

ON THE PROFESSION

What LASA Can Do For Political Scientists

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When comparing LASA Congresses with other professional meetings of social scientists, particularly of the APSA, I have been saying for a long time that LASA Congresses are both more exciting and more inviting. They are more exciting, because one can find out not only what new topics people are working on—which is also true for APSA meetings—but also what has happened lately in politics and the economy in Latin American countries, and what social scientists familiar with these countries think about the latest developments. It is simply not possible for most of us to stay up with political dynamics in a whole number of Latin American countries on a continuing basis. Newspapers and newsletters only convey so much information, even if we make the assumption that professors have the time to read five newspapers daily. Annual visits to several countries to talk to people put a severe strain on time and financial resources. LASA Congresses offer the opportunity to partially compensate for the lack of first-hand information, by allowing scholars to listen to presentations and to talk with colleagues from South, Central, and North America.

The LASA Congresses are generally also inviting, both from the point of view of the intellectual interchange and from the point of view of socializing. In marked contrast to some other professional meetings, political scientists generally do not come to LASA to score points, i.e. to prove to others and themselves how brilliant they are, but to exchange ideas about topics and real problems they are concerned about. They come to learn and to offer their insights and invite feedback, and the debates center around important problems in politics more so than around problems in political science. The Congresses provide a forum for give and take about real world problems and intellectual approaches to deal with them. From the social and professional point of

view, they offer opportunities to see old friends and acquaintances, and to make new ones. For young scholars, they make it possible to build networks of peers and meet the more established people in their field. For all of us, they enhance our international scholarly networks.

What can LASA do to protect and enhance these functions of the Congresses? Given the centrality of the information function, the roundtable format might be used more frequently. Scholars could be invited to comment on major events, their causes and implications (e.g. elections, large-scale protests) or significant new approaches to old problems (e.g. second round of reform of pension systems, judicial reforms, reopening of human rights cases). These roundtables would not require full-blown papers, so it should not be difficult to get scholars to participate. This might require relaxing the rules concerning limits on participation; i.e. participation in such roundtables should not count towards the limit.

I would like to emphasize that I am suggesting that LASA build on successful examples of such roundtables—I am not suggesting something new, just more of the best from the point of view of political scientists. This might require reallocating some time slots from traditional panels to such roundtables. In a similar vein, I would like to suggest that LASA continue with sessions where major new reports are presented and debated, such as the UNDP Report on *La Democracia en América Latina*, or the IDB Report on *The Politics of Policy*.

Another suggestion for the Congresses would be to broaden the horizon and introduce a cross-regional perspective. There has been much fruitful work done by social scientists comparing development patterns in Latin America with those of East Asia, or

processes of democratization in Latin America with those in Eastern Europe and East Asia. There has also been a vigorous debate about the merits and limitations of such comparisons. Roundtables with leading scholars from different regions addressing common topics would bring new perspectives to the discussion. Organizing such roundtables would require initiatives from the program committee or council to reach out and invite appropriate participants.

In order to further enhance LASA's information and networking functions additional resources would be required. I am fully aware of the longstanding efforts to build up an endowment and to increase the travel fund, and I admire and thank all those involved in this effort. Enabling Latin American colleagues to attend the Congresses is central to the fulfillment of the information and networking functions, and supporting graduate students from North and South to do the same is vital for the future of the Association. Should the stock market hit new heights and the LASA Development Committee strike gold, it would be wonderful to add research support to the core functions of LASA. I am thinking of programs to provide seed funds for collaborative research projects and to support doctoral dissertation research in the region. Both of these programs should work on a competitive basis, which in turn would require the constitution of a selection committee. Such a committee could easily be appointed by the LASA Executive Council, with overlapping terms paralleling those of EC members.

LASA of course does much more than hold the Congresses. It publishes *LARR*, a high quality interdisciplinary journal devoted to research, and the *LASA Forum*. From the point of view of a political scientist, the *LASA Forum* could be made more central to

the information function of the Association. For instance, a part of the *LASA Forum* could be devoted to commentaries or debates on the kinds of topics mentioned above—problems faced by Latin American actors. These commentaries should by no means be confined to political scientists, but, rather, could be interdisciplinary, in the best LASA tradition. Anthropologists and sociologists would have lots to say about large-scale social protests and the reopening of human rights cases, and sociologists and economists could weigh in on the latest round of pension reforms just as well as political scientists. The idea is to have short analytic pieces on the major social, economic, and political developments that affect various Latin American countries in similar or different ways.

LASA has also served as an important advocacy group. The Association has been at its best as an advocate where it has remained inclusive and concentrated on scholarly or professional concerns, and on human rights. LASA has been an important voice on the North American academic scene for the value of area studies, that is, the in-depth study of different countries with their language, history, and culture, in a larger regional and comparative context. From the point of view of political scientists, two pitfalls have to be avoided if LASA is to continue to be taken seriously on this issue. First, area studies should not be contrasted with systematic, theoretically informed, comparative research, but, rather, their symbiotic relationship should be stressed. Case knowledge acquired under the umbrella of area studies is a prerequisite for the advancement of comparative research and social science theory, and only theoretically informed comparative knowledge gives us the tools to understand individual cases in their whole complexity.

The second pitfall that has to be avoided is to equate area studies with cultural studies. There are different approaches to knowledge about countries, their language, history, and culture, and to declare one approach—cultural studies—as superior to all others is to be exclusionary and to disparage the considerable accumulated knowledge of social scientists who use other approaches, such as structural and institutional approaches. To label structural and institutional approaches as alien to or useless for studying Latin American realities at best, and as imperialist perspectives at worst, is to ignore the long and venerable tradition of Latin American social science rooted in historical materialism and finding one of its prominent expressions in the *dependencia* perspective.

Let me end on a brief note that has nothing to do with a political science perspective in particular but will benefit political scientists along with everybody else. Given the importance of the networking and social function of the LASA Congresses, it is crucial to organize these in places where there are opportunities to sit with small groups and talk outside of panels. This always works better when the outside is an option (Puerto Rico was great!) and not as well when the participants are confined to one or two giant hotels in business districts in cool climates, without the outside, coffee shops, or small restaurants to retreat to. I fully realize that there are many variables that have to be taken into account in the choice of a convention site, but I think it helps to reflect on what participants really want to get out of the meetings, and to inspect the sites with an eye on their suitability for these purposes. ■