

## Letter to the Editor

### June 27, 2016

We write to share with other members of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) our profound concern about the concerted attempt that was made before and during LASA's 50th anniversary Congress in New York last month to turn a scholarly and celebratory conference into an occasion for political theatrics.

A group of activists called upon LASA to rescind its invitation to former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso to address the association together with former president Ricardo Lagos of Chile. They argued that Cardoso was undermining Brazilian democracy because he has expressed support for the impeachment process now under way in Brazil. When LASA's officers refused to disinvite President Cardoso, the group then fostered demonstrations, circulated petitions, sold T-shirts, and spread various charges—all intended to make President Cardoso unwelcome at LASA and to prevent LASA members from hearing him in a civil and respectful way.

President Cardoso ultimately decided to withdraw from the LASA event rather than have it disrupted by political demonstrations that would have harmed LASA. The day before the LASA program, Harvard University awarded Cardoso an honorary degree, citing his outstanding scholarly and political careers. The organizers of the anti-Cardoso campaign at LASA, however, circulated material alleging that Cardoso is no longer an intellectual and blaming him, among other supposed offenses, for damaging Brazil's economy in the 1990s—charges that all of us regard as mere expression of political opinion.

This is not the right time or place for us to express our respective individual views about Brazil's complicated current situation: about whether the impeachment process constitutes an unconstitutional coup (as the organizers of the protest assert), and exactly what role former President Cardoso played in the Brazilian debate about whether or not the impeachment process should be undertaken. These are legitimate topics for discussion, in Brazil and internationally, but they should not be used to hijack a meeting organized for scholarly exchange.

Whatever our personal views, we all agree that trying to turn the scheduled discussion between former presidents Cardoso and Lagos, both so important in the building of Latin American Studies and of inter-American scholarly exchange, into a venue for political demonstrations, constitute undesirable interference in the proper functions of a professional association that seeks to foster the respectful exchange of ideas, and that has well-established means by which its members can register opinions on political issues within the association's rules and procedures.

What happened at LASA in New York was deeply troubling. It reminded us how easy it can be to discourage genuine critical inquiry and to disrupt open, respectful exchange. And it reminded us that it takes much more effort, time, and persistence to build constructive institutions like LASA than it would take to damage or destroy them.

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