

# President's Report<sup>1</sup>

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It is an enormous honor to have been selected to serve as LASA President, and I will devote myself as best I can to advancing the Association's work throughout my term in office. The Association, and the field of Latin American Studies, face important challenges, but I am fortunate to engage these at a moment of great intellectual dynamism among researchers engaged with Latin American affairs; of high esteem for LASA among broad segments of the scholarly community; of relative financial prosperity for the Association; and at a moment when capable and devoted staff at the Secretariat have modernized the operation of LASA far beyond what is immediately evident to participants in our Congresses. Stated differently: this is an opportune time to be called upon to serve as LASA President and I look forward to the experience.

Normally, my interventions in the *LASA Forum* will be brief. However, on this occasion I would like to discuss in greater depth the state of the Association and what I take to be the more significant institutional and intellectual issues before us. I will begin my remarks with observations about numerous institutional challenges facing LASA, and then move to issues that, while also imbued with institutional ramifications, are related fundamentally to LASA's intellectual role and to my own aspirations for the coming year and a half.

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LASA is growing at unprecedented rates. Consider the following data: the 2003 Congress in Dallas included 2,950 participants, compared to 3,000 in 2004 in Las Vegas, 4,868 in San Juan for the 2006 Congress and 5,260 for the September 2007 meeting in Montreal. This good news presents immense challenges. These are administrative, in the first instance, and as

President, I will work closely with Executive Director Milagros Pereyra and her staff to ensure that they have the necessary resources to carry out the work of supporting an ever larger network of intellectuals from around the world.

Second, expansion in our numbers has significant implications for the way we organize LASA Congresses. Consider here the burden on program chairs, who have to craft an agenda based on twice as many panel and paper submissions as was the case just a couple of Congresses ago: we owe an immense debt of gratitude to Neil Harvey and Maria Socorro Tabuenca for their work in making the Montreal Congress such a success. I am already grateful to Evelyne Huber and to Cynthia Steele for agreeing to take on this role for the June 2009 Congress.<sup>2</sup>

But beyond this, there is the question of how to fit the contributions of all of these people into the Congress program. For San Juan in 2006 and Montreal in 2007 we expanded the Congress to four days, and we have increased—modestly—the rejection rates for both panel and paper proposals. The next meeting will be in Rio de Janeiro—our first ever in South America—and will be held not in hotels but at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC), which means among other things that we will no longer be limited by the number of available meeting rooms in corporate spaces. This will allow us to run more simultaneous sessions, and almost certainly will enable us to scale back from four days to three and a half. In addition, we envision a modest increase in selectivity. Whereas only two percent of submissions were rejected for the 2004 Congress in Las Vegas, for 2006 and 2007 the rejection rates held steady at approximately 18 percent for individual paper proposals and 13 percent for panels. Our expectation is that the rejection rate for all submissions will grow to between 20



percent and 25 percent for the 2009 Rio meeting. Of course, we cannot judge with any precision how many proposals will be submitted for our first ever Congress in South America. We will keep the membership informed as information becomes available, and will convey clearly the factors that enter into decisions concerning the duration of the meeting.

An aside, in this regard: the key mechanism through which we will keep you informed is the *LASA Forum*. Here I should acknowledge the efforts of LASA Past President Arturo Arias, who as Associate Editor for the past three years has improved the *Forum's* production quality, making it a source of debates concerning pressing issues involving specialists from across sub-fields of Latin American Studies. Working with the new Associate Editor, Antonio Sérgio Guimarães, a sociologist at the University of Sao Paulo, I hope that we can maintain the high production standards that Arturo Arias achieved while working with my predecessors Sonia Alvarez and Charlie Hale. As Professor Guimarães notes in his introduction to this first issue of the *Forum*, we intend to focus debates over the next six issues on questions related to "Rethinking Inequalities," the theme we have chosen for LASA 2009. We will also continue to include the "On the Profession" section, and the *Forum* will remain the principal vehicle for reporting on Association activities to both the membership and outside stakeholders.

Returning to the challenges raised by LASA's expansion, a third issue concerns travel grants for Latin American scholars, for

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which essentially all of the proceeds from the endowment are directed, and for non-Latin American students. Thanks to the generosity of several foundations—OSI, Tinker, IAF, MacArthur, and Ford—we have managed to increase the number of travel grants substantially in recent years. Whereas the Association devoted \$144,000 to travel grants as recently as 2004, spending for that purpose increased to \$234,000 for LASA 2006 and reached an all-time high of \$334,000 for LASA 2007. Yet, as successful as we have been in securing resources, the growth in demand far outpaces the increase in supply, which is unlikely to be sustained at the 2007 levels. For LASA 2004, the Secretariat received 253 eligible applications for travel support, of which 116 were approved and 137 rejected (46% approval rate); for LASA 2006 we received 537 eligible applications, of which 177 were approved and 366 rejected (32% approval rate); for LASA 2007, 1218 people applied of whom 778 (581 Latin Americans and 197 non-Latin American students) were eligible for funding. We awarded 219 grants, while 559 eligible applicants were rejected (28% approval rate).<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, records show that 331 individuals (168 of whom were Latin America-based researchers) who were denied travel grants nonetheless attended the 2007 Congress.

What we are facing, then, is a situation in which the administrative burden of managing travel grant submissions is increasingly substantial, and in which growing numbers of applicants are going to the trouble of submitting materials with decreasing prospects of success. In this context, we need to evaluate how best to support travel to the Congresses within the constraints imposed by limited financial and administrative resources. Tough decisions need to be made, in an environment where a number of key variables are neither constant nor entirely predictable. Consider for

example the ways in which holding the meeting in Rio complicates matters further. What numbers should we expect for this Congress? Should Brazilian scholars still be eligible for travel funding? To the extent that we draw on unencumbered interest from the endowment, what should be the relative priority between non-Latin American students, on the one hand, and Latin American applicants, on the other? Looking toward future Congresses, which owing to continuing difficulties securing travel visas are likely to continue to take place outside the United States, what if anything can be done about junior faculty in North American or European institutions who cannot secure support for travel to international conferences? Could LASA raise a significant portion of travel funds for Latin Americans through funding agencies located in their home countries, and should we insist that Latin American applicants for travel funding make efforts to secure such support through local funding agencies? Should the Association offer more grants with lower stipends rather than fewer grants aimed at providing full funding for Congress participation?<sup>4</sup>

No solution to the travel funding challenges will be ideal, but decisions need to be taken by the Executive Council during the coming months. I pledge that in deciding how to proceed we are committed to a) using endowment funds strictly for the purposes for which they were granted; b) promoting equity; and c) maximizing the productivity of our investment in travel support.

Whatever solution we come up with will be more successful if we are able to draw on a greater pool of resources, and I want to assure members of the Association that efforts to secure greater funding for LASA will be a high priority during my Presidency. I hope to be as successful as my predecessors have been. At the same time, and without

compromising our commitment to expand the resources available to the Association, I intend to work closely with Treasurer Kevin Middlebrook and with members of our investment committee to move prudently but expeditiously toward shifting our portfolio into so-called “socially responsible” investments. This effort was begun by Charlie Hale, advanced by Kevin Middlebrook’s careful research, and endorsed by the Executive Council. I wholeheartedly support this policy and intend to continue moving in this direction.

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Turning away now from strictly institutional matters, let me address several substantive questions, focusing on the internationalization of our Association and the relationship between Latin American studies and scholarly disciplines. Internationalization has been a central preoccupation of recent LASA Presidents, and has been articulated as a fundamental commitment of the organization. It is a concern that will shape my Presidency as well. That we are meeting in Brazil is symbolic of our determination to make LASA as international an organization as possible, albeit one that we should remember has its origins and administrative headquarters in the United States.

The growing number of Latin American participants in our Congresses is a tangible sign of progress: in Montreal, for the first time nearly a third of those presenting their research at the Congress were based outside of North America; two thirds of those participants make their home in Latin America and the Caribbean. And for LASA 2009 a considerably higher percentage of track chairs—those conducting the peer review that guides selection of panels and papers—will be Latin America-based. This reflects a conscious decision, some of the

reasons for which I hope to make clear momentarily.

At this juncture I would simply emphasize, first, that a significant and growing portion of the intellectual work of the Association—the peer review, the panels, the papers—is not being carried out by North Americans, and second, that this trend is likely to continue.

All of this elides the frequently-banded about question of what an intellectual agenda for an internationalized Latin American Studies ought to consist. My first answer is that there will be no single agenda, and that there should not be. Nor should the agenda for the Association or the field of Latin American Studies be defined by the LASA President: multiple agendas should filter up from below—from academic and non-academic circuits alike—and these diverse agendas should find in the Congress a space in which to encounter one another and to evolve in ways that reflect the full range of our members' substantive, theoretical, and methodological preferences. LASA affords intellectuals a big tent and we should celebrate that. I would note here in passing that while the theme for the 2009 Congress will be "Rethinking Inequalities," proposals for panels and papers on other topics will be welcomed with equally open arms.

Indeed, during my Presidency I will endeavor to convey—in rhetoric and in practice—a commitment to an inclusive Latin American Studies, one whose richness derives from the historically rooted fact that it encompasses multiple disciplinary traditions, methodologies and epistemological orientations, and the equally important fact that now more than ever before Latin American Studies transcends geographic zones that were once taken as the boundaries for *lo Latinoamericano*. As

emphasized by Canada's governor general in her comments inaugurating our 2007 Montreal Congress, and by the richness of contributions there by scholars in fields ranging from Latino Studies to analysts of the Asia-Pacific region, Latin American and Caribbean identities span territories throughout the Hemisphere, and, one must add, elsewhere around the globe as well.

Let me say something about what I think Latin American Studies is *not*. Here a bit of history—albeit terribly oversimplified in the interest of brevity. If we look back to the origins of the Association four decades ago, we see an institution comprised of North American scholars studying Latin American cultures, societies, economies, and politics. Theirs was an enormously valuable enterprise, one that helped to develop world class university-based research and training centers devoted to scholarship and teaching about the region. This early phase of development of the Association had a lasting and positive impact on our capacity to understand the human condition.

Over time, Latin American scholars infused the work of North American area studies researchers with some of the most theoretically ambitious approaches that have ever characterized the field. A relatively small but not insignificant number of those intellectuals came to participate and influence the Association itself. Yet the area studies project as embodied institutionally in LASA and in North American institutions remained a largely North American-centric enterprise—indeed, for all of its wonderful attributes, it was ultimately a U.S.-centric undertaking.

The viability of this model disappeared with the 1980s and '90s crisis of area studies, the origins and nature of which are more complex and multi-faceted than I can discuss here, but that in part had to do precisely

with its U.S.-centric nature and its corresponding failure to grapple adequately with transnational phenomena that increasingly preoccupied scholars and practitioners in the Americas and beyond. Yet alongside the exhaustion of area studies as traditionally practiced came the hegemony of narrowly disciplinary approaches that purported to illuminate emerging processes but that failed to grasp complexities rooted in local specificities. This was a moment of triumph for epistemic communities with scant regard for the knowledge about Latin America that had been developed over decades, precisely by area studies scholars. The consequences for North American teaching about the region, and for policies undertaken by governments in those societies, were pernicious, and are enduring.

At the same time that the Association was being founded and Latin American Studies was becoming more dynamic in the North, important institutions devoted to galvanizing thinking and practice relating to the human condition in developing countries emerged in Latin America. CEPAL of course pre-dated LASA, but more comparable institutions, such as CLACSO, were founded during this period in order to develop and articulate a Latin American agenda, a project rooted in aspirations for regional integration and intellectual autonomy. For reasons that are again beyond the scope of this report, that Latin America-centric vision also fell on hard times during the 1980s and 1990s, as ideas originating in the North came to exert growing sway over policies—and important currents of intellectual life—across the region. The consequences were serious and enduring, as partial and distorted ways of understanding the world encountered little institutionalized intellectual opposition and, as they permeated the policy realm, effected significant damage on social welfare and cohesion.

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Today, LASA finds itself seeking to diversify the voices and perspectives that define what an area studies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century might look like. In doing so it has articulated in its past two Congress themes the importance of “de-centering” the field, and of moving “beyond the Washington Consensus to create a new Americas.” Simultaneously, and I think not by accident, we see a reinvigorated CLACSO seeking to advance “un pensamiento crítico” capable of challenging the prevailing state of affairs in Latin America by elaborating alternative proposals for forging social welfare, autonomy, and cohesion. Both of these efforts are moving in parallel directions, yet in order to gain traction, and to have enduring impact, they need to better engage one another and to strive consciously to influence thinking in North and South alike, in both the academy and in other spaces where intellectual work is carried out. An internationalized LASA represents one, and only one, institutional space in which that encounter can take place, producing forms of understanding that cannot be anticipated in advance, but that offer greater possibilities than are now present for enriching human experience in Latin America and beyond. This, in part, is what internationalization must be about. The choice of “inequalities” as the theme for LASA 2009 reflects the conviction that this is a topic around which intellectual communities can both enrich one another and contribute to the generation of knowledge that matters.

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An additional and related matter that I want to address concerns the relationship between Latin American Studies and conventional disciplines. Here I refer in particular to the social sciences, which I know best, but I think that much of what I am about to say is relevant to my colleagues in the humanities as well.

In my view LASA must create spaces *both* for the multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches that are inherent to our field *and* for contributions from individual disciplines. Inter-disciplinary work requires insights from disciplines. If we lose the capacity to engage any particular discipline, our opportunities to conduct cross-disciplinary work are diminished, and our work within our own disciplines is arguably impoverished. For myself, as well as others, activity in the Association provides a rare and welcome opportunity to learn about the frontiers of research in disciplines other than our own. LASA fulfills its mission when an anthropologist comes to the meeting with the hope of learning what political scientists are doing, and when the latter look forward to our meetings as a way of gaining exposure to state of the art work in a field such as Latin Americanist literary theory.

The fact of the matter, in any event, is that the disciplines need us, intellectually at least, as much as we need them. Indeed, by infusing the disciplines with perspectives drawn from other areas of the social sciences and humanities regional specialists enrich those very disciplines and increase their capacity to shed light on issues that matter to Latin America. Moreover, it is precisely by internationalizing Latin American Studies that we can have the greatest impact on opening up the disciplines: For reasons that have to do with labor markets and professional reward systems, among other factors, disciplines evolve differently across regional and national contexts, all too frequently in isolation from counterparts elsewhere. This is to the detriment of both their intellectual vitality and their practical relevance. In my view, one fundamental rationale for our mission to internationalize the Association is to open the disciplines to challenges from those whose perspectives are rooted in distinct contexts and traditions.

That so much of the discipline-based work of North American scholars utterly fails to acknowledge theories and methods emerging from Latin America testifies to the importance of our efforts in this regard.

In closing, I want to take this opportunity to convey to the LASA membership my commitment to try to be responsive to your ideas and suggestions for ways of strengthening our work and the Association.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The following text draws on a presentation delivered to the membership during the September, 2007 business meeting in Montreal.

<sup>2</sup> Guido Podesta had originally agreed to serve as co-chair, and participated with Evelyne Huber, Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, in defining tracks for the 2009 meeting. However, competing commitments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison led Prof. Podesta to resign as co-chair following the Montreal meeting. We are delighted that Professor Cynthia Steele, chair of the Comparative Literature Department at the University of Washington, has agreed to step in to serve as co-chair for the Rio de Janeiro Congress.

<sup>3</sup> In recent years roughly one third of applications received by the Secretariat have been deemed ineligible (e.g. people who had received funding to previous Congresses, North Americans who are not students, individuals who did not have an accepted paper, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> For 2007 the average grant for Latin Americans was \$1,541, up from \$1,243 in 2004 and \$1,369 in 2006. ■