility, but when I once asked Lita Osmundsen which were true and which were exaggerations, she said that the more unbelievable ones are true.

What Fejos and Tax shared was a vision of a world of seamless intercultural understanding to which anthropology would lead the way. Fejos, in fact, had persuaded Axel Wenner-Gren to devote his Fund to anthropology by appealing to his ambition to be a mediator of international relations (which had impelled an uninvited visit to Hermann Goering to try to persuade him of the folly of the Nazi military buildup). For both Fejos and Tax, anthropology embodied the most comprehensive knowledge of humankind, and it was a connected enterprise of scholars worldwide. They believed that that connectedness was also a means of addressing the large problems of the day. (In Wenner-Gren's words, written for him by Fejos, anthropology had the potential to touch on universal issues.) Thus, the venture that became *CA* was always more than a publishing project; it was part and parcel of a worldview and a mission shared by the dashing Hungarian Renaissance man and the Jewish anthropologist from Milwaukee who had always been eager to do good in the world (Stocking 2000, 173). The two of them were undertaking what they thought of as a social experiment that could change the face of international anthropology and have an impact beyond the discipline.

The background to the origin of *CA* was a shift in priorities within the WGF. In the immediate postwar years it had been among the very few sources of support for research in anthropology, but the creation in 1950 of the U.S. National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health, both with far more lavish funding, began to leave the WGF behind in the competition for good projects. In response, Fejos decided to focus on "communication" functions. In the first instance, that meant conferences, building on the supper conferences that had been held at the townhouse in New York since it was acquired in 1945; to these were added major gatherings held at universities and other sites and, from 1958 on, the extremely productive summertime program of international symposia at the "castle," Burg Wartenstein in Austria. The budget for grants was reduced to about a third of the total, and conferences were assigned an equal portion. (The remaining third was divided among several other activities, the most important of which was the casting program begun in 1958; once *CA* was established, it absorbed only about 5% of the budget, much less than the amount committed for its subsidy, because of the income it generated.) However, another aspect of the WGF's communications role was to be to develop publications and other mechanisms that would enable anthropologists of all specialties, worldwide, to be in contact with one another and continually to be informed about the state of the field.

The "Anthropology Today" symposium had proven a great success, and Fejos hoped to sustain and update the "encyclopedic inventory" it had yielded. He experimented with the idea of a *Yearbook of Anthropology* and published one volume, in a limited edition, in 1955; parts of it were reproduced for public sale under the title *Current Anthropology: A Supplement*

to "*Anthropology Today*" (1956, edited by William L. Thomas, Jr., who was on the WGF staff). However, Fejos felt it was impractical for the Foundation to produce further editions in-house, and he was disappointed that some of the authors did not actually write inventories. Moreover, he thought that what was needed was a more rapid and more flexible means of communication. Fejos asked Tax to develop a plan that would more effectively meet these goals, and in April 1957 Tax agreed to take on the project, seeing in it an opportunity "to develop new patterns of worldwide intercommunication in the profession" (Stocking 2000, 204).

Tax submitted an initial plan that envisioned a series of five books (to be called *Current Anthropology*) to be published every second year, which, along with revisions of the original *Anthropology Today* (*AT*) articles, would yield a definitive encyclopedia of anthropology. But before he was ready to put a plan into effect, he felt that he needed to discover what the scholars of the world themselves thought would be most useful. With full WGF support, he then embarked on a hectic round of meetings—44 of them between 1957 and 1960, covering more than 30 countries and a dozen venues in the United States, as well as several meetings at Burg Wartenstein and in New York, and involving some 650 individuals. Tax's journeys took him everywhere except to Australia and the Pacific Islands. He estimated that there were about 3,000 anthropologists all over the world at the time, and he was determined to talk to as many of them as possible.

The idea that Tax took with him was that there should be a "participatory democracy of scholars in exchanging information." True to his conviction, he was bent on soliciting a wide range of suggestions. What he got was a dizzying array of reactions and ideas: participatory democracy meant everyone had his (sometimes her) own notions. It was Tax's genius that he was able to sort these into coherent plans while seeming to accommodate most opinions, even contradictory ones. (He also seems to have been quite willing to have his own opinions overruled.)

In 1957, Tax held seven supper conferences throughout the United States involving more than a hundred anthropologists. In these meetings, and continuing into the early months of 1958, the basic assumption was that *CA* would be not a journal but a series of yearbooks. As Tax summarized it at this time: "This new editorial venture . . . is intended to keep *Anthropology Today* up to date, and perform some of the functions in continuation of the *Yearbook of Anthropology*." Its articles would review large fields of knowledge, inventory subjects not included in *AT*, and summarize current knowledge on major anthropological topics and problems. At the first meeting, in Michigan in July 1957, the specific proposal of the group was for a series of four yearbooks to be published every two years, which after eight years might lead to a publication much like *AT* but broader in scope (essentially the plan that Tax began with). The proposal was accompanied by an "Outline of the Encyclopedia Inventory" (prepared by

Tax and Betty Potash), elaborating on the specific articles that might be included. That list of suggested articles grew over the course of the next several meetings until it amounted to more than 80 items. An additional section was to cover "Peoples and Cultures of the World." Finally, the proposal envisioned a "Field Manual," a handbook of items that a fieldworker might use in data collection, along the lines of *Notes and Queries*. It was suggested that the manual be printed on microcards for portability. In November of that year, J. S. Slotkin elaborated on this idea and produced a full outline of a handbook, a document that seems to have been consigned to a file cabinet.

By the end of 1957, Tax assembled the comments and suggestions of the several meetings into a report that set forth the central aim of *CA* as that of the updating and completion of *AT*. Other notions were included under "subsidiary purposes" and "possible side projects," to be kept to one side but possibly incorporated in some way (these included a range of ideas, such as abstracts, reprintings, and translations of material published elsewhere; book reviews; an inventory of training aids; and opinion pieces). "Peoples of the World" and the "Field Manual" were left as "not conclusively resolved."

That the notion of a journal was still not adopted is clear from an exchange during a February 1958 meeting in Chicago. Melville Herskovits expressed concern that the publication might be "unstructured like a journal." He continued, "If it's a journal that's all right but *CA* is not a journal." Tax agreed: "A journal is Kroeber's idea. This will be a book . . ." but, he added, it might continue, and there is "no reason why we need limit the publication to four issues."

In these early meetings, the unanimous point of agreement was that the publication would be international, interdisciplinary, and geared to professionals and graduate students (rather than a wider readership). There was also general support for Tax's emphasis on review articles, but some added the proviso that these should reflect current trends and "be forward looking in nature." A third point of wide agreement was that the articles should be contributed by individuals, although there could be room for coverage of conferences. But there was debate over whether these should come from volunteered submissions or solicited (with some proposing that committees representing each field decide whom to invite).

As Tax's year-end summary reveals, these gatherings yielded a plethora of suggestions, each with points of dispute. The idea of a "Peoples of the World" section came with differences of opinion as to whether it should be oriented toward data, theory, methodology, or problems. Some ideas, such as the proposal for a microcard library, went beyond the journal format. As Tax collected specific suggestions for articles, he organized the long list into categories: articles dealing with the particular field as a whole; methods, concepts, and theories; reviews of major blocks of knowledge; substantive re-

sults in various areas; interdisciplinary approaches. He sent the list to all fellows of the American Anthropological Association, asking for volunteered submissions and suggested authors, and he received several hundred replies.

In the summer of 1958 Tax held seven regional conferences throughout Europe, involving more than 150 participants. He encountered conflicting reactions to the *CA* idea, both among different countries and within each one. Writing to Fejos in July, he said that in England there was "resentment" that *CA* might take resources away from WGF's support of research and of students. The English were in favor of communications within specialties but "positively and loudly opposed to any sort of marriage of these specialties." The Cambridge group wanted only reference materials—inventory or review articles "left them cold"—while the opposite was true in London, where the interest was only in "middle-range review articles." In Paris, only Alfred Metraux favored inventory articles; others stressed "classifiable pieces of new knowledge." According to Levi-Strauss, "the French were tired of philosophy and wanted information for empirical research." The variety of opinions multiplied as Tax continued his travels.

In August of that year, Burg Wartenstein was inaugurated. Its first event (after a day of ceremonies to which all Austrian anthropologists were invited) was a conference on *CA*, which included 12 participants along with Tax and Fejos. That conference resulted in a specific proposal that established the future contours of *CA*. At the conference "the idea of an open ended journal rather than a closed encyclopedia crystallized" (Tax 1965, 242) because it was felt that this would provide more rapid dissemination and would allow material to appear in units small enough to be easily handled. The proposal declared three firm desiderata for the journal: (1) that it be as broad and open as the changing sciences of man require, with the widest variety of relevant ideas and data, facilitating communication throughout the world; (2) that it be unitary (rather than divided by fields or specialties), with a single set of cross-cutting materials to be available to all; and (3) that it provide communication that is both fast and convenient.

Specifically, the journal would be addressed to the world audience of all the anthropological sciences ("physical anthropology, ethnology, prehistory, folklore, linguistics, social anthropology, and all of the subsidiary and related sciences by whatever names"). It would publish two classes of materials. One would be major reviews of broad scope, comprising several subdisciplines and/or different scholarly traditions; these could be new considerations of traditional subjects, but preferably they would be subjects of new, current, and growing interest. The second kind of content would be current news and reference materials: news of research activities and discoveries, guides to materials (bibliographies of bibliographies, surveys of research and museum collections, etc.), and "Want Ads" (requests for information and research suggestions). The idea of Associates was also formalized, as Tax articulated his vision of a "community of scholars" that would develop

through the journal and in turn determine the policy of the journal. Thus, Tax welcomed the shift to a journal model and immediately wedded it to his "strong and optimistic belief in humanity, community, and democracy" (Tax 1965, 242). He now saw *CA* as a new kind of scholarly institution that should be "permitted to evolve after the fashion of a 'natural institution,' like the family or a hunting party, with which anthropologists are so familiar" (1965, 248).

With the basic parameters of the journal in place, Tax continued to solicit input and support through further travels in 1959. In January, he held regional conferences in Russia, India, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan and others in Hawaii and California. During the spring, he ranged across Latin America, visiting Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. The summer took him to Sweden, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, the Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and England. These meetings yielded numerous ideas and suggestions for changes. In particular, there was much interest in expanding the role of Associates.

Throughout this time, Tax was preparing a Pre-Issue, which was mailed in September 1959, and the first full issue (dated January 1960 but mailed in November 1959). The pace of his work is hard to comprehend: by mid-January 1960, the March issue was completed, and by the end of January, the May issue was in press. He was also assembling his corps of Associates. Invitations were extended to some 3,000 anthropologists to become Associates and to participate in the network; Tax hoped to eventually recruit 4,000. To facilitate communications with the Associates, he inaugurated the Reply Letter device in the Pre-Issue, and by the end of January 1960 he had received about 1,000 replies.

The philosophy of the journal was laid out in the Pre-Issue. The subtitle summarizes its basic goal, *A World Journal of the Sciences of Man*, and the cover design (showing the globe and the spectrum of fields) symbolizes the world community of anthropologists. "It is a journal, yes," writes Tax, but it is more than that. It is the means by which individual scholars can communicate with each other all over the world: to exchange and pool ideas, information, research materials, and new knowledge; review the results of past research; and lay the basis for further intercommunication on current developments. (The language of "world" and "worldwide" rather than "international" was deliberate, reflecting that anthropologists participated as individuals, not through institutions or national bodies.) It intends to represent all of anthropology, to "go from the biological to the social and cultural, and also range from the purely historical to the analytical and to scientific generalizing," but at the same time to recognize the differences among countries in how the sciences are organized. *CA*, Tax says, is a social experiment, and all Associates are part of it. The WGF has promised to pay the deficit for five years, after which "we citizens of the world community of scholars" might be able to pay for it. The Foundation was

leaving to us (Associates) complete freedom to develop *CA* in any way that it can serve the sciences of man.

The journal was to appear six times a year (soon reduced to five). Each issue would include review articles or other major articles, which would have "CA☆ treatment"; this innovation, a device for organizing the intercommunication among specialists that was a basic goal of *CA*, was in place from the first issue. There would also be sections for news, reference materials, and information exchange, serving its function as a clearinghouse. The editor's Letter to Associates and a Reply Letter would be inserted in each issue, inviting Associates to comment on anything and everything from the design to the content to editorial policies and stylistic niceties. But none of this was immutable: as the first issue declares, "CA will eventually publish whatever it is that Associates wish to learn from and to teach one another."

The concept of Associates, who make up the "community," was fundamental to *CA*. In return for a special subscription rate, Associates had obligations: (1) to keep the list of Associates updated and to nominate others; (2) to pay their fee (bills or reminders would not be sent); (3) to look through each issue upon receipt and respond to requests "meant for you"; (4) to give the Editor suggestions for material to be included, especially your own proposals; and (5) to respond to the Editor's request for submissions, comments on articles, and other matters.

The fee for Associates was set as the equivalent of the purchasing power of \$2 in North America. Individual subscribers recommended by Associates (who were considered Potential Associates) were charged twice that amount, and the institutional rate was five times greater. The fee was payable in local currency. In some cases where currency restrictions prevented sending payment abroad, the accumulated fees were left in the country to be used for *CA*-related purposes. Informally, Tax described the fees as equivalent to the cost of a good meal in the country. Still, Associates and students in some countries simply could not pay fees, and no effort was ever made to collect them, the costs being absorbed as part of the deficit covered by the WGF. (To encourage paying subscribers, the Foundation added a bonus of two or three volumes in the Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology series each year.)

In the Pre-Issue, Tax responded to the concern over whether *CA* would be competing with other journals. Not really, he said. The clearinghouse function was truly new, and while some of the major articles might be published elsewhere, the *CA* audience represented the broadest range of anthropologists geographically and in terms of interests.

Tax was well aware that language was a thorny question. The 1958 Burg Wartenstein conference, after long discussion, had reluctantly concluded that publication in one language was the only practical alternative and that it had to be English, as the most widely read language. That decision was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Associates. Still, there was con-

tinuing debate over how other languages should be accommodated. It was decided that initial submissions needed to be made in English, however rough, and that accepted items would be fully translated and edited. The primary concession to the Associates' linguistic diversity was the publication of the Editor's statement (about *CA* principles and policies) in a different language in each issue, rotating among major languages (initially French, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, German, Chinese, and Italian).

What the major articles were intended to be was somewhat ambiguous. While Tax had given up the yearbook notion, he continued to use the terms "major review" and "review article," but the contributors were shifting the meaning of the terms. The first issue's two major articles conformed to Tax's original concept, providing synthesis and systematic coverage of topics ("Lexicostatistics So Far" by Dell Hymes and "Twenty Years of Peyote Studies" by Weston LaBarre). But later issues increasingly featured articles emphasizing new developments in the field. The question of what qualifies as a review article or how far the meaning should be stretched continued to be debated by the Associates, with the majority favoring a flexible approach. Tax attempted to accommodate these views with a revised policy statement in 1961. "A 'Review Article' [i.e., the long articles with *CA*☆ treatment, usually two in an issue] is a major survey of knowledge on any topic relevant to the sciences of man. New material at the growing points of anthropology, and new evaluations, are preferred over syntheses of what has become well-known, but the new should be placed in the context of the known." He also affirmed that there was no length limit "as long as it is consistent with the material it covers, provided that sensible canons of selection are observed." His working principle was that "an article should be as long as it needs to be for what it says, and not one word longer" (Tax 1965, 255).

In 1960, Tax summarized the status and future challenges of *CA* for the WGF board: (1) It is a "co-operative of scholars," but that requires "institutionalization" so as not to depend on a particular editor (him). Its goal is "free and democratic participation and communication without bureaucracy," but other mechanisms than those already set up may be needed. (2) It aspires to be an inventory of knowledge, but that will require a sufficiently large and representative flow of material to allow for selectivity and to ensure a backlog, given the time needed for *CA*☆ treatment. (3) It is a medium for interchange, but clearer patterns need to be established for the kinds of items to be included, and the mailing needs to be speeded up. (4) Its function of information interchange could be expanded into a more active role in research cooperation. (Tax envisioned *CA* as coordinating simultaneous inquiry in different parts of the world—facilitating exchanges of ideas for related studies, discussions of research results, and the planning of subsequent stages of work.)

Over the next few years, the Reply Letter became for Tax

an important means of gathering opinions of the Associates, which to some extent led to changes in *CA* policy. There were constant suggestions for new departments and projects, many of which were implemented. But there was also complaint and criticism. From Tax's 1965 reflection on the history of *CA*, it appears that there were three main areas that were proving problematic. One was the definition and role of Associates, that is, criteria of inclusion, fees, handling failures to fulfill obligations, and means of communication and cooperation among Associates. A second area had to do with the *CA*☆ treatment. There were questions of how commentators were selected, how many rounds of comments and revisions should be circulated (Tax reluctantly settled on just one round), how criticisms and suggestions were handled by the authors and the editor, and how credit was assigned. Finally, there were the recurrent problems of language. Beyond the choice of English as the sole language of publication, there were issues of usage, idioms, and spelling; translation (or not) of place names and technical terms; politically charged terminology; use of the word "primitive"; ad hominem phrasings; the idea of printing abstracts in different languages (a compromise solution was ultimately reached); complaints that oversimplification was forced on writers not fluent in English; and more. But after experiencing a year of editing articles, Anna Pikelis concluded that the problem was not so much language as "communication": "By far more potentially troublesome than language are the complex implications of inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary communication" (Tax 1965, 253).

Underlying the language issues was the unavoidable American dominance, given a U.S.-based editor and sponsor. There was (and continued to be) a clear overrepresentation of U.S.-Americans among the authors of major articles, although more comments and reports came from outside the United States. U.S.-Americans were the majority of Associates at the beginning, but by the end of the first year they accounted for less than 40% (Tax 1965, 266). Both Tax and Fejos struggled heroically (in a preelectronic age of unreliable mails) to realize their commitment to making the journal truly international, and they achieved at least partial success. They managed to include in the *CA* community anthropologists from every part of the world, including countries that were politically closed off from the West. Probably the journal had its greatest importance in reaching the more isolated scholars, a role that never diminished until the advent of the Internet. (Fejos's successor, Lita Osmundsen, made it a point to select the next two editors from outside the United States, albeit from English-speaking countries.)

Fejos was enthusiastic about Tax's efforts, and he reported to the WGF board that *CA* was providing a "means of constant interchange for the anthropologists of the world." Both in its achievements and its relatively modest cost (although it never reached Tax's optimistic goal of becoming self-supporting), *CA* was an important part of the Foundation's vibrancy dur-

ing the 1960s, a decade as yet untouched by the financial crisis that was to come.

With the end of Tax's editorship in 1974, and over the years that followed, several of *CA*'s innovations were solidified, some even copied by other journals, while others (including most of Tax's as yet unfulfilled hopes for it) fell by the wayside. Inevitably, *CA* came to resemble more a conventional, albeit distinctive, journal than the linchpin of an anthropological world citizenry. Still, from our perspective today, we can appreciate that the social experiment engineered by Tax and Fejos succeeded in creating, and to a degree institutionalizing, new modes of communication among anthropologists of all specialties and nationalities. We continue to benefit from the vision of two extraordinary men.

Acknowledgments

I thank Barbara Metzger, the universally respected copy editor who served under five editors, for reminding me of the many ways in which *CA* came near to its goal of being truly international. It is worth remembering that Tax had no models to follow. In the mid-1950s he proposed to the ICAES the idea of a world journal that would bring together individual scholars; inquiring at the United Nations about precedents, he was told that all international associations were based on national groups, not individuals (Tax 1965, 241–242).

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