

President's Report

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As a candidate to become LASA Vice President and President-Elect, I articulated several goals that I hoped to achieve during my tenure. These included, most notably, increasing the opportunities for Latin American scholars and junior researchers to take part in LASA Congresses, and fostering dialogue between discipline-based scholarship and the field of Latin American Studies. In this context, I am pleased to report that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has awarded the Association a grant of \$500,000 in support of these and other objectives over the next five years. I believe that the resulting program of Mellon-LASA workshops will enable us to facilitate innovative scholarly work both at our Congresses and in other venues.

The Mellon-LASA workshops will promote trans-regional and comparative approaches to Latin Americanist research in the humanities and social sciences while strengthening ties between area studies and discipline-driven scholarship. Beginning at the upcoming meeting in Rio de Janeiro, the program will fund Congress participation of Latin American researchers, graduate students, and scholars whose primary empirical focus is on other parts of the world but whose work explores topics that are especially conducive to inter-regional comparisons. It will also make possible a series of research workshops that will be convened at roughly the midway point between Congresses. The latter will be selected for funding through a peer-reviewed competition open to all LASA members, and workshop results will be featured in panel presentations at the subsequent meeting of the Association.

This initiative supports three trends that are critical to the future advancement of Latin American Studies, which I shall try to summarize very briefly.

1) Regional reconfigurations

During the 20th century, scholarship in Latin American Studies, like other area studies fields, evolved largely within boundaries defined by geographic contiguity. Units of analysis typically were fixed in geo-cultural terms, and despite important exceptions, the tendency was for researchers to situate their work into spatial categories that reflected the institutional configurations of major universities, scholarly associations and journals. Latin Americanists did their work within their area studies circles, Africanists did similarly, and so on. The institutional terrain was tilted against efforts to rethink those very boundaries, to problematize regional spaces and to consider alternative aggregations. In North America, academic job markets reinforced this conservatism, as graduate students and junior faculty were recruited into positions defined according to traditional area studies geographies.

This has begun to change over the past decade or so, to varying degrees but in a growing array of fields: Theoretical innovation is emerging from approaches to scholarly inquiry that do not deny the salience of regional units but treat them as historically contingent and porous. Historians of Latin America's colonial period, for example, increasingly frame their work in the context of global empire. In turn, anthropologists and sociologists focused on issues of racial formations articulate their analyses in terms of the greater Atlantic. Political economists, for their part, often cluster cases not by location alone but also by their structural characteristics, which frequently but not always fit within geographical constraints suggested by conventional area studies. Scholarship on contemporary processes as varied as international migration, environmental change and popular consumption patterns may take Latin



American settings as their empirical referents, but they do so by conceiving of the sites of their research as forming parts of universes that transcend the region per se. Little by little, moreover, academic job markets are responding to these intellectual shifts and, in some universities, hires are being clustered along quite novel lines. LASA is well situated to push this trend further along and to highlight the importance of these new directions for area studies work in the 21st century.

2) Cross-regional comparisons

A second consideration involves the importance of fostering opportunities for cross-regional comparison. Here again, among Latin Americanists, almost certainly beyond what we see in any other area studies field, the clear trend is toward expanding the scope of comparative research to encompass cases beyond Latin America. This is by no means entirely new: For some decades now, comparative third world history and comparative historical sociology have been strongly influenced by scholarship involving Latin Americanists, with LASA members having played a key role in consolidating these cross-regional fields of inquiry. More can be done, however, both to encourage such research and to diffuse it to subfields of scholarship that have not yet taken advantage of the potential benefits of cross-regional comparison. The study of Latin American land reforms, for example, has paid relatively little attention to analogous processes outside the region, and the same could be said for research on religious pluralism, film production or the use of new technologies for disseminating

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scholarly resources. In these domains and quite a few others, LASA can play an important role in stimulating cross-regional encounters, and in establishing their legitimacy as part of the core set of activities associated with area studies scholarship. The Association can also expose scholars from outside the realm of Latin American Studies to the insights being developed through analysis of Latin American experience, thus enriching fields well beyond the core areas of concern to the Association. By opening Latin American Studies to other area studies communities, we may encourage the latter to broaden their horizons as well.

3) The necessary rapprochement between disciplines and area studies

In the U.S. academy the last couple of decades of the 20th century witnessed a troubling distancing of several key disciplines from the work of Latin American Studies and other regionally-defined fields. The case of economics is surely the most glaring example of this trend, and it is to the mutual detriment of economists and area studies researchers that the twain seldom meet. But the tension between area studies and disciplinary approaches was and to some extent remains apparent in domains ranging from comparative literature to political science and sociology. At one level this simply reflected a fundamental difference of view concerning the importance of empirical research for scholarly excellence, with some disciplinary purists retreating into theory or model building that putatively applied in all places and at all times.

Over the past decade the climate has improved considerably, with at least a rhetorical consensus in favor of work that is rooted in disciplinary theory and engaged with the complexities of local settings. Yet the tensions remain, and there is good reason to attempt to address them

productively. One can imagine a scenario in which important (particularly quantitative) currents of political science and sociology follow their economist colleagues in removing themselves from under the area studies umbrella. The adverse consequences for their work would likely be substantial: important currents of scholarship in behavioral economics, for example, have come to the conclusion that rationality differs dramatically across local and cultural settings. The implication should be that area studies has much to offer the discipline.

No less importantly, from the perspective of area studies as a discrete field in American universities, the defection of a significant fraction of the social scientific research community could prove devastating. Given that disciplines remain the most privileged units in universities throughout the Hemisphere, if area studies programs are seen by university administrators as relevant solely to inter- and trans-disciplinary fields they may be weakened irreparably. For LASA, and for our membership, no objective is more important than that of cultivating dialogue and mutual learning among those who define themselves as mainstream disciplinary researchers and those who identify with Latin American Studies in its many manifestations.

The good news is that that LASA is especially well situated to rekindle the interest of core social science disciplines. In part this reflects the degree to which some of the most influential work in Latin American Studies has also impacted the disciplines. This is the case in political science for work on such topics as the political economy of democratization; in sociology for research on the determinants and impacts of international migration; for anthropologists' conceptualizations of the emergence of hybrid identities in the age of transnational cultural processes; and for comparative

literature analyses of the "boom" in Latin American novel production from the late 1960s through the end of the 20th century. Beyond this established track record, we believe that by making the promotion of cross-regional research an explicit objective of the Mellon-LASA program we can go a considerable way toward incorporating into our activities networks of scholars whose inclinations are precisely toward such comparative work.

These efforts, I believe, will enhance LASA's capability to take leadership in cutting edge academic work, reinforcing and perhaps accelerating encouraging trends that are underway in the scholarly community, while demonstrating the role that a dynamic area studies community can play in promoting intellectual innovation at universities in the United States and beyond. Taken together, we believe that the components of the proposed initiative will make an important contribution to Latin American Studies and to internationally-oriented scholarship more generally. They will enable LASA to build on some of its existing strengths, and to move in new directions that are important for our efforts to push the frontiers of research in the social sciences and humanities alike. ■