

Between meals, subjectivities, science and anthropology: an academic path of Jesus Contreras

Entre comidas, subjetividades, ciência e antropologia: um caminho acadêmico de Jesus Contreras

An interview conducted by Anelise Rizzolo ^{1,2}

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Introducing the interviewee

Anthropology of Food is a very broad field of study, with researchers and contributions from different theoretical currents. Jesús Contreras Hernández is one of these academic personalities and in contemporary times he is certainly one of those who have given us important contributions.

He has had a long career, going through themes that dialogue with numerous methods and ideas in culturally distinct territories. Until 2017, he was a professor at the Faculty of History and Geography in the Department of Social Anthropology at University of Barcelona. His professional career begins in South America, in the Andes, and then reconnects with his origins in Spain, passing between Economic and Food Anthropology. The most recent investigations have focused on consumption practices, with emphasis on food processes and changes. He has developed several innovative studies on social relations and eating.

He is the author of more than 20 books and dozens of scientific articles. Among his main books are: *Subsistencia, ritual y poder en los Andes* (1986), *Antropología de la alimentación* (1993), *Alimentación y cultura: necesidades, gustos y costumbres* (1995), *Los productos de la tierra* (2003), *Sabores del Mediterráneo* (2005), *Alimentación y cultura. Perspectivas antropológicas* (2005) and *Alimentación, sociedad y cultura* (2011).

The varied and dense intellectual production line defines his profile and instigates us to look for the paths that have led him to Anthropology, from production to food consumption, in a conversation that begins with material bases, dialectically articulating them to what is symbolic.

This interview was designed as an integral part of postdoctoral activities in Food Anthropology conducted by Anelise Rizzolo at Observatorio de la Alimentación (ODELA) at University of Barcelona. The conversation was planned based on an open script with two central axes: to know Jesús' professional path and, in a way, how he became a researcher in the field of Food Anthropology, and discuss current and emerging issues in this field of science.

Jesús Contreras talked about all topics with vigor and disposition in a cold morning in January 2017 in his room at the Faculty of History and Geography. That same month, he retired, after teaching his last class in the Course of Graduation in Anthropology.

The interview

Anelise Rizzolo

Starting our conversation. Jesus... How was your path like until you reached the Barcelona Anthropology Course?

Jesús Contreras

I have been living in Barcelona for many years but I have come here from a region in southern Spain, Andalusia, specifically Granada. I was born in Granada but at the age of 2 my parents immigrated to a municipality in Catalonia, bordering France: Puxará, in the Pyrenees. There I attended primary and secondary school courses.

I have worked in a hotel during the summer. I started as a courier, luggage porter, errand boy, waiter, receptionist... I did all possible tasks in this little hotel, where I learned many things, including the French language. I have not learned French at school. At that time, French was considered the second language.

Then, since I was about 18, I came to live in Barcelona. Here, I studied Philosophy. Pure philosophy. And this was my calling. But when I began my specialization in Philosophy, I also began to feel a little disappointed and coincidentally I discovered Anthropology because of a friend who had met a Spanish anthropologist recently arrived from Mexico. He welcomed us, motivated us, commended us and began to train us in Anthropology. As self-taught anthropologists, we began to teach Anthropology. I have not strictly studied Anthropology! I am saying that I have learned

Anthropology by teaching Anthropology. This may sound like a joke, but it's not a joke! This is how I got into Anthropology. I had the opportunity to do field work and my doctoral thesis in the Peruvian Andes on Quechua people communities. For many years, my areas of expertise were Economic Anthropology, Peasantry Anthropology and Andean Anthropology.

By the end of the 1980s, within my Economic Anthropology program there was a subarea dedicated to consumption. And within consumption (Anthropology had little involvement with consumption itself), I became interested in clothing and food. I was lucky enough to get a scholarship to organize a book, a compilation of readings, by the Ministry of Culture, and this allowed me to make a selection and the first course on Food Anthropology. And it seems to me that it was the first university course in Social Sciences devoted to food. The truth is that the course was successful, some nutritionists met me and started asking me for conferences and collaborations. Certainly, there was a demand for this anthropological approach to food and for this reason I remained in this field. Thus, we formed a research group with historians and anthropologists and topics on food were growing. We had European research projects, national research projects, Catalan ones etc.

Later, with other colleagues from the University of Bologna and the University of Tour, we created a master degree course in Food History and Culture. This was the consolidation room for this line of research and study. I believe that this line of Anthropology, History of Food and Food and Social Sciences is well established in Spain and other parts of the world. I can assume that I was one of the first ones in Spain. But not in the world, because obviously there are many others who preceded me and with much more quality.

I left the Andean Anthropology and am currently focusing Economic and Food Anthropology. And since this is my last year at the University, from now on I shall think about what I can do, because in terms of research I have a lot of work pending and I intend to finish many of them.

AR.

You've been working with Economic Anthropology and Food Anthropology at the same time. How do you see the development or transition between one area and the other? How did this thematic construction take place in your academic-professional profile?

JC.

Economic Anthropology would explain the economic process: production, distribution and consumption. Reflections on production and distribution had been around for some time. But consumption was relatively little worked on at that time. I believed there was some interest in this subject. In addition, this allowed me to go beyond the classical texts of Anthropology, because

consumption would be the final part of this process, although it would not be seen like this. Consumption would not be seen as a stage of the process, an additional phase, which is what allows reproduction in both social and biological terms. What I did was to integrate consumption as part of the production process, that is, in the logic of the economic process. However, by dealing more about food rather than clothing. Clothing is interesting but food is much more so because of its multidimensionality. It is undeniably a biological and cultural fact. This double dimension, biological and cultural, makes food a very interesting process to be analyzed, especially in the scope of Anthropology. But in food, from the materialist point of view – that is, that attaches great importance to biological, technological, economic factors, obviously – and social, ideological, religious factors... seeing this relationship is crucial. In other subjects, perhaps not so much. But in the case of food it is obvious.

We ingest matter and our body assimilates and transforms it. But we do not eat any matter, we previously think about what matter we are going to eat. As (French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude) Lévi-Strauss used to say: “We think what we eat.” We do not eat anything that we had not previously thought about. We have to know what we eat. We previously classify everything we eat, even if it is something simple such as being edible or inedible. All cultures have these classifications but not all classify in the same way. What is edible for some may not be edible for others. For me, food seemed especially attractive because the material and cultural dimensions had the singular aspect of consumption. And for this reason I was abandoning Economic Anthropology and Peasantry Anthropology to devote myself, almost exclusively, to food.

However, there is still one thing that interests me a lot to study, which is “gift exchange,” which is the Anthropology of Reciprocity. This is one of the doubts I have with me and I want to publish a book on the Anthropology of Reciprocity in contemporary society. In primitive or traditional societies, anthropologists have already written much about it. I want to know the similarities and differences between contemporary society and the traditional societies that anthropologists have studied in relation to the act of giving, receiving, returning, social relations of reciprocity.

AR.

Among the main theories or currents in Food Anthropology, where do you find yourself? What is your greatest influence and why?

JC.

I once defined myself as a materialist within Economic Anthropology, clearly materialistic. And it is true that we can summarize the different theories that exist in Anthropology or Social

Sciences in theories of materialistic emphasis, which gives much importance, above all, to the institutions and material factors of existence, ecological, technological, economic conditioning, and less to ideological ones, although also considered. Well, if you study how some materialistic authors within anthropology devoted to food, such as Marvin Harris and Eric Ross, explain the origin of some practices, some institutions and some taboos, the ecological knowledge at its source is very clear. Today, the issue is much more complex because many other factors interfere in our contemporary society.

Ecological or environmental factors are still present: it rains or it does not rain, plants grow or do not grow, plants grow with insects or without insects... But it is clear that the material conditioning in urbanized, industrialized and salaried societies is economic availability. Thus, we can not do without economic availability measured in cash. But even with such large food options, for the same economic availability, food choices and preferences can be very different and taking into account aspects that are not economical. They can be due to their perceptions about health, they can be for reasons of taste, strictly psychological ones. They can be for aspects of work organization, they can be for aesthetic or medical reasons or, in the case of vegetarians, they can be for philosophical reasons etc. So we would say that the Food Anthropology that I try to practice now, in an eclectic way, is not very well seen. But I obviously try to analyze, from a concrete behavior, what conditioning factors guide decisions or food choices, that is, what conditioning processes are present and why they act in one way or another. On the other hand, I also think that our contemporaneous food is so complex and diverse that we can not reduce food choices to a limited set of factors. The same person can be guided by very different choices, conditioning processes or criteria over a day, over a week, over a year. It means that our eating behaviors are very variable, much more variable than they could be 20, 40 or 60 years ago. This is not to say that ideological factors do not matter, as they clearly do. Nowadays, certain religious or philosophical considerations are fashionable. There are many vegetarians who can be so for ecological or strictly philosophical reasons, such as out of respect for animals, for example.

AR.

We are living today an attempt to medicalize food, with the market and the food industry using narratives and speeches in food advertising, constructing some imagery of slim, healthy, strong and beautiful bodies. In this context, health training, especially of nutritionists, is very susceptible to this harassment, where it is possible to find subjectively an imaginarieness of what is healthy and a health concept strategically manipulated by the actors who have interests in maintaining this discourse. How do you perceive health understanding in society?

JC.

I usually say that our society suffers from a pathological obsession for health. People do not enjoy it. There are people who want to be so healthy that they do not enjoy the health they have. They are sick of health! We're lucky not to know when we're going to die. We know that the probability of dying of something is greater according to our behavior. Therefore, if I take poison, I'm going to die in a matter of hours or minutes. But cause and effect reasons for disease, health and food are not immediate. It's a long, long process taking years. Prevention is more difficult to take on in these cases. Women are more preventive than men in general terms. Men take preventive attitudes when they have already had heart attack sequelae or when they are very ill. Effects of poor diets are not immediate. On the other hand, satiety and well-being with a tasty diet are immediate. Anyway, it's not easy... Nutrition is not an exact science, not because of nutritional knowledge but because subjects who apply it are human. And no two humans are alike...

AR.

In your classes, you always present many popular sayings that illustrate popular wisdom about food in Spain. Could you name a few?

JC.

I have many... "*Lo compartido bien sabe!*" Or, "What is shared tastes better!". It means that what is shared has a better flavor. You do not enjoy food the same if you eat it alone. The best is always to share with someone else.

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