Research Ethics, Urban Equality and the Role of University in Pandemic Times: Reflections from Havana

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Abstract
Cuba’s capacity to confront challenging scenarios has been internationally recognised and its health system and ability to respond to complex contexts under an overall principle of equality acknowledged. During the pandemic, however, several crises have challenged Havana’s ambitions of equality. COVID-19 coincided with the exponential impacts of the United States blockade and the inequalities created by the processes of economic opening up during the last decade. Acknowledging that Cuban universities, as public institutions, have historically played a key role in engaging with social problems, this paper asks what the role of universities is in the context of COVID-19, what ethical considerations are inherent in this role, and how these can be navigated. Drawing on the experience of an interdisciplinary research project, KNOW-Havana, the article discusses several ethical ‘hotspots’ or challenges faced by the university while conducting research during the pandemic, around questions of redefining proximity, the politics of time, and the duties of care. We discuss principles to navigate these challenges such as rethinking benefits, risks, relationality, responsibility, commitment, trust, reciprocity, flexibility, and care ethics. These provide insights to rethink what knowledge co-production for equality means in Havana. We conclude by reflecting on their importance for universities in a post-pandemic future.

Keywords
Cuba, university, COVID-19, research ethics, urban equality

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Introduction

In March 2021, less than a year after the World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a pandemic, several news portals announced that in 2021, Cuba was expected to produce 100 million doses of one of the five vaccines designed and manufactured in the country, becoming the first Latin American country to produce its own vaccine against the virus (Yaffe, 2021). Impressive as this was, the news was not particularly unexpected—for decades, the Cuban health system has been recognised as an exemplary sector in an adverse and paradigmatic context, due to its capacity for effective responses to complex problems. After decades of international economic blockades and numerous crises, the main virtue of the Cuban health apparatus probably lies in its capacity to articulate the actions and resources of several sectors working together: highly trained professionals and medical staff, public services with extensive territorial presence and engaged local actors, a not-for-profit pharmaceutical industry focused on the public good, and universities producing and mobilising scientific knowledge to solve social problems.

The response to the COVID-19 crisis, however, is much more than a response from the health sector: it is also about how societies organise and how cities and territories are inhabited. For urban centres, the pandemic arrived in a particularly challenging moment. In addition to the aggravated impact of the ongoing United States (US) blockade and oppressive measures during the Donald Trump administration, the country is facing a process of deep transformation due to its own internal political and social changes, following the new economic roadmap implemented since 2011 and the approval of a new constitution in 2019, which have generated important urban equality challenges linked to the opening up of the Cuban economy. In Havana, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing difficulties in aspects such as mobility and transport, food supply chains, local infrastructure and housing, as well as their interconnections with social unrest and the exponential impact of the blockade.

Historically, universities have been a central player in Cuban development agendas, playing a key public role as knowledge producers and as ‘brokers’ between different public actors. In the complex scenario brought about by the pandemic, universities have faced important ethical challenges regarding their multifaceted role. In this article, we question the position of universities in the context of the current crisis and the ethical considerations inherent in this role. We ask these questions by focusing particularly on research and teaching related to urban disciplines in Havana. Drawing on the experience of an interdisciplinary research project about co-production and urban equality called Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW)-Havana, led by the Technological University of Havana José Antonio Echeverría (Instituto Superior Politécnico José Antonio Echeverría [CUJAE]), the article discusses a series of ethical ‘hotspots’ or challenges faced by the university while conducting research during the pandemic, and the ways to navigate these challenges in a post-pandemic future.

The Public Role of Cuban Universities: A Long History of Social Articulation

The key role of Latin American universities as social actors has been widely studied and acknowledged for many decades. This recognition includes not only the traditional understanding of their role as producers of knowledge and professionals contributing to national development projects (Graciarena, 1980) but also their position within the wider student and social movements pursuing political change, particularly during the processes of deep social transformation in the region during the second half of the twentieth century (Barrera Romero, 1968). More recently, studies have shown that ‘social engagement’
is the most remarkable outreach activity in Latin American universities (Mora et al., 2018). Particularly in Cuba, there has been a growing official recognition of the university as a key social actor in the country (González & Díaz-Canel, 2020).

Despite these common regional patterns, the particularity of the Cuban process since the 1959 revolution has meant that universities have played several roles that are specific to the island’s political and social pathway. These roles have not been static. Our research has found that during the first years of the revolution (1959–1970), universities were mainly at the service of a singular and often centralised vision of development, playing a key role supporting the technical needs of a common public project. During the period of institutionalisation of the revolutionary country that followed (1971–1989), universities focused on building strong institutions for a ‘country of men [sic] of science’, producing knowledge mainly through disciplinary silos, as a mechanism to establish solid foundations for scientific institutions. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, Cuba entered a deep crisis that has been called the ‘special period’ and ‘the reform’ (1990–2010), in which universities were at the service of new and urgent challenges, with initiatives that sought to create nodes of university–society integration at small scales, such as a mechanism to contribute to newly created, decentralised and participatory structures (Morris, 2014). And finally, during the last decade, the island has witnessed a process of deep political and economic adjustment, opening a new cycle (2011–2021) in which universities have played a role promoting new epistemic paradigms, seeking to co-produce and articulate diverse knowledges as mechanisms to respond to changing problems, diverse territories and more flexible governance.1

In broad terms, the transformations during the last decade were marked by the establishment of a new economic and political roadmap in Cuba in 2011, which set the conditions for the design, consultation and approval of the new constitution in 2019 and the process of monetary exchange reorganisation in 2021. This process of opening up, together with the changes in the international policy of the US under the Barack Obama and Trump administrations, had a direct impact on urban transformations in Havana, with implications on the housing market, the increase of self-employed enterprises and tourism, and the intensification and deepening of certain urban processes through new businesses and home renovations as well as the change of character in certain areas due to new capital flows.

For universities working on urban issues, these processes have brought up important epistemic questions regarding the kind of knowledge that is needed in this changing environment, challenging the ways knowledge is produced and valued by research institutions. This coincides with the contemporary expansion of broader debates about knowledge decoloniality (Escobar, 2020), epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014) and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007), as well as the growing body of academic work emphasising the need for feminist or southern perspectives in knowledge production. These processes have demanded more flexible ways of understanding the role of universities as brokers or facilitators between different knowledges and stakeholders with different power. In Cuba, this change of paradigm has been slowly taken forward by initiatives that have sought to create links between the students’ work, research projects and university outreach activities that focus on co-production, participation and collaboration. This has been carried forward in areas as diverse as local governments, participatory urban planning and urban mobility (Morris et al., 2019), even though these efforts remain fragmented in nature (Ortiz et al., 2021).

These new ways of engagement and knowledge production come with important implications for the work of Cuban universities, which have only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges relate to historical gaps in the relation between the knowledge produced by universities and public institutions (Díaz-Canel, 2021), as well as the existing (and lack of) institutional capabilities in the public system after decades of several internal and external crises (Peña Díaz, 2020). In addition, this
approach demands that universities find ways to challenge epistemic paradigms that dismiss forms of knowledge that are produced and mobilised outside formal institutions, engaging with everyday practices and forms of learning and knowing that are often invisibilised by research institutions. Such a task implies embracing a lens of epistemic justice, engaging with often overlooked questions of diversity including gender and race in the island (Zurbano Torres, 2015), as well as the long history of colonisation and mestizo culture (Fernández Retamar, 1971/2003). Overall, this paradigm demands that universities radically embrace the democratising potential they have in Cuban society, in terms of not only opening access to higher education (as they did at the beginning of the revolution) but also democratising the voices and processes behind the production of knowledge.

This complex scenario certainly raises difficult questions for universities in the context of an exacerbated crisis triggered by COVID-19. As we will discuss, the ethical dimensions of these questions are particularly important for urban research and can shed light on wider issues about knowledge production and research ethics when dealing with complex urban problematics that require the articulation of diverse forms of knowledge.

‘Hotspots’: Framing Ethical Concerns as a Situated and Relational Challenge

Any form of research implies engaging with what has been usually termed ‘research ethics’. In particular, co-producing knowledge for urban equality intersects with ethical issues that require collective reflection about their contextual, political and relational aspects. Since processes of knowledge co-production entail the exchange and integration of concepts, methodologies and epistemologies (Klaver et al., 2014), it is crucial to understand the socially situated perspectives of various groups and to consider their different epistemic conceptions (Fricker, 2007). The centrality of Cuban universities as facilitators between different public actors and their knowledges calls for reflecting on both their institutional conduct and the ways in which individual sensitivities are developed for co-producing practices of ethics through difference.

Co-production methodologies allow for reflecting about issues that come up while navigating ‘the complex union between methodology and ethical practices’ (Palaiologou, 2014, p. 691). Participatory and co-production research methods involve relational processes that require attention and care, as they unfold through multiple intersubjective negotiations. The co-creation of mechanisms to address ethical issues is central for achieving the aims of participatory methodologies to reflect diverse and interesting positions, and the use of knowledge towards achieving greater epistemic justice. In this context, recognising what has been called an ‘ethically important moment’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), or ‘hotspot’, marks the first step in the process of developing an ethical practice (Rendell, 2020). Issues such as conflicts of interests among research participants, managing expectations, and power relations within communities and within research teams, as well as managing the emotional impact on participants and researchers, can be navigated through reflection about ethical values in order to make decisions about ethical courses of action. We explore the meaning of such ethical values, or ‘touchstones’ (Rendell, 2020), in their context, questioning their universality and relevance in guiding co-produced research within a multinational project.

Hotspots are difficult to anticipate. Most of the time they appear through practice, as they are the result of the interaction with other actors. Recognising them and being aware of their possible appearance helps, but this does not avoid surprise. They are recognised in the contrast between our own
behaviour—led by our own values—and the behaviours and values of others. This is particularly relevant in collaborative research, and consequently is even more likely if there are aspirations to embrace co-production and trans-disciplinary approaches to research and action processes.

It is important to acknowledge that the ethics code of CUJAE, the host institution of the experience we will discuss, is a general framework based on principles of integrity and fairness, but it does not provide specific ethical research guidelines. This approach recognises, first, a specific set of values, namely, dignity, exemplary behaviour, honesty, solidarity, responsibility, humanism, commitment, trustworthiness, justice and patriotism. Second, it recognises a relational approach that frames the interaction with the professional praxis, including its relationship with other professionals, with society and with the environment. Thus, ethics is embedded into a much wider framework that should guide the behaviour of the academics in every aspect of their work and, by extension, in research-related activities (CUJAE, 2000). Additionally, this is supported by a set of national laws that define the role of universities within society. Every research project proposal is therefore reviewed for approval by a set of bodies that are entitled to address any specific concern, including ethical ones. This framework, based on an overall set of principles, allows for flexibility and discussion during the revision process, where potential conflicts can be addressed.

In what follows, we provide a short description of the KNOW-Havana research project, followed by a discussion of the main aspects in which its co-production and equality ambitions have been affected in the context of COVID-19, while reflecting on the ethical hotspots and concerns that have been created or exacerbated. We have grouped them around three themes: redefining proximity, politics of time and the duties of care.

**Brief Background of KNOW-Havana Project**

KNOW-Havana is a four-year interdisciplinary action-research project led by CUJAE as part of the international research programme KNOW. Its team aims to examine the implications of a ‘prosperity with equality’ approach and participatory planning in the context of Havana across seven topics that act as entry points for both the exploration of existing inequalities and for building opportunities for improving the quality of life: energy security, urban food security, access to adequate housing and public space, reliability of public services, sustainable urban mobility and accessibility, economic well-being and an inclusive, healthy and productive environment. These topics are investigated and prioritised in four focus sites within Havana: Centro Habana, Bahía de La Habana, Plaza de la Revolución and Alamar. In the complex urban moment described earlier, KNOW-Havana seeks to contribute to urban equality struggles, co-producing research-based outputs with a range of key actors and specific partnerships. The team has assessed these different topics by identifying the manifestation of existing inequalities, finding resources to tackle them and conceiving transformative strategies.

This framing has been mobilised through a series of activities: particularly during the first year, the main focus of the project was on building the right institutional partnerships (across academics, public institutions and communities) to advance the different themes. Since one aim of the project was to translate the co-produced knowledge into recommendations for current urban management and policy tools (e.g., Cuban National Urban Agenda, municipal development strategies or the sustainable urban mobility plan), the work focused, first, on identifying the strategic partnerships needed and, second, on assessing the position of these topics within existing frameworks, in order to evaluate their capacity to promote prosperity with equality. Building upon these partnerships, the project was set to combine a
series of collaborative research activities, including workshops with diverse actors and communities of each of the sites, focus groups and interviews with key informants, site visits, student-led work, thesis projects about specific themes, the co-production of urban instruments and the setting of a National University Urban Forum.

There is a lot of knowledge on inequality and equality in the Cuban urban realm, which has been produced by universities and research institutions in the past. However, this knowledge has not always translated properly into other organisations and their institutional procedures, policies, structures, aspirations and methodologies (Levy, 1998). This implies that when KNOW-Havana plays the role of a ‘broker’ and creates alliances, an important part of that work is about using and mobilising already existing knowledge that has not been visible in certain organisations and practices. In a way, KNOW-Havana sets itself as a constellation of actors, teams and activities contributing to the understanding of prosperity with equality in collaborative ways, with the co-production of knowledge and the recognition of multiple voices as central pillars. Additionally, from July 2020 to March 2022 in Centro Habana, the project assumed a more active role, leading the process of drafting the Municipal Development Strategy, where all the accumulated knowledge converged.

*Research Hotspots in Havana During COVID-19: Tensions to Advance Co-production and Urban Equality*

**Hotspot 1: Redefining Proximity**

The first ethical challenge relates to the core of KNOW-Havana research proposal: as a key element for facilitating co-production processes, the project defined the space of the workshop as the main interface for amplifying pluralities and identifying unheard voices. COVID-19 has altered our priorities and behaviour. Probably the most evident of those changes relates to the impossibility of physical proximity as we knew it, forcing teams to adapt research activities according to the restriction of movement and gathering. As discussed, in the context of Havana, the effects of the pandemic were combined with other crises, which heavily impacted people’s daily lives. This crisis made engaging different actors in the research process difficult to negotiate, not only because of the limitations of being and ‘doing together’ (Osuteye & Levy, 2020, pp. 6–11) but also because of the new demands and limited capacity of engagement of different partners.

The poor IT infrastructure and interconnectivity in the island translated, in most cases, to the impossibility of using technology to allow for ‘remote proximity’. With limited physical and digital connection, most plans of using the space of the workshop as the main co-production event got frustrated. This created ethical concerns for the researchers, risking the aspirations of plurality and recognition that were at the base of the co-production and equality project, and forcing the reshaping, postponing and shrinking of activities. Recognising unheard voices and amplifying the interactions between a diversity of actors were the core goals of the planned workshops, which could not be met as they were initially conceived. Consequently, the team had to work with information that was understood as incomplete, forcing a series of strategies in order to cope with these limitations.

The impossibility of proximity had therefore raised some core ethical questions: How would they cope with the elimination of a space like the workshop, which wasn’t only a means to raise evidence, but an end in itself as a space of recognition, co-production and exchange? Would it be possible to deal with questions of urban equality, including those of epistemic justice, with limited access to the voices of those experiencing inequalities in the city? What is missed; what are the blind spots and silences? And,
most specifically about the role of the university—how could the university advance into a more diverse understanding of the sources of knowledge, and the multiple ways of knowing, doing and learning, in a context of limited proximity?

Hotspot 2: The Politics of Time

Creating partnerships for the co-production of knowledge was defined as a key element of the work on urban equality. This implies creating, expanding or consolidating broad alliances in which actors with different sets of values can work together through solidarity ties. An important task during the first year of the project was precisely to identify those actors and start a process of collaboration, looking for a shared set of values and aligning those that might differ. From a social justice perspective, Iris Marion Young has defined solidarity as ‘a relationship among separate and dissimilar actors who decide to stand together, for one another’ (Young, 2011, p. 120); the delicate process of collectively arriving at that decision, building trust that allows navigating tensions and negotiating dissimilarities takes time and requires constant iteration and reaffirmation. Hotspots can appear when different assumptions, aspirations and expectations clash. In pre-pandemic conditions, the successive direct interaction in events and workshops served as mediators, as moments for clarification and as means to bring differences into one or several properly defined lines. COVID-19 interrupted and diminished the level of direct exchange within nascent partnerships. Some of these differences could not be realigned.

Additionally, the current crisis forced the team more than ever to be aware of differences with local partners in terms of time and engagement, regarding the different realities we are experiencing at the personal (e.g., caring responsibilities), institutional (e.g., financial capacity to cope with crisis and to complete activities) and community levels (e.g., differences on local impact of COVID-19). Navigating these differences requires trust bonds, flexibility and communication, which require investment of time.

As a consequence, the changes brought about by COVID-19 pushed for difficult decisions about prioritising cases or areas of the city where a certain level of interaction could be met in spite of the limitations on gatherings, partly because of the strength of existing partnerships. The team experienced ethical challenges about making those decisions and about managing differences regarding the roles of different parties within a partnership. These translated into difficulties to navigate dissensus without weakening the foundations of the partnership, which was actually expected to be strengthened along the course of the work.

The changing nature of the politics of time under COVID-19, particularly regarding the construction of new partnerships, has also created some core ethical questions: How to navigate the different priorities and ‘ways of doing’ of partners in nascent relationships that have not had the time to grow together? Is it possible to find substitutes for the ‘time together’ and the informal exchanges in the consolidation of solidarity and trust bonds? And recognising the important position Cuban universities have in linking with public actors to strengthen institutional capabilities, what are the conditions that allow universities to fulfil this role and to consolidate sustained and trustful partnerships, and how can those conditions be crafted when the politics of time are intersected with a severe crisis?

Hotspot 3: The Duty of Care

Since the introduction of universal access to higher education after the 1959 revolution, universities have played a key role in Cuba as a space of opportunities for all. This means that they not only provide an educational space for young people but also fulfil duties of care for the students, staff and their communities. COVID-19 has increased these demands in every dimension and has also put research teams in the difficult position of balancing institutional and individual needs.
For a research project that focuses on issues of urban equality, this balancing exercise is even more important, as the pandemic has exacerbated some of the inequalities and trends the project is trying to address, while also hindering the team members’ and partners’ capacity to engage. Considering the individual and collective constraints in place, continuing with ‘business as usual’ has been virtually impossible. This has forced the team to be more flexible to the new demands emerging from the work as well as their duties of care. This flexibility involves adapting expectations while keeping a constant assessment of emerging needs. It also implies recognising the limited capacity of core members of the team and trusting and relying more of the work on the youngsters, students and other volunteers. This is a reflection of the Cuban universities’ duties of care towards wider social processes and the communities to which its students and academics belong.

Understanding the historical social role of Cuban universities and the exacerbated demands for care in the context of COVID-19 presents some key ethical questions: How do we make the multiple and urgent duties of care compatible with pre-existing research commitments? What are the criteria used to prioritise activities to support certain communities over others? Is it possible to leverage this context of crisis into developing new capabilities, especially for younger members of the research team, while also ensuring their well-being? How do we re-calibrate the role of the university in building a more equal city within these exacerbated demands?

Discussion: On Touchstones and Compromises

Recognising ethical hotspots that were caused or amplified by COVID-19, as well as the questions they brought up, has demanded rethinking routine practices of research ethics. In the process of reflection, broader ethical principles or touchstones offer ways to think about addressing these hotspots and facilitate making ethical decisions about how to act. In this section, alongside these touchstones, we provide short vignettes or examples of how they have been mobilised in the context of KNOW-Havana. Although incomplete and imperfect, these illustrations hint at the messy, iterative and reflective nature of the processes of adapting and compromising research methodologies guided by situated ethical principles.

In Havana, the loss of ‘spaces of proximity’ imposed by the pandemic meant that planned encounters and discussions with community members and other stakeholders had to be cancelled or redesigned. This hotspot required the team to reconsider methodologies and rethink the meaning of the ethical principles that had previously seemed to be part and parcel of the workshop methodology. Among these were weighing the benefits of this research method in view of the new health risks posed for all stakeholders, questioning whether alternatives exist when relationality is prevented by the lack of proximity, and reconsidering how to sustain the notions of responsibility and commitment to the research objectives and goals without physical spaces of interaction.

To mobilise these principles with a lack of proximity, the team adapted the original workshop methodologies by multiplying the number of smaller events, using selected informants and conducting individual interviews. For example, the original research design in Los Sitios included a series of open co-production workshops with multiple stakeholders for the development of a local neighbourhood planning instrument (called DesTraBa). Although in the first instance the workshops were postponed, as COVID-19 restrictions continued, a decision was made to adapt the workshops to the existing conditions. This was a crucial compromise to protect participants based on the principle of benefit and risk. But this compromise also meant that the richness of the encounters and collective discussions that were planned could not be fully experienced and required active effort to include actors that are usually excluded.
In the case of Los Sitios, for instance, activities with community representatives focused on identifying available tools for residents and their representatives to advance ‘prosperity with equality’. Although smaller in their scope compared to the original research design, they have been inserted into the wider process of the Strategic Development Plan in Centro Habana, to mobilise the principles of relationality and commitment to communities’ aspirations and needs. On the other hand, having kept a certain level of contact and activity, despite the pandemic-related restrictions, made it easier to resume activities once gathering was possible because it had maintained a certain level of relative proximity.

The change in the ‘politics of time’ that interrupted processes of partnership-building has put at stake the mutual development of trust and respect among the research teams in nascent collaborations. The team had initially attempted to use the space and time of workshops to negotiate and rework differences about modes of knowledge co-production, the recognition and appreciation of existing and non-expert knowledge, and the attribution of authorship. In nascent collaborations, sets of values that were originally contested remained as existing tensions when lacking time for discussing, negotiating and building trust around them. Generally, this hotspot was addressed by thinking through the notion of reciprocity within research relationships. Developing meaningful reciprocal relations entails the understanding and reconfiguring of intersubjective relations, through open negotiations to acknowledge limitations, make shared informed decisions and develop realistic expectations (Neufeld et al., 2019). In the Havana project, managing the politics of time was envisaged as a process in which new knowledges build on existing ones in the situated conditions of specific communities, providing opportunities for all partners to develop institutional as well as personal capabilities through deliberation and collaboration.

In the case of KNOW-Havana, these tensions were more evident in some neighbourhoods than in others, particularly in those with nascent collaborations. These related, for example, to different expectations of what the ‘traditional’ role of researchers is within a community, what it means to recognise voices that are usually not part of the technical work, and how to negotiate diverse leadership and knowledge authorities within the joint work. Without the time to build common understanding around these critical aspects, the work in some neighbourhoods was restricted and the team decided to narrow the focus within them. In others, such as Centro Habana, it was possible to embrace the principle of reciprocity more actively by expanding networks to local authorities, residents and academic institutions that had collaborated and built meaningful bonds and trust in the past through smaller-scale initiatives. Additionally, narrowing the spatial focus to Centro Habana allowed maximising the efficiency of resources, increasing interactions and overcoming the severe interruptions.

Finally, ‘duties of care’ have led to increased flexibility for the university, while expanding its responsibility for knowledge transfer among different stakeholders and prioritising capacity building. Addressing this hotspot meant increasing personal and institutional adaptabilities, resonating with Joan Tronto’s point regarding caring institutions, that ‘any agency or institution that presumes that needs are fixed is likely to be mistaken and to inflict harm in trying to meet such needs’ (Tronto, 2010, p. 164). The principle of care ethics has provided a framework for addressing the various care demands inflicted by the pandemic, because of its focus on ‘attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations’ (Held, 2006, p. 16). This approach has enabled the KNOW-Havana team to prioritise responses to the emergency by acknowledging that demands on the staff’s and students’ time and capacities were needed in all fields, including, for example, voluntary work outside the university. Furthermore, within the university, young academic team members took the lead in searching for innovative ways to navigate the challenges of social distancing. They were committed to finding ways to decentralise the usual study sessions by reaching out to students and...
meeting them separately in their own neighbourhoods—a strategy that has enriched the study process and enabled its continuation.

Examples of flexibility, adaptability and care ethics have cut across everyday decisions taking place across the project, but became particularly evident in the more acute moments of crisis. For Cuba, COVID-19 has expanded the difficulties of accumulated crises. A clear sign of this was the social unrest that took place in Havana after 11 July 2021, as a reaction to a series of external and internal factors related to the government response to COVID-19 and the longstanding consequences of the US blockade. For universities, this social crisis brought to the surface new demands and requirements in specific areas that went through particular difficulties, such as Las Canteras, in the west of Havana. For CUJAE and KNOW-Havana, this implied channelling energy and time, to work with, and provide technical assistance to, organised communities. This implied compromising some of the efforts originally put in other areas or themes but was as a necessary decision to embrace the ethics of care as a central aspect of the urban equality agenda.

Conclusion: Ethical Touchstones and Equality Ambitions

If we understand urban equality as a multidimensional experience for urban dwellers—which requires a combination of equitable distribution, reciprocal recognition, parity in political participation, and solidarity and care (Levy, 2020; Yap et al., 2021)—in which epistemic justice is a core principle, then advancing these touchstones is not just a matter of research procedures—they constitute a material aspect of how to build pathways to urban equality. Rethinking the notions of benefits, risks, relationality, responsibility, commitment, trust, reciprocity, flexibility and care ethics can provide important insights to navigate the ethical hotspots exacerbated by COVID-19 and to help rethink what the very notion of knowledge co-production for equality means in the context of post-pandemic Havana. In fact, the importance of these principles goes beyond the specificity of the COVID-19 crisis and should be central to rethinking the core role of Cuban universities as social actors. As discussed earlier, the role of Cuban universities has changed over the years, and the current context and challenges call for a university praxis that actively centres ethical principles to advance equality ambitions, recognising the diversity in Cuban society and the changing nature of today’s multiple crises.

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Note

1. A complete revision of this historical trajectory is presented in a manuscript entitled ‘Mobilizing Mestizo knowledges: Cuban universities articulating diverse knowledges in urban processes, 1959–2021’, the Spanish version of which is currently under review for publication.
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