

ON THE PROFESSION

The Latin Americas I Have Known and Loved

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I first fell in love with Latin America as a teenager through her music and Hollywood movies. I think it is where my love of *lo tropical* came from—palm trees and syncopated music. In college at Cornell, these interests broadened, as I had Latin American friends, but there were few Latin American courses at Cornell then that caught my interest.

In 1954, two years after graduation, I made my first trip to Puerto Rico. My application for an NYU fellowship was unusual, because most of their applicants were teachers in the New York City public schools. I was working as a researcher with the Puerto Rican Study, which surveyed Spanish-speaking youth in the city's public schools, that were then being inundated by migrants. They accepted my application, and I went to Puerto Rico for five weeks in the summer of 1954—and stayed for two years. Again, I fell in love with the island my first night. We were housed at the old Escuela de Medicina, which has a fantastic view of the Atlantic Ocean and is just a few blocks from El Viejo San Juan. My dreams had been realized!

I made every effort to stay, and worked for one year with the Commonwealth's Department of State, in the administration of their Point IV program. A year later, I moved to Social Programs at the Department of Agriculture, because I was interested in research on their *parcelero* program, which distributed house plots in planned rural communities to former rural squatters to develop using self-help methods. This study became the basis of my M.A. thesis at Columbia University, where I undertook graduate work in anthropology in 1956.

The experience in Puerto Rico and with social research confirmed my interest in

Latin America, and in addressing some of the severe social inequities then evident. I came to know the Caribbean first hand as a resident and my Spanish improved considerably. I was turned off by the impersonal survey methods of sociology and sought in anthropology a more qualitative approach. However, anthropologists at Columbia, who included such eminent Latin Americanist scholars as Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris, also insisted on a four field approach, so that I had to master the rudiments of physical anthropology, archaeology and linguistics, as well as social or cultural anthropology. I did not take many courses in Latin America because my adviser, Conrad Arensberg, thought I already knew a considerable amount about the region, and suggested I take courses on China and other areas, that would lead me to question my premises about human social patterns. My tuition was paid by a scholarship from the University of Puerto Rico, which then funded graduate studies in the United States to build up a core of trained professionals committed to return to Puerto Rico to work for the Commonwealth government for the same period as they held the scholarship. I have always been proud that they considered me enough of a *puertorriqueña* to receive such an honor.

I returned to Puerto Rico in the Fall of 1959 to do research for my doctoral dissertation. The Commonwealth government was interested in my studying the process of relocation from an *arrabal* or shantytown to public housing, because they were then already experiencing social problems like delinquency and alcoholism among the project population. With a team of students funded by the Puerto Rico Housing Authority, we undertook a comparative study of an *arrabal* and *caserío* (as the housing projects were then called) in which I first did months of participant



observation before developing a survey instrument. I came to know Puerto Rico much better and became a bona fide Latin American social researcher, able to understand issues from the bottom up and not just from the top down.

Upon completing my dissertation at Columbia in 1962, I became one of the first urban anthropologists in the United States, and was immediately offered a job at Syracuse University to participate in a study two sociologists were conducting of public housing in that city. I looked for the patterns of social cohesion I had found in the Puerto Rican shantytown, but found none. Residents of the large African American public housing project in Syracuse, on which I focused my attention, suffered from a marginalization which I had not seen in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican urban poor always felt themselves part of the larger society, and even identified with the modernization program Puerto Rico was making in terms of new office buildings or bridges, even though they did not benefit directly. The African American poor, who were racially as well as socially stigmatized, did not share such a nationalist identification, and blamed themselves for many of the social problems they faced, which often stemmed from societal structural inequities.

Much of the 1960s were dedicated to forging a new family together with my husband, Manouchehr Safa, whom I married in 1962, shortly after finishing my Ph.D. He was an Iranian widower (whom I met in Puerto Rico earlier) with two children, Kaveh, aged 18 and Arya, aged nine. Kaveh studied anthropology at

Syracuse University and Arya went to public school. They were joined by our daughter Mitra, born in 1964. Manu, as we called him, had spent a year at Harvard, where he finished his M.A., and enrolled in the doctoral program at Syracuse in public administration, finishing his degree in 1967. He joined the Economic and Social Unit of the United Nations in New York City as a senior researcher in 1968, and worked there until his retirement in 1980. Being married to a Middle Easterner (born a Muslim) also gave me insights into the different forms patriarchy takes cross-culturally. Middle Eastern men are not dependent on earning a living to gain respect because so much of their religion and culture reinforces their status.

In 1968, after our move to New Jersey, I began a new job at Rutgers University, as one of the founding academic members of Livingston College, a new innovative school ostensibly designed to facilitate social mobility of the urban poor. My first class in *The Urban Poor* consisted of 98 freshmen, 95 of whom seemed to come from the slums of Newark and other New Jersey cities, most of them African American. This was a rich though often painful learning experience for me, as I witnessed the scars of racism in our own culture first hand. Teaching introduced me to a new way of learning Latin America, by conveying to others the fascination with the culture and the people I had come to love.

Over the years, my confidence in social reform programs such as Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico, or poverty programs in the United States, had waned, and I looked to the theoretical frameworks of Marxism for answers. Livingston College reinforced this shift, because there were many Marxists—in sociology and in the other social sciences. This shift is reflected in my book, *The Urban Poor of*

Puerto Rico: a Study in Development and Inequality, published in 1974. The book examines the hegemonic power which the state held over the Puerto Rican urban poor, and how this thwarted the development of class consciousness.

Because of a ten-year delay in publishing the book, I was able to do a followup study, which was incorporated into the book. This longitudinal focus helped me understand the importance of the selection process involved in relocation from shantytowns to public housing. The Puerto Rican selection process gave preference to some of the most vulnerable families eligible for public housing, and destroyed the patterns of social support developed in the shantytown. This selection process, coupled with a paternalistic project administration, became the basis for much of public housings' social problems. Today neither I nor any outsider can easily enter public housing in Puerto Rico, because the projects have become centers of the drug trade and other social ills, as their problems grew over time with the general fragmentation of Puerto Rican society.

I did not fit into the rather traditional anthropology department at Livingston, and instead moved to urban planning, which nurtured my interdisciplinary interests. But I moved back to anthropology, as New Brunswick chair in 1974, and also became Director of the poorly funded Latin American Institute at Rutgers. Despite a chronic shortage of funds, we maintained an active speakers program, cajoling scholars like Fernando Enrique Cardoso or Oswaldo Sunkel to come from New York City for train fare and lunch. This program re-stimulated my interest in Latin America, and I undertook a comparative study of women factory workers in São Paulo and New Jersey, with Heleith Saffioti from Brazil. Lynn Bolles,

then a graduate student at Rutgers, participated in the New Jersey study and went on to examine women's role in Jamaica's industrialization by invitation program. Today, she has become a leading scholar in anthropology and women's studies at the University of Maryland.

My participation in LASA began at this time, when I was elected as a member of the Executive Council in 1974. LASA certainly broadened my knowledge and interest in Latin America, as I participated in Executive Council discussions and attended every Congress from 1974 onwards. In 1982 I was elected Vice President, and my commitment deepened as the Reagan years made our relations with Latin America more difficult. As President of LASA, I became not just a student or teacher of Latin America, but a spokesperson for the U.S. academic community and for our Latin American colleagues, whose voice in the 1970s and 80s was often stifled by brutal military dictatorships. I initiated the first formal LASA-Cuba exchange in 1983, when Santiago Diaz from Cuba and I signed a formal *convenio*, for which I was able to secure initial funding from the Ford Foundation. We all know how the Cuba exchange has grown over the years, until again stymied by the visa restrictions imposed by the Bush administration (until we were smart enough to move to Canada in 2007). It has been a thrill to see how LASA has grown in the past decades, not only in numbers, but in diversity and intellectual esteem. We must continue to build this partnership with our Latin American colleagues as a bulwark against the neoliberal agenda of our governments.

My interest in gender studies also began in the 1970s, principally through my friendship with June Nash, an anthropologist and Latin Americanist who

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taught at NYU and then the City University of New York (and is a past Silvert recipient). Together we organized in 1974 the first SSRC research seminar on Feminine (we did not dare call it feminist) Perspectives in the Social Sciences, with some of the founders of the women's movement in Latin America today. This was followed by a graduate student eight-week course in Cuernavaca, also funded by SSRC, which I co-organized with the late Elsa Chaney. The current women's movement was just beginning in Latin America, and these activities forced us to examine more closely its premises and how it differed from the women's movement in the United States. My friendship with Carmen Diana Deere, Marta Tienda, Marysa Navarro, Elizabeth Jelin, Ruth Sautu, Jane Jaquette, Mary Goldsmith and others dates back to these events. Carmen Diana went on to finish her Ph.D. in economics at Berkeley and became one of the foremost Latin American scholars, as well as President of LASA. She now directs the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, as I did in the 1980s.

June Nash and I published two co-edited volumes, *Sex and Class in Latin America*, resulting from the seminar we co-organized, and *Women and Change in Latin America*, published several years later. As a woman, I felt for the first time that I could truly represent my own interests in fighting for better understanding of women's issues, and greater recognition of their rights. Through the research we did on garment workers in New Jersey, we became aware of the problem of "runaway shops", or outsourcing as it is now known, which in the 1970s had received little attention in the social science literature. I also became aware of the leading role which Puerto Rico had played in this process. It was one of the first areas outside the mainland United

States to which U.S. firms fled because of the advantages of cheaper wages, few taxes, and compliant unionization.

I was about to begin a new study in Puerto Rico, with Carmen Angélica Pérez, a Rutgers graduate student from Puerto Rico, when I accepted a new job as Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. Despite heavy administrative responsibilities, we managed to complete this study and I began research in the Dominican Republic, another area to which U.S. firms had fled as Puerto Rican wages got higher. I came to know Jorge Duany in Puerto Rico, then a graduate student in anthropology at Berkeley, and he later joined us for a year as Assistant Director of the Center at Florida. His research on migration, ethnicity and nation-building in Puerto Rico, Cuba and the wider Caribbean has earned him a distinguished reputation in Latin American and Latino Studies., and he is now Chair of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Puerto Rico.

As Center Director I could focus entirely on Latin American Studies, and had a much more ample budget to design and develop new programs. My interest in the Caribbean persisted, stimulated by the rich Latin American library collection at the University of Florida. I sought to renew interest in the Caribbean at Florida, which had shifted over the years into Brazil (especially the Amazon) and the Andes. With funding from the Ford and Tinker Foundations, we started the Caribbean Migration Program, which brought Caribbean students and Caribbean scholars to the University of Florida to work on this topic. We also held a major conference on Popular Culture, National Identity and Migration in the Caribbean, some of the proceedings of which were published in the *New West Indian Guide* in 1987. As

Director of the Center, I again had the opportunity to become a visible spokesperson for the Latin American and U.S. academic community, which sometimes brought me into conflict with conservative Cuban legislators in the Florida legislature. I was also asked to serve on the selection committees of the U.S. Fulbright Commission, the Inter-American Foundation, and other scholarly institutions dealing with Latin America.

I stepped down as Director in 1985, but remained in the Center to continue to pursue Caribbean programs. My increasing interest in race resulted in a fellowship program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation on Afro-American Identity and Cultural Diversity, which brought visiting scholars to the University of Florida from 1992 to 1996. The Rockefeller program also culminated in a major conference on Race and National Identity in Latin America, published in *Latin American Perspectives* in 1998. Nathalie Lebon, the youngest member of this panel, was one of my graduate students in anthropology, doing interesting work on Brazilian women and NGOs. She now teaches women's studies at Gettysburg College.

I continued my research on women workers, conducting studies in the Dominican Republic and Cuba in the 1980s to complement the earlier work I had done on female factory workers in Puerto Rico. I am very grateful to the Federation of Cuban Women in Cuba, and to its late President, Vilma Espin, for the confidence they placed in me to conduct one of the first social research projects directed by a *gringa* in Cuba. Working with a talented group of Cuban researchers, such as Rita María Pereira and Marta Tienda (now an active LASA participant) was one of the enjoyable and enriching learning experiences I have had. It was 1995 before

this extensive comparative study was published as *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean*. I learned that it was not just the increase in women's labor force incorporation that contributed to women's status, but the decline and deterioration in male employment, which forced women to take on additional economic responsibilities to sustain the household.

My personal life also underwent dramatic changes in the 1990s. Our children had all completed their education, and were beginning to bless us with grandchildren. But in 1994, my husband of 32 years, Manouchehr Safa, died, leaving me feeling guilty for not having spent more time with him in his later years, after his retirement. I decided to retire from the University of Florida in 1997, at least from teaching, although I have remained active in writing and research.

I have also enjoyed immensely the opportunity to teach short courses on Latin America, at the Federal University of Bahia, at the Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, and two separate programs funded by Mexican institutions in Mexico City. I also taught at Dartmouth College and in the Latino Studies program at Columbia University. This adjunct teaching has opened yet another door into the younger generation of Latin American and Latino scholars struggling to deal with their region's problems and promises.

In 1999 I married John Dumoulin, whom I had come to know through LASA, along with his late wife, Isabel Largaña. He worked as a researcher in Cuba for 29 years, and we share our love for this island and her people. His many years in Latin America (including nine in Argentina) reinforced even further my commitment to the region and its people. He also helps me

with translation and editing. Since 1998 we have traveled together to Latin America and we always participate in LASA, enabling us to see old friends and learn new approaches to studying our common area of interest.

As I see it, my scholarly focus in Latin America moved from class (the urban poor in Puerto Rico and other areas), to incorporate gender (the myth of the male breadwinner) and now race. Inequality has not been reduced in Latin America, but it has become more complex. I hope that I have contributed a small share to understanding these issues, along with my colleagues in Latin America, in LASA, and in the U.S. academy. Certainly the friends gathered here in this room and on the panel know that I have tried my best. It is their recognition and affection that makes it all worthwhile. ■

CALACS (Canadian Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies) 2008 Conference Vancouver, June 4-7, 2008

Conference Theme: At the Crossroads of Empire

Latin America and the Caribbean have been profoundly shaped by the rise and fall of Empires, from pre-Columbian civilizations to European expansionism and on to US strategies for hemispheric supremacy. Yet the region has also been a crucial site for the articulation of movements of resistance to imperial projects. The global political fields of the early 21st century are now posing new, challenging questions about the social, cultural, and political dimensions of such processes on the

continent. The 2008 CALACS conference to be held in Vancouver convokes scholars from across the social sciences and the humanities as well as activists and artists to offer a fresh look at the influence of imperial schemes on Latin America and the Caribbean and at the range of social movements and government projects that contest them. In addition, the conference welcomes submissions related to other themes involving Latin America and the Caribbean.

For more information see: www.can-latam.org