

President's Report

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SILVERT AWARD continued...

the question how he manages to spend time in the field despite the many personal and professional obligations, he observed that "...e-mails back and forth to members of all my 'invisible colleges' make it easierFieldwork does not just happen in the field. I sometimes feel that some of my best fieldwork happens over a long dinner at my home, when someone is visiting and we have time for a four-hour conversation" (p.431). When asked about the role of normative values in his work and engagement with public affairs, he responded: "I have always chosen to work on problems that affect a lot of people. I never understood the argument that social science should be value-free....It is difficult to find a problem you care passionately about if you don't allow your values to influence your decision about what is important to study....I have always been much more interested in doing what I want by myself, rather than working for an administration. On the other hand...I have even been willing to insert myself into complex situations when I feel I have an analytic edge, and think I can also learn something, and make a useful contribution. In this sense, my fieldwork and my political involvement feed on each other....If I can contribute something because I have an idea about a particular public problem, I am willing to commit myself, as I have often done for human rights issues" (p. 437).

Professor Stepan will participate in the Silvert panel session at the XXVIII Congress of the Latin American Studies Association on Friday, June 12, 2009, in Rio de Janeiro. More details will be in the final program booklet. ■

As in so many other domains, the performance of the Bush administration with regard to Latin America can only be characterized as irresponsible. Relations with Cuba and several Andean countries deteriorated; meddling in domestic affairs of sovereign, democratic states was widespread; strategies for enhancing economic cooperation were limited to the pursuit of bilateral trade accords of dubious consequences for vulnerable sectors of the population in the region; counter-narcotics policy was carried out overwhelmingly in military terms; and by loading development assistance programs with military aid the United States abdicated its responsibility as a wealthy nation to provide aid designed to advance social welfare in highly unequal societies. The failure to enact comprehensive immigration reform adversely affected many countries in the region. Meanwhile, administration policies not directly aimed at Latin America—such as the illegal detention of putative terrorists at the U.S. military installation at Guantanamo—seriously undermined our country's reputation throughout the region as in other parts of the world. Largely as a result, U.S. influence in the region arguably reached an all time low.

The advent of a new administration in Washington opens the possibility for Hemispheric cooperation based on principles of mutual respect and reciprocity. Public opinion in Latin America is cautiously optimistic about the prospects for more equal partnerships with the United States under an Obama administration. The election of an African-American candidate to the Presidency offers a rare opportunity, moreover, to restore valorizations of American democracy that were tarnished by the Supreme Court's settlement of the contested Bush-Gore election of 2000 and the behavior of the U.S. government in the so-called War on Terror. But concrete

measures will be required in order to take advantage of this potentially watershed moment. The U.S. government could get things off to a fresh start by signaling a commitment to normalize relations with Cuba, enacting comprehensive immigration reform, and ceasing efforts by U.S. embassies and government-supported entities to influence domestic political dynamics in Latin American countries. An additional priority should be to re-orient narcotics control and development assistance programs from a military to a developmentalist paradigm.

The June 2009 LASA Congress will afford a timely space for exploring how these and other objectives can be met through concerted actions by governments and civil society organizations throughout the Americas. Leading scholars from around the world will have occasion to debate priorities and the means for achieving them. That the meeting of a still predominantly U.S.-based Association will take place in Rio de Janeiro is symbolic of the imperative for such discussions to incorporate voices from the South as well as from the North.

I hope that representatives of the new administration in Washington will look to the Association and its membership for insights, and that they will increase federal support for the international studies training that is crucial to the maintenance of scholarly expertise about Latin America and other regions of the world. The knowledge of researchers in American universities is a precious resource, and one that should not be ignored by policy-makers, as has so often been the case in the past. Whether we see a greater openness than in the past to scholarly perspectives, and a desire to expand understanding of peoples and cultures outside U.S. borders, will tell us much about whether the new administration is truly committed to inviting fresh perspectives on



U.S. policy toward the region and on the key challenges that Latin America faces as it continues to strive for equitable development and cooperative ties to the United States.

Sentiments similar to these were conveyed in an open letter sent to then-Senator Barack Obama during the closing days of the electoral campaign. In it, more than 300 scholars specializing on Latin America, including myself and a number of LASA past Presidents, called on Obama to extend his agenda for “change” to the realm of U.S. Latin America policy, and to understand that many of the injustices that his candidacy sought to address were analogous to those that have motivated processes of political renewal throughout the Americas, including in countries which the Bush administration had treated in a confrontational manner. I believe that the letter captured the views of a broad cross-section of the Latin Americanist community in the United States, and I wish to extend my thanks to Professor Arturo Escobar of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill for taking the initiative to draft it and to recruit an impressive array of signatories. However, it is important for me to emphasize that, contrary to some portrayals on the web, where the letter circulated like wildfire, this was not a communication from LASA as an institution: many of our members may well hold differing views, and it is not for me as President to speak on their behalf on such matters. For the LASA President to take advantage of the bully pulpit is to my mind fully appropriate, but throughout my period of service I have spoken on behalf of the Association only with regard to concerns

that directly involve our roles as researchers and educators.

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This and the four preceding issues of the *Forum* have featured debates about a variety of issues relating to inequalities, a theme that the program co-chairs and I articulated as central to the 2009 meeting. We have dedicated sections to discussions of race, gender, labor and education, and the next issue, which will arrive just after the June Congress in Rio and will be the last of my presidency, will contain a scholarly debates section devoted to violence and inequalities. All of these have been crafted in hopes of engaging the core topic of the upcoming meeting. But of course that Congress will encompass work on countless other issues, and this is as it should be: the Congress is meant to provide a venue for scholarship across the social sciences and humanities—and beyond—regardless of its thematic focus. Throughout my period of service to LASA, I have sought to ensure that my own intellectual agenda does not take precedence over that of the membership, for it is the latter that must drive the agenda of our Congresses. And that pluralism should be reflected in the *Forum* as well. Thus, we have chosen for this issue of the *Forum* to depart from the theme of inequalities and to share with our readers contributions analyzing contemporary debates in literary analysis and, in the *On the Profession* section, reviewing developments in film studies. I wish to acknowledge here the assistance of Professors Cynthia Steele, of the University of Washington, and Claudia Ferman, of the University of Richmond, in recruiting authors to contribute to this discussion and in introducing their essays.

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My LASA-related efforts over the past several months have been focused largely on preparations for the Rio Congress. In a previous note in the *Forum* I stated, erroneously, that this would be the first LASA Congress held at a University. As several colleagues with first-hand memories of LASA’s initial years pointed out to me, a number of the Association’s early Congresses were held on American campuses. At that point in our history the meetings involved hundreds of scholars rather than thousands, and one of the principal challenges we face in Rio is managing a volume of participation that is unprecedented. We anticipate that as many as 8,000 people will register for the meeting, well above the 5,500 who took part in our largest event to date, the 2007 Congress in Montreal. Above and beyond the logistical question of where to lodge so many people and how to transport them from hotels to the Catholic University—challenges that we believe we have resolved thanks to the tireless efforts of LASA’s remarkably capable Secretariat staff and of our local organizing committee—we have struggled with numerous other challenges relating to the size and venue of the meeting. Let me note three of these that I believe will be of particular interest.

First, as I have noted in previous issues of the *Forum*, the growth in numbers carries with it a growth in the demand for travel funding. LASA has steadily increased the level of resources allocated to this end, focusing on the needs of researchers based in Latin America and of graduate students from around the world. I am pleased to report that despite the adverse economic climate we have managed to raise funds to award an unprecedented number of travel grants. Still, given the disjuncture between rapidly growing demand and slowly increasing funding levels, we are able to support an ever smaller percentage of all requests. This simply highlights the imperative that

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members seek alternative means of financing their participation in this and future LASA Congresses. It is neither practical nor reasonable to expect that LASA can fill this need. Moreover, funding for travel is, unfortunately, uneven across Congress tracks, because some of the grants we receive are track specific. For example, the Open Society Institute will support travel for participants in panels on Citizenship, Rights and Social Justice, Political Institutions and Processes, Politics and Public Policy, and Parties and Elections; the Tinker Foundation has provided funds for Crossborder Studies and Migration, Law, Jurisprudence and Society, Economics and Development, Development and Regional Alternatives, and Violence and (in)security; and the Inter-American Foundation has provided funds for Afro-Latin and Indigenous Peoples, Crossborder Studies and Migration, Development and Regional Alternatives, and Economics and Development. Our newest source of support, the Mellon-LASA seminar program, will fund participants in eight panels at the Rio Congress, drawn from five different tracks: Histories and Historiographies, International Relations, Culture, Power, and Political Subjectivities, Literary Studies: Contemporary, and Labor Studies and Class Relations.¹

Second, to again revisit a topic addressed in previous issues of the *Forum*, when there is growing demand but a limited number of days for the Congress and a finite number of meeting rooms, there is no alternative but to increase the rate of rejection of both paper and panel proposals.

This year more than 899 individuals and 230 sessions, 28 and 20 percent of the total submissions respectively, were notified that their proposals were not accepted. I recognize the disappointment this causes, and deeply regret that quite a few scholars whose work I value immensely may not be

able to attend the Congress as a result of their proposals having been rejected. But decisions were made through a peer review process that, however imperfect, corresponds in my assessment to best practice in our profession, and I see no other way for the Association to do its work. Constructive and practicable suggestions would be most welcome, as I am certain that my successors will be compelled to grapple with this difficult problem for the foreseeable future.

Finally, I wish to alert the membership to an important downside to our decision to meet in South America, specifically our inability to organize a book exhibit at the Rio Congress. Beginning well before I was involved in LASA governance, several U.S.-based book publishers made clear their displeasure with the decision to hold meetings outside of the United States, as this imposed significant burdens on them, including transport costs and potential customs difficulties. As planning for the Congress evolved, it became clear that most would choose not to attend. My hope was that their absence would be compensated in part by an unprecedented presence of Latin American publishers, who after all had for many years attended our meetings held in North America. In the end, however, and despite concerted efforts by the Secretariat, virtually no publishers signed up to take part in the exhibit. Faced with the prospect of spending \$50,000 on construction of exhibit space that appeared likely to be empty, we were compelled to cancel this key component of the Congress. I deeply regret this, but countless hours were expended trying to come up with a feasible solution, and I am convinced that we had no alternative but to take the decision that we did.

I am optimistic that this will be a one-time problem, and will do all that I can to ensure that it not occur again. That the next

Congress will be held in Toronto (October 6-9, 2010) will reduce the transportation costs incurred by North American publishers, and we will arrange (as we had managed to do for Rio) to ease customs procedures for publishers transporting books across borders. Looking further ahead, my strong personal preference is for the next Congress, slated tentatively for March 2011, to take place once again in the United States. Whether this comes about will depend in part on how U.S. visa policies evolve under the new administration, but I am cautiously optimistic that we will see a reversal of the Bush-era policies that, beginning with the decision to move the 2007 Congress from Boston to Montreal, dissuaded us from holding our meetings in the United States. Here is another instance in which the willingness of a new administration to pay heed to the judgments of the scholarly community would have a salutary impact on Hemispheric relations.

¹ Our current plan, which is still being refined, is to open the Mellon program to all tracks and to the Sections in future years, and to support 15-20 panels per Congress. In addition, a second component of the Mellon initiative, grant support for research workshops to take place between Congresses, will get underway soon after the Rio Congress, when we will issue to the membership a call for proposals, with applications to be selected based on a peer review competition. Details on this will be announced in the next issue of the *Forum*. ■