

April 25, 2019

Statement Regarding Academic Freedom and Public Anthropology in Colombia

The Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America, an international scholarly organization composed of 500 professors, students, and practitioners, hereby expresses our collective concern with the recent actions taken by the leadership of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (ICANH, Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia) to censor the important work and perspective of professional anthropologists.

Since March 2019, thousands of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural Colombians have been peacefully demonstrating as part of the “National Collective for Life, Territory, Democracy, Justice, and Peace” (La Minga), which among other things has sought to bring to greater public attention to targeted assassinations of community leaders in recent years. On April 4, researchers affiliated with ICANH published a letter which offered valuable historical context for understanding La Minga as a popular form of expression and political engagement that has been utilized many times over the past twenty years in Colombia. The authors also sought to correct racist and politically-motivated depictions of the protesters that are currently circulating in Colombia’s mass and social media. They correctly point to the dangerous trend in public discourse that seeks to criminalize dissent and “connect ethnicity and violence” in a nation only recently at peace with itself. In our view, it is precisely this type of analysis and appreciation for context that the social science disciplines can and should volunteer into the public sphere in times of political turbulence.

However, the leadership of ICANH did not support the professional and highly competent work of its researchers. Instead, the statement was removed from ICANH’s website and social media accounts almost immediately, and its authors have reportedly been threatened with disciplinary action. We find the former to be regrettable and the latter to be unconscionable. Academic freedom and the freedom of expression are the cornerstones upon which free and open societies are built, and as scholars we are called to condemn censorship in whatever form it takes. Members of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (ICANH) should feel confident that their leadership shares these values, and that it is not beholden to the political agenda of whichever administration currently holds power in Bogotá.

With this letter, we are adding our name to the public call, written by four former directors of ICANH (April 22), for an end to the politicization of research. We also invite the current Director of ICANH, Ernesto Montenegro, to immediately clarify the Institute’s commitment to the principles of academic freedom and free expression and to renew ICANH’s support for engaged, relevant, and scientifically rigorous research oriented toward the public good.



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