

# President's Report

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As the 18 months of my presidency come to a close, I am pleased to report on some key initiatives that have come to fruition in this period. It is fitting that I post this column from Central America, where some 20 years ago I developed a basic orientation toward Latin American scholarship that later I would bring to the LASA presidency. This orientation embodies a preference for research problems that the subjects of our investigations view as important, for methods that emphasize collaboration and horizontal relations, and for scholarly rigor combined with an explicit commitment to social justice. Work in the LASA leadership as well as in conversations with colleagues in many Latin American countries—most recently Brazil and Cuba—has affirmed not only how widely shared these elements are, but also how differently they are interpreted and practiced. One of the biggest challenges of the LASA president, in my view, is to know how to take firm action consistent with one's principles and stated commitments, while at the same time respecting the broad pluralism of positions within our Association on a given substantive issue. Neither the firm action nor the pluralism can be sold short, and judgments eventually will be made about our success in combining the two.

Another equally great challenge is to guarantee the highest possible level of membership satisfaction regarding the organization and quality of the Congress. By the time this *Forum* reaches your hands, LASA2007 will be just weeks away, and I want to share with you my excitement for what we have in store. First, however, a note on Congress organization: our Association is blessed with a Secretariat that provides, each 18 months, an incredibly efficient, procedurally transparent, and yet remarkably adaptable system for making the Congress a logistical success. I have discussed many aspects of this system with

Milagros Pereyra-Rojas, our Executive Director, who along with her staff deserve the lion's share of the credit for producing LASA2007.

I am quite sure that the intellectual content of the Congress will meet and surpass expectations, thanks to the energy and commitment of the LASA members who have organized more than 1,000 panels, workshops, and special events. Here I will mention just a few components of LASA2007 that particularly stand out. I am extremely pleased to introduce an innovation in this year's program: a four-part series called "*Diálogos Políticos*" which features intellectuals who currently are political actors and will discuss their work in connection with the Congress theme, "After the Washington Consensus." The roster includes three prominent Latin Americans: Álvaro García Linera, Vice-President of Bolivia; Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada, President of the Cuban National Assembly; and Matilde Ribeiro, Minister of Racial Equality in Brazil. The fourth participant in the series is Canadian global justice activist and writer Naomi Klein, whose new book, *Disaster Capitalism*, will be released the week of the LASA Congress.

The Congress also features an exciting series of plenary sessions, listed in full at the front of the program. Here I will mention four. Aída Hernández Castillo (CIESAS, Mexico) has organized a featured plenary session titled, "De la Investigación-Acción Colaborativa a las Metodologías Dialógicas," on feminist collaborative research methods in Latin America; and Arturo Escobar and Marisol de la Cadena's session on "Co-laborando conocimientos y políticas alternativos" promises a spirited dialogue among intellectuals working at the crossroads of scholarship and social movement activism. Two invited plenary sessions that are sure to attract major



attention are: "Empire in Question: The Case of Venezuela" organized by Greg Grandin, who made a special effort to capture a wide range of views on the Chávez government and U.S.-Venezuela relations; and "The Struggle for Immigrant Rights: Activist Voices Form the Front Line" on immigration politics in the United States, organized by William Robinson and featuring three major actors in the immigration rights mobilizations of 2005 and 2006, with comments by two leading immigration scholars.

I am also thrilled to highlight plans associated with regular features of the Congress. It is a special honor for me to congratulate Helen Safa, recipient of the LASA2007 Kalman Silvert Award. Professor Safa has been a central figure in numerous LASA initiatives over her long and industrious career, a leader in feminist and gender studies, in critical race theory, and in the articulation of Caribbean scholarship within LASA—all crucial to the health and growth of our Association. I encourage you to attend the special session honoring Helen, which will feature a multi-generational panel of scholars speaking on her scholarship, pedagogy, and her contributions as a citizen-scholar. We also have the great privilege of hosting the eminent Colombian scholar, Orlando Fals-Borda, who will deliver the LASA/Oxfam America Martin Diskin Memorial Lecture for 2007. Professor Fals-Borda has inspired generations of younger academics across the Americas, myself included, with his pioneering writing on and practice of "*investigación-acción*." In recognition of the ten-year anniversary of the Lectureship, Diskin committee chair Brinton Lykes and I have made the event into a

double session to provide space for further reflection on the prospects for *investigación comprometida* in our times.

Please note, also, an important innovation in the Congress format, which we have devised in hopes of rejuvenating membership participation in the Business Meeting. It will be held at the normal time (Friday 8:00 pm, Grand Salon – Fairmont Hotel), with the usual items, though in a more compressed format, to allow time for a substantive statement by incoming LASA president Eric Hershberg focused on the future of our Association, followed by a question and answer period. Please attend this session to hear our new president's plans and priorities and to participate in important matters regarding our Association's governance!

Finally, there are three additional initiatives—involving much groundwork, extensive discussion, abundant time and energy, and generously donated resources—which I believe will make this Congress an especially important and high-quality scholarly event. First and foremost, I take this opportunity to extend a warm and hearty welcome to our Cuban colleagues, who will be attending the LASA Congress in an unfettered manner for the first time since the year 2000! As of this writing it is not clear how many of the over 200 accepted in the program will be able to attend, but it is sure to be a significant number of important academics, who will greatly enrich the Congress with scholarship on Cuba, Latin America, and U.S.-Latin America relations. Without pretense of addressing all the complexities involved in the complete integration of Cuban scholarship within LASA, I am deeply gratified that we have overcome the first and foremost barrier: categorical U.S. government prohibitions on freedom of travel and scholarly exchange. Second, as I write this column, a delegation of five LASA scholars, chaired by Matthew

Gutmann, are hard at work on a delegation to Oaxaca, Mexico to investigate alleged violations of academic freedom of scholars and intellectuals, in the context of social conflict and government repression there. The mandate of this delegation was extensively debated and finely crafted by our Executive Council, and it stands as a first case in a newly established set of guidelines for a “Committee on Academic Freedom,” which I hope the LASA EC will pass in its pre-Congress meeting this September. The decision to send this delegation to Oaxaca was not unanimous: EC member José Antonio Aguilar (CIDE, Mexico) cast a reasoned dissenting vote.<sup>1</sup> I hope that José Antonio and other skeptics, as well as those who support the principle of LASA taking this sort of action, will attend the session (Thursday 2:00 pm, Fundy – Hilton Hotel) where Gutmann and his colleagues report on their findings, and engage the audience in a discussion of academic freedom in Oaxaca.

I conclude this Congress preview with a brief note on *Otros Saberes*, an initiative to which I and many others, most notably EC member Lynn Stephen, have devoted major energy over the past two years. The first phase of the Initiative will culminate with a double session at the Congress (Saturday 10:00 am, Grand Salon – Fairmont Hotel) at which teams of civil society- and academy-based scholars will present preliminary results of their collaborative research, carried out over the past year. After the Congress they will participate in an intensive two-day workshop on their experiences with collaborative research methods. In these pages you have a preview of their presentations, with deep thanks to Vivian Newdick for her work as special editor of this section. We have high hopes that these culminating activities will confirm the founding premises of this Initiative, and make a resounding argument for *Otros Saberes* Phase II, focused on “Gender, Rights

and Citizenship among Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples.”

Welcome to Montréal! Enjoy this incredibly rich and diverse intellectual fare, and please take full advantage of the opportunities, both formal and informal, to participate in LASA governance. We want to hear your voices: what has been good and worthwhile in the efforts of LASA over the past 18 months, what has been lacking, and how we might do better. My final column, written just after the Congress, will reflect on precisely these questions.

<sup>1</sup> In the previous *Forum* (38:2), I represented the vote in favor of the delegation as “unanimous (one abstention)”. This was a mistaken reference to the vote on the draft guidelines of the Committee for Academic Freedom. The Oaxaca vote was 9 for, 1 against. My apologies for this error. José Antonio asked that he be identified as the dissenting vote, and I am glad to honor this request. ■