

President's Report

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The LASA Executive Council (EC) recently braved Montréal's sub-zero temperatures to attend our midterm meeting, an intense day and a half long session dedicated to vital Association issues. Reflecting on the past nine months that culminated with this midterm meeting, I am happy to report that the majority of my time and energy as President has been spent on issues of great intellectual-political substance and challenges crucial to Latin Americanist scholars. When, on occasion, I do not highlight these substantive dimensions myself, I have learned to rely upon the present EC—a critical, demanding, energetic and highly talented group—to bring them to the fore. Here is a glimpse of our deliberations, followed by a comment on pluralism and the concerns about “politicization” within our Association.

One topic to which this EC has assigned great importance is our commitment to the “Latin Americanization” of LASA. While our members surely have a range of positions on the meaning of this term, and on the substance of this commitment, my sense is that most would endorse two broad principles (and these two certainly formed part of what I understood as my presidential mandate). We seek to increase the percentage of Latin America-based LASA members as well as an evolutionary change toward an Association that more fully encompasses the study of Latin America *from Latin America*, thereby moving away from an organizational culture and intellectual frame dominated by scholars from the North. To be sure, this stark contrast between Southern and Northern perspectives does not always hold, given the great heterogeneity that both geographic locations encompass. Still, the dual principle is a reasonable point of departure, and indeed, it goes to the heart of why many of us find LASA to be so valuable and vital.

The data show how far we have come from LASA's U.S.-centric beginnings, but also, how far we have to go. Currently, roughly 30 percent of our members live outside the United States, of whom about 20 percent are Latin America-based. We have never had a Latin America-based president. It is one thing to reaffirm the principle, but quite another to achieve full clarity about the end goals and the appropriate means to reach them. What geographic distribution of our membership do we seek? What changes in organizational culture are most important in this gradual transformation toward becoming a truly Americas-wide association with a U.S. home? What kinds of relations with our Latin American sister organizations will best achieve complementarities and mutual support? Our practice of providing travel funds for significant numbers of Latin America-based Congress participants is crucial to the overall objective of Latin Americanization, but how sustainable are our current fund raising strategies as both general Congress attendance, and the Latin American-based proportion of attendees continue to grow? We do not yet have firm answers to these questions, but I can report that the EC has assigned them high priority, and has begun to take action. For example, a subcommittee of the EC will design a brief survey to better understand the current sources of travel funds available to Latin American participants and in May LASA officials will hold meetings with our counterparts in Brazilian social science organizations to discuss these issues in the context of both Montréal 2007 and Rio de Janeiro 2009.

Closely related to the need to increase the funds available for travel grants is the thorny question of corporate sponsorship. Given that attendance at the Montréal 2007 Congress is projected to be greater than that of Puerto Rico, the fund raising challenge will be exacerbated as well. In order to



reach our benchmark of supporting roughly 30 percent of total applications, we will need to raise about \$492,000 (25 percent more than our Puerto Rico goal)—while the amount we currently have in hand is about \$257,000. The EC had a long and spirited discussion about socially responsible investment, in relation to management of LASA reserves and endowment funds, as well as the possibility of pursuing corporate donations. Without any attempt to convey the many complexities, I can report that the EC approved exploratory actions on both fronts: a more assertive move toward socially responsible investment of the Association's assets and a primary attempt to attract donations from socially responsible corporations. Fully aware that this latter step is highly controversial, and fully expecting it to generate intense and constructive debate, I am very excited about the initiative. It is an opportunity for LASA to engage critically with the uneven and contradictory economic conditions in which we are all immersed, while also potentially fashioning creative new ways to meet our Association's pressing financial needs. I am also deeply grateful to life member Michael Conroy, who has volunteered to work with the Fund Raising Committee and the EC to help us navigate this rocky terrain. More details on this initiative will soon be available.

Finally, I would like to report briefly on the EC's deliberations regarding our revitalized commission on academic freedom, as well as the related issue of a petition for LASA to convene a fact-finding mission to investigate the impact of social conflict and government actions on Oaxacan intellectuals, academics,

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and cultural workers. The EC agreed that LASA should establish a protocol for action when our members' (or would-be members') physical integrity or basic intellectual freedoms are seriously and systematically curtailed. Yet closer scrutiny of this seemingly clear-cut principle revealed a welter of difficult questions and grey areas. What investigative capacities can and should such a Committee have? Will the protocol hold up over time in the face of what could be a long and steadily growing roster of cases brought forth? How broadly should the principles "physical integrity" and "intellectual freedom" be interpreted? Who is included in the term "intellectuals"? What measures should be taken to assure that partisan affinities do not influence the application of procedures that should apply across the board? We are still one step away from the provisional resolution of these (and other similar) questions, which in turn will allow the CAF to be inaugurated. I have been very impressed by how hard the EC has worked on this task under vice president Eric Hershberg's leadership and I am confident that the results will meet with the approval of the great majority of LASA members. After the CAF discussion, the EC turned to the Oaxaca delegation petition, and voted unanimously (one abstention) for approval. Efforts are now underway to form a delegation and plan its activities.

In one way or another all three of these issues resonate with larger questions raised by the four excellent comments in the "on the profession" section of this issue. I am grateful to these four political scientists for having taken the time to write their thoughts and especially appreciate the frank criticisms they put forth. I invited these four in hopes of hearing from scholars who are highly respected in the mainstream of their discipline, but without any illusion that they are representative of some larger body. Many other LASA political scientists

(including LASA officers, former officers, and previous contributors to the *Forum*) may not agree with the views espoused, and we have yet to hear from Latin America-based political scientists on the various issues raised. It is also important to note that there is considerable diversity of opinion among these four. In any case, these comments help to begin thinking through a series of concerns regarding LASA that have circulated in less accessible channels for some time.

As a further contribution to this dialogue, I want to reflect briefly on the question of LASA's alleged "politicization." While I agree with Susan Stokes that this term can often be a red herring, it is also clear that it has become a catch-phrase for one significant (albeit a minority) current of discontent within LASA. I also feel a special responsibility to address this issue because in some members' perceptions I may be implicated in the problem. And while there may be some misapprehension involved in these perceptions, they are based at least partly on positions I have defended without ambivalence. Take, for example, the *Otros Saberes* Initiative. In part this initiative is simply about making space for indigenous and Afro-descendant intellectuals who are woefully underrepresented in LASA—hardly a controversial goal. Yet, the initiative attempts to support a different conception of Latin Americanist scholarship: where research agendas are conceived and carried out in a horizontal, collaborative dialogue between academic and civil society-based intellectuals, where the latter are apt to be motivated primarily by socio-political rather than academic-professional objectives. To some, the *Otros Saberes* Initiative may well confirm the alleged politicization of LASA; to others, it is both a healthy move in its own right, and a welcome counterweight to the often unacknowledged politics of research agendas that are defined exclusively

by academics on grounds that are portrayed as strictly objective or professional (and therefore apolitical). This divergence of opinions creates an arena in which a series of important debates regarding intersubjectivity in the humanist and social science research, the sociology of knowledge, and the political economy of research can be staged.

I contend that LASA is enriched by these healthy debates, as long as one key condition can be met. This condition is big tent pluralism, supplemented by a clear distinction between initiatives taken under LASA's name, on the one hand, and attempts to define *the* official LASA position, on the other. The *Otros Saberes* Initiative, for example, employs the rigorous requirement that research agendas be conceived through collaborative means, but without the slightest pretense that such a criterion should somehow become a prescribed norm for LASA members. The same goes, presumably, for initiatives around "nontraditional" knowledge producers or for efforts to connect LASA with various policy, activist, or grassroots communities. This distinction helps us focus the healthy debate on alleged politicization away from the question, "do I like, endorse, or practice this kind of intellectual work?" toward the question "does this kind of intellectual work have a legitimate place under LASA's big tent?" There will be many cases that still call for a "no" in response to the latter question, and much occasion for disagreement on where that line should be drawn, but my strong sense is that refocusing the dialogue in this way will encourage mutual tolerance of difference and draw attention to the high stakes associated with drawing a line that essentially says: "no, your approach to research does not belong." This argument, in turn, has three dimensions that merit further attention.

First, it is hard for the membership not to perceive a given initiative as *the* official LASA policy, when it is taken up by the president, or even by the EC. Yet this is the way our Association works. Officials are elected with the dual mandate to exercise good governance and to devote special energy to one or two projects to which we are deeply committed. As newly elected officials circulate on the EC, a new set of special projects emerge. By taking a long term view, and by trusting our democratic procedures, these presidential initiatives can be seen as further affirmations of organizational pluralism, rather than as successive attempts to redefine *the* character of LASA.

The second issue involves the composition of our membership over time. LASA has changed enormously over the past two decades (the rise of cultural-literary studies and the increasing proportion of Latin America-based members are two notable trends), and with these changes come new distributions of perspectives on basic questions like the alleged “politicization.” As a result it may well be that the position put forth by Ariel Armony once reflected a majority sentiment within the Association, but now represents the views of a minority (the numbers that Raúl Madrid musters and the vote to relocate to Montréal are two data points that support this conjecture). If this is the case, then it becomes imperative that elected officials vigorously defend this minority perspective, making sure its proponents have their rightful space and legitimacy within the Association; at the same time, they must be encouraged to adapt to new conditions of organizational pluralism, without the pretension that a given conception of legitimate professional practice should automatically trump other beliefs.

Finally, these two previous points beg the question of the representative character of LASA’s elected leadership. Having just completed the present cycle of nominations, resulting in a slate to be announced in this *Forum*, I can affirm full confidence in our current procedures. Under the able leadership of Carmen Diana Deere, the nomination committee chose a stellar slate of candidates, with diversity on a range of criteria that closely reflects the composition of our membership. A quick glance at past slates reinforces this assertion: the election of officers every 18 months is a plebiscite of sorts on a range of issues about which LASA members feel most strongly. What remains (and what has *not* always happened to the extent it should) is for our membership to organize, to vote and to register its views through all means available. As long as our internal democratic practices remain sound, and our pluralist principles are rigorously defended, we can look to these debates on issues such as alleged politicization, and to the ongoing dialogue about where to draw the boundaries of the big tent, as vital signs of a healthy, vibrant Association that constructively engages our own diversity. ■