

El incierto rumbo de LASA

by ARIEL C. ARMONY | Colby College | acarmony@colby.edu

Public Policy track would be a relatively costless way to address these concerns, and might serve as an effective goodwill gesture.

The most difficult issue to address may be the issue of politicization. Whereas some members clearly want LASA to take political stands, others believe that LASA should be strictly a professional organization. Nevertheless, even on this issue a compromise might be found by limiting the organization's stances to those issues that centrally involve academic freedom and/or participation in the association. In order to find such a compromise, however, we need to have dialogue and we need to have better information on the preferences of all of LASA's members.

Endnotes

¹ I chose LAPIS both because I have been a member of the Section off and on for the last half dozen years, and because, to my knowledge, it has largest number of political scientists within LASA. LAPIS had 281 members included on its listserv at the time I carried out the survey.

² It may be that people who were dissatisfied with LASA were more likely to respond to the survey in order to voice their discontent, but it is also possible that people with critical views felt uncomfortable expressing their criticisms even though I promised that I would keep the identity of the respondents confidential.

³ One of the respondents whom I have classified here as very satisfied actually said s/he was between satisfied and very satisfied.

⁴ The author of this article (and administrator of the survey) was Associate Editor of *LARR* from mid-2004 until January 2007. It is not clear how many of the respondents knew this, but it conceivably could have affected their responses to the survey. ■

It is important to place this contribution in its proper context. Along with other political scientists, I received an invitation from LASA President Charles Hale to write a brief piece for the *Forum* on the role of interdisciplinary dialogue and scholarship in Latin American studies and the best ways by which LASA can contribute to maximize this dialogue and the quality of scholarship.

I interpret Hale's invitation as a healthy response to a growing concern among members of LASA about the gradual drift of the Association away from its founding principles and historical roots as a *professional* association to one moving increasingly toward partisanship and methodological narrowness.

Frustration with LASA seems to come primarily from political scientists. However, disenchantment is evident to me in other social science disciplines as well and in sectors of the humanities. While voices of discontent have been louder among a sizable group of members with a background of active involvement in the Association, my sense is that many members perceive some problematic trends in LASA.

Recent developments in LASA are significant because they can, potentially, alter its fundamental character. It is important to stress that these changes have not originated under the current leadership, but began at least four years ago. If the gap between the Association's leadership and part of the membership deepens, I am afraid that we will witness growing disaffection, particularly among members who have devoted significant time to LASA without seeking any personal rewards. Unfortunately, a possible outcome of this process could be a decision by some of the very members who have supported the Association for decades, and nurtured it through thick and thin to withdraw from the Association.

Therefore, I commend Hale for opening this space. These are important issues that should

be amply debated. In this spirit, let me focus on two of the most important concerns raised by some LASA members.

Politicization of the Association

A number of members have expressed their disagreement with LASA's increasing *political* engagement. This concern was primarily triggered by LASA's 2003-06 Strategic Plan, which contained several sections calling for an increased political role of the Association. A point of particular concern was the Plan's proposal "to increase *political* relations with new or emerging social actors" [emphasis added].

Indeed, an important contingent of members, based on the conversations I have had, consider that LASA has been drifting in the direction of political partisanship, a trend that threatens LASA's status as an *academic, professional* association. No one questions the right of the Association to vote and publish resolutions on pressing matters. These formal declarations, which state specific views on public policy matters, are agreed to by a vote at the business meeting. This is the accepted procedure. What some members question is a recent tendency to steer the association closer to a pressure group that advances partisan causes beyond those that deal directly with scholarship, academic freedom, and the right of inquiry.

A group of members, most of them political scientists, articulated these concerns in a letter dated May 27, 2003 to the LASA president at the time. They wrote:

"Each member of LASA has countless opportunities to become engaged politically if he or she chooses. Members can join political parties, pressure groups, and voluntary associations of many kinds to push for the sorts of political changes that they may favor, and they can join other groups to oppose changes

ARMONY continued...

being advocated by others. LASA members can even join or form associations of other scholars who might wish to lobby for a political position. But, LASA itself is a pluralistic association of scholars and students; it is not a pressure group, nor is it a political party."

If we take seriously the institutional roots of our association, it is clear that the purpose of LASA is not to function as a political actor, not even as a think tank (as the Strategic Plan envisioned as part of LASA's transformation). The Constitution and By-Laws of LASA, adopted and approved in 1966, state that

"The purposes of the Association are to provide a professional organization that will foster the concerns of all scholars interested in Latin American studies and will encourage more effective training, teaching, and research in connection with such studies, and will provide both a forum and an instrument for dealing with matters of common interest to the scholarly professions and to individuals concerned with Latin American studies."

The goal of LASA is to serve as a professional vehicle for scholars and non-scholars alike. The decision to improve mechanisms for the participation of social actors outside academia, especially those based in Latin America and representing historically marginalized populations, is very positive. However, such an effort of incorporation should be framed within the *professional* purposes of the association.

While it is vital to innovate, politicization—expressed as direct involvement in promoting partisan causes or particular groups—risks steering LASA away from its roots. In these difficult times, professional associations such as LASA must secure their role as a respected source of intellectual debate and research. Politicization not only weakens the public image of LASA, but it is also potentially self-destructive because it can undermine pluralism within the Association.

Preference for Certain Intellectual and Methodological Positions

The Strategic Plan includes remarks concerning a presumed distance that separates some academic work from historically underrepresented groups. According to this document, the voices of underprivileged groups are not taken seriously by many LASA members, because they are seldom articulated in abstract theoretical language. This assertion has been received with substantial concern by many members. The basis for this concern is a sense that LASA might be questioning the work of political scientists, economists, and other scholars employing positivist methodological approaches, criticizing these approaches for being detached from the subaltern. It is disturbing that the perception exists, and that the number of people holding this view seems to have grown in the last few years.

Some of the recent debates sponsored by the *Forum* suggest a trend toward hegemonic thought. For instance, the emphasis given to some strains of scholarship, such as politically engaged or action-oriented research, seems to confirm a push to give these approaches preeminence over others. Indeed, one cannot help noticing that some of the "debates" in the *Forum* present mostly similar perspectives. While the transformation of the *Forum* into a vehicle for stimulating intellectual interaction between Congresses is to be applauded, these are signs that debate on critical topics, such as research methodology, is becoming one-dimensional. It may well be the case that this is no fault of the editors, and that they have tried to stimulate contributions from all quarters. Rather, it may be that many political scientists have chosen to invest their intellectual energies elsewhere because of their flagging interest in the nature and quality of these debates.

An agenda of "de-centering" Latin American studies should not be pursued at the expense of the exclusion of some methodological and

theoretical approaches. There is excellent scholarship, within and outside Latin American studies, that addresses the problem of de-centering social science research. A number of these studies employ a combination of "conventional" perspectives that bring new insights into our understanding of processes that structure social and political hierarchies. In fact, some of this research has been published by the flagship journal of the American Political Science Association, a publication not known for its predilection for subaltern-oriented scholarship.

LASA's Present and Its Future

Our association is in a strong position to continue growing in size, scope, and influence. Now that the acrimonious debates about the relevance of area studies are over, the field of Latin American studies has reemerged with significant vitality. The auspicious development of research on topics such as subnational politics, citizenship rights, and transnational flows and movements creates great opportunities for our field. It is time to recover the intellectual leadership that Latin American studies enjoyed during the period of democratic transitions. As an association that promotes sound academic scholarship and broad-ranging debates, LASA can play a key role in helping to incubate new theoretical and empirical ideas, relevant for understanding Latin America and beyond.

One of the most significant changes of recent years has been the incorporation to LASA of numerous colleagues residing in Latin America. LASA should engage in a continuous search for innovative ways to make the dialogue between North and South more fluid and horizontal. The "Otros Saberes" initiative is a promising component of this agenda because, among other reasons, it values grassroots knowledge, incorporates "non-scientific" styles of communication, and challenges hierarchical

What Might LASA Do to Best Meet the Needs and Serve the Interests of Those in the Political Sciences?

by SUSAN C. STOKES | Yale University | susan.stokes@yale.edu

ways of validating knowledge. Regrettably, this initiative has raised skepticism among many LASA members, who perceive it as a mechanism to implement a political rather than a scholarly agenda.

One may argue that, today, any critical appraisal that refers to the Strategic Plan is outdated because the plan was presented to the membership for feedback several years ago and a revised mission statement developed by the planning group was approved by the members themselves. This is a valid point. However, decisions ratified by elections cannot lead to the exclusion or marginalization of members, whether they represent a minority or not. In addition, as it happens with any policy, the process of implementation opens new areas for debate and contestation. This is part of the democratic process. The problems that I have outlined in this contribution remind us that participation is crucial.

It is vital to discuss how LASA can continue to serve its academic mission and develop a broad consensual agenda that supports values such as human rights and rational debate. Finding a proper convergence between innovation and preservation of the Association's roots is a significant challenge. It is thus essential that the leadership of LASA reassure its members that this is a professional association, committed to the principles recognized four decades ago. LASA should open more venues to address the disenchantment of many of its members. This dialogue is a welcomed step. One or more panels at the Montreal Congress could offer a venue to continue this dialogue. It is crucial that leaders and membership alike find mechanisms to bridge differences so as to chart a promising future for LASA without alienating or marginalizing anyone. ■

The tensions that have arisen between political scientists and LASA are real, interesting, and (potentially) productive rather than organizationally divisive. LASA should take actions that allow us to productively explore the important questions that the organization faces, and to avoid getting bogged down in unproductive debates. Political scientists in LASA should recognize that this is a multi-disciplinary organization which will, inevitably, have a different character from the disciplinary organizations in which we take part. In these comments I touch on three sources of tension between political scientists and LASA: the "politicization" of the Association; tensions among the academic cultures in which we participate; and differences over modes of political participation of individual scholars.

"Politicization" of LASA

The "politicization" of LASA is a concern of some of my political-science colleagues. Yet, phrased in this way, I believe this is a red herring. Most of us would reject the idea that LASA should never involve itself in political issues. Since its founding in 1966, the Association has dealt with crucial questions of politics and U.S. policy which have had a direct impact on our members or about which many members felt deeply. Consider the situation—not so unreal—in which members of the Association were jailed or tortured because of their research. Surely LASA would have to speak out, as it has in the past. So the question for most is not *whether* the Association should adopt political stances, but which ones? And do our internal rules and procedures produce sufficiently democratic and participative responses to this question?

My sense is that the problem here is not one of insufficient internal democracy, but of

insufficient participation—a common problem in membership organizations. A subset of members that is highly motivated to shift the organization in some direction can do so; and even individual members have full freedom to get involved in organizational decision-making. The problem, instead, is that many of us care about LASA but don't have the time or incentives to make its governance or decisions a high priority. But it doesn't take much time or initiative to become offended by a decision which appears, to the relatively uninvolved (fairly or not), to have been taken by a small cabal. The point is not to scold most of us who are not deeply involved, but to challenge LASA to find easier ways for us to participate. The recent shift to email votes on resolutions is a big step in the right direction.

Tensions among Academic Cultures

Some of the tensions between political scientists and LASA reflect academic-cultural and linguistic divisions. (These divisions are frequently referred to as "methodological," but are in fact broader than that term suggests.) Many (though obviously not all) political scientists who are members of LASA belong to academic communities in which it is assumed that there is a reality "out there" in which the objects of study reside; that good research means explaining things causally; and that there is—indeed should be—a certain separation of researcher from object of research. In a more narrowly methodological sense, many also believe that quantitative measures and formal models are useful tools in the process of explanation. These stances would also be held by the typical economist and by not a few sociologists. They are not undisputed in political science today. Indeed, there have been interesting and productive criticisms of them, whether in the form of the perestroika