

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

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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One may argue that, today, any critical appraisal that refers to the Strategic Plan is outdated because the plan was presented to the membership for feedback several years ago and a revised mission statement developed by the planning group was approved by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

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movement in the American Political Science Association or the reconsideration of the value of qualitative research.¹

My impression from reading through the *LASA Forum* over the past few years is that those who control its editorial content are fairly oblivious to the academic culture of mainstream social science that I've just sketched. Arturo Escobar's account of the history of scholarly paradigms informing (and challenging) Latin American studies goes from liberalism and Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s to "hyphenations of these two paradigms" in the 1970s and 1980s. "In the 1980s and 1990s, a third paradigm—post-structuralism, as a language and meaning-based social theory" arose. "Today, combinations of these three paradigms are practiced by many scholars...with one paradigm usually predominating in a given discipline or in the work of particular authors."²

Mainstream political science is written out of this condensed history. Missing is another major force that challenged Latin American studies, and area studies more broadly, in the 1990s: the challenge of rational choice theory and of the new institutionalism. These scholarly developments pushed us to discover general causal relations that operated across all regional settings. To offer just one example: if presidentialism increased the probability of military intervention, the challenge went, one should therefore study presidentialism (and its alternatives), as well as coups everywhere in the world. Not all Latin Americanist political scientists accepted the precepts of this challenge; others might agree in theory but find the trade-offs, in a loss of understanding of processes and historical context, too costly. But the point is that these scholarly developments influenced many of us, buffeted all of us, and questioned the paradigm of Latin American

studies. We look in vain to recent LASA communications for a reflection of, and reflections on, this experience.

Language is a part of culture, and LASA members are separated by linguistic divides as well. Ironically for an association that is multi-lingual—note that there will be *four* official conference languages in Montreal—even those of us who share the same native languages use terms that others of us do not understand. The problem of technical and jargon-ridden prose in academic writing is well known and perhaps irresolvable; the problem that LASA needs to work hard to mitigate is that our jargon-laden prose sometimes infects our organizational communications. The Call for Papers for the 2007 Congress left many of us scratching our heads. The word "de-centering," which appears scattered throughout LASA documents in recent years, means little to most political scientists, especially those outside of political theory (this includes most of us who are also LASA members). "Re-visioning" is not in the dictionary—does it mean reviewing, re-envisioning, revising? I know what a border is, and I know what an order is, but what is a (b)order?³ Perhaps even many colleagues for whom these terms are more familiar would disagree with one another about what was being said. The examples are in themselves harmless, but when many people read prose that appears eccentric and inscrutable, a feeling of alienation creeps in.

(Of course, political scientists also often write in ways that are inscrutable to members of other tribes; I hope to avoid the "everyone-has-an-accent-except-me" fallacy.)

It would be unfair to assume that LASA has been univocal in its methodological stances. William Leogrande, in his 2006 Martin Diskin Memorial Lecture, encourages us, perhaps in our scholarship but especially in

the roles of public intellectuals that some of us may wish to take on, to "speak truth to power." In so doing, he echoes the view, accepted by many mainstream political scientists, that there is a "there out there," and argues for the political importance of this stance:

No knowledge is absolute, of course, and knowledge of complex social phenomena is always partial and mediated by point of view. But neither is knowledge entirely relative, as some recently popular epistemologies in the social sciences would have us believe. Truth is not just a point of view.⁴

Communicating Across Disciplines

LASA is by definition a multi-disciplinary association. The great benefit of LASA Congresses is that they allow people who are asking similar questions but from different disciplinary perspectives to learn from one another. Political scientists, for instance, are trying to understand why the left has risen to power in many Latin American countries and what the implications are of this rise. We will benefit greatly from the perspectives that anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and literary scholars bring to these questions.

For such cross-fertilization to occur, of course, we need to be able to understand each other; this goes back to the last complaint. We should all strive to make LASA Congresses jargon-free zones. Not only do we often not understand the work of our colleagues from other disciplines, our attitudes toward it tend to vary between condescension and disdain. These opinions are almost invariably the product of ignorance, seasoned with a bit of defensiveness. I have two degrees in anthropology, but, if pressed to produce an

opinion of current anthropological research, I might fall back on outdated and inaccurate stereotypes about anthropologists and their methods. Others' views of political science are similarly ill-informed. The ambitious among us might try to immerse ourselves in the methods and findings of non-proximate disciplines, but for the rest, some humility and tolerance would help a multi-disciplinary organization withstand the stresses of increased specialization.

Cross-disciplinary ignorance becomes an organizational problem when those responsible for Congress programs, who may be well intentioned but not well versed on recent developments in other disciplines, reconfigure panels and tracks to the point that whole sets of members fail to recognize a niche for their work in the program. I doubt that my political-science colleagues want a mini-APSA conference lodged within the LASA Congress; to limit ourselves to such an event would be to miss some real opportunities for cross-fertilization. The answer, I believe, is to include on program committees people who will pull toward more traditional disciplinary categories along with others who will pull toward more novel configurations.

The Activist Researcher and the Public Intellectual

A complaint voiced by some political scientists (and perhaps not exclusively by them) is that they feel that LASA is hectoring the membership to make politics part of our practice of doing research. This is another aspect of the "politicization" that many have complained about. Some political-science colleagues believe that the official LASA view is that their research is top-down and elitist, biased, and impervious to subaltern voices or perspectives. I don't believe that any method popular in today's humanities or

social sciences holds inherent political implications—is empowering or disempowering—in and of itself.

It seems obvious that our membership will fall across a broad range, from the apolitical to the intensely political. Many LASA members feel no tug toward politics. Among those of us who do, the tug often pulls us in opposite directions. Some are committed to introducing political considerations and efforts for social change into all aspects of research. But a third option, one that may be preferable to many political scientists, is to maintain a certain analytical distance from our subjects of study, without giving up entirely on political involvement. That is, to become public intellectuals on a parallel track to our roles as scholars. *Public intellectual* is perhaps too grandiose; again I recommend William LeoGrande's Diskin lecture, which lays out simple and helpful steps toward making a difference (developing relationships with organizations that lobby the U.S. government on relevant policy areas, writing letters to the editor, and the like).

Certainly LASA is an organization large enough for all types: the apolitical, the activist, the public intellectual. Charlie Hale's recent reiteration of a big-tent philosophy for LASA, for instance, and his respectfulness toward the minority that opposed moving the 2007 Congress to Montreal, are welcome signs.⁵

Endnotes

¹ See, for instance, Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

² *LASA Forum* 37(2), Spring 2006, p. 12.

³ The term *(b)order* appears twice in *LASA Forum* 37(2):1.

⁴ *LASA Forum* 37(3):7.

⁵ *LASA Forum* 37(3), Summer 2006, p.1. ■