

President's Report

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In a seminar on Central American integration at the University of Texas, held in the second week of November, UT economist James Galbraith opened his presentation with an arresting observation. "This is," he announced, "the beginning of the end of neoliberalism." His analysis had a panoramic scope, from China to Chile, and the specific impetus for his remarks was surely the deep critique of U.S. domestic and foreign policies brought forth by the U.S. midterm elections. Still, his assessment provokes two observations that are especially relevant to the central theme of our upcoming Montréal Congress. First, not only is the prediction itself subject to debate (as any prediction of course would be), but equally important, it dramatizes how important it will be for us to analyze both neoliberalism and the related idea of the "Washington Consensus" through a prior clarification of what we take these terms to mean. Whether we understand neoliberalism as an abstract and limited set of economic policy prescriptions, or a multifaceted and evolving strategy of governance, or something different from either of these two, will have everything to do with whether our analysis bears Galbraith out. The second observation moves beyond this problem of "definitional pluralism," to note the dramatic course of recent events in the region. Since my last report there have been five elections (Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Ecuador), of which four (or all five, depending on what one believes the true outcome of the disputed Mexican elections to be) delivered sharp blows of dissent to policies of the Washington Consensus. Neoliberalism is another matter, of course, and the victors represent a range of positions on its key components. Still, the winds of change are blowing hard, and they can be expected to create an especially vibrant atmosphere for scholarly exchange in Montréal.

It is also striking that over the past few months Mexico, where a candidate most clearly associated with continuity of political-economic conservatism took the helm, is also where some of the most dramatic unrest and social conflict has occurred. A few days before this writing (mid-December 2006) the LASA Executive Council (EC) received a petition signed by some 100 intellectuals, all Latin American, mostly Mexican, and about 30 percent LASA members, who expressed deep concern about the crisis in Oaxaca, and petitioned LASA to take action. The causes for concern are well known and need not be repeated here, except to note that the letter, after citing general human rights violations, goes on to specify acts of repression against academic, intellectual and artistic communities. The signatories call for a "...delegación compuesta por distinguidos miembros de LASA—de alto renombre y neutralidad..." that could visit Oaxaca, gather information, and prepare a report that could contribute to the "...conocimiento y comprensión de los acontecimientos recientes... [lo cual] podría ser un importante elemento para detener la represión y apoyar el reestablecimiento de las libertades que normalmente se gozan...."

The petition is now under consideration of the LASA EC, and a decision on the matter will be taken long before this issue of the *Forum* is printed and mailed. I bring the matter to the attention of LASA members because it raises such crucial questions for our Association. LASA has a long tradition of organizing fact-finding and research missions, especially, but not exclusively, in the context of the Central American crisis. Since 1980 (to choose an arbitrary date), LASA has sponsored eight special delegations or missions on a range of topics, from elections to peace processes to scholars under threat. In addition, again especially but not exclusively in reference to Central



America and Cuba, LASA has been asked to pronounce on a series of issues regarding U.S. policy, human rights violations, and other situations of repression or injustice. How are we to respond appropriately, responsibly and effectively to this large (and potentially overwhelming) flow of petitions?

While there are no easy answers, and quite probably no single position with which all members will be satisfied, I am glad to report that we are engaged in a process that aims to confront the matter head on. In the June 2005 EC meeting, at then-president Sonia Alvarez's initiative, we began to rethink the Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom, which had been paralyzed by ambiguities in its mandate and procedures. We are now working on a proposal to revitalize the Task Force, to place it under the direction of the sitting Vice President, and to give it sharply defined guidelines. This proposal will be presented to the EC for discussion and approval in our January 2007 midterm meeting. While I cannot predict the results of these deliberations, I hope and expect that we will forge a position that lies somewhere in the middle ground between two poles in the debate: 1) that LASA should take an overtly politicized stand, potentially responding to any injustice or human rights violation in Latin America brought to its attention; 2) that LASA's mission dictates strict neutrality at all times, such that it is never appropriate to take action that influences the broader conditions under which scholarship, creative and intellectual work on Latin America takes place. Although the Oaxaca petition is quite separate from this broader question of the reconstituted Task Force, I am confident that

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working through a specific case and the broader principles in the same meeting will help us reach clarity on both.

LASA faces another largely unrelated challenge, which also will need to be resolved before this *Forum* goes to print. We have grown beyond the bounds of the three-day Congress format, especially given our long-standing practice of accepting the great majority of session and paper submissions. In many ways this problem is good news, since it speaks to the vibrancy of Latin American area studies, contrary to the opinions of some prominent voices in the U.S. academic and foundation establishments. Yet it also signals the need for hard decisions. Here are the basic facts: the rejection rate for submissions to the Puerto Rico Congress, a four-day event with the largest attendance in LASA history, was 19 percent; we received 30 percent more submissions for Montréal than we did for Puerto Rico. The crunch is somewhat eased by the higher number of venues for simultaneous presentations in Montréal (49 versus 36), but still, a three-day Montréal Congress would require us to reject about 32 percent of paper/session submissions. Each Congress day is already full and 49 simultaneous sessions is almost surely at its conceivable maximum. This leaves us, in effect, to confront the challenge by manipulating one or more of three variables: a) rejection rate; b) minutes assigned to each session; c) number of Congress days. I am deeply opposed to shortening the sessions, which already often leave insufficient time for discussion. I have become convinced that a gradually rising rejection rate can be healthy for LASA, but a spike to 32 percent seems too high, especially in a year when the express rationale for relocation to Montréal was greater inclusiveness. This leaves adding a day to the Congress as the only alternative, one that I and others have been reluctant to endorse.

This discussion is sure *not* to go away with Montréal. Although it is too early to discern a trend, it seems likely that LASA's general move to hold our Congress outside the United States will be a continued impetus for growth, both in Congress attendance and in Association membership. Our multifaceted efforts to make LASA a truly international Association, with progress toward parity in the participation and leadership of U.S.- and Latin America-based members, should also contribute to this trend. Yet this means coming to terms with the "crunch" every 18 months, as we put together the Congress program. Even if the move to four days becomes a permanent feature, the challenge will remain. In the years to come the LASA EC needs to: 1) prepare the membership for an inevitable rise in the rejection rate; 2) create conditions that encourage greater Congress attendance by those who do not give papers; 3) find incentives for membership growth and retention beyond Congress participation. (The new vibrancy of the *Forum* and the continued excellence of *LARR* already have this effect; other special projects and activities could make it stronger.)

Let me close with a brief note on the *Forum*. We are very pleased, with this issue, to inaugurate a "letters from members" section, with a contribution from Professor Peter Ranis. Although we cannot guarantee publication of every letter, we are committed to making this section a dynamic, pluralist outlet for members to express views about matters vital to the Association. So if you have praise but also critiques and constructive suggestions, please make your voices heard! ■