

From the President

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My colleague June Carolyn Erlick recently asked me, “Don’t you think it’s interesting that we who know something about Latin America might have good insights into events that are currently occurring in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East?” She went on to speculate about how Latin America’s experiences with military engagement in politics and its citizens’ long commitment to the construction of democratic governments have contributed to much more general analyses of the causes and consequences of deep political divisions, violence and repression, the dynamics of widespread civic mobilization, and collective efforts to broker and consolidate transitions to more effective and equitable societies.

Her comments were arresting, I thought, for suggesting that the most frequently voiced rationale for area studies—that such a focus leads to deep knowledge of countries, regions, cultures, and societies—needs to acknowledge that depth in knowledge goes hand in hand with breadth in understanding. From this expanded perspective, and whether the discipline is literature, language, history, politics, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, economics, or the environment, scholars in Latin American studies work with concepts and frameworks that can be helpful in understanding fundamental human interactions, and these in turn can provide insight into events happening elsewhere.

Of course, Egypt’s experience must be understood on its own terms, and clearly it and other countries of the Middle East have unique histories, cultures, challenges, and opportunities. Nevertheless, the deep knowledge we have of Latin America’s past and present may hold examples and lessons for those struggling to create peaceful and democratic societies elsewhere. Indeed, our studies and experiences regularly require us

to sort through what is unique to time and place and what is more transcendent. Depth and breadth are also present in the multidisciplinary that characterizes area studies centers and institutes. While most of us come to such organizational settings with training in a specific field, we can’t help learning more broadly about cultures, environments, and historical legacies when we meet, discuss, and debate.

How are these reflections relevant to LASA? At our Congress in Washington in 2013, over 40 directors of Latin American centers and institutes met to consider how the Association might encourage discussions among them and advance common objectives of research, teaching, and outreach. The discussion was lively and quickly turned to the need to ensure that Latin American studies centers and institutes had an appropriate and relevant explanation for the benefits they bring to educational institutions. In a post-Cold War and increasingly global context, what do such centers have to offer the worlds of scholarship and practice?

The meeting closed with a commitment to organize a workshop to focus on this question at the 2014 Congress in Chicago. As a director of a center for Latin American studies, I am looking forward to the workshop discussion and the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others. I suspect that all of us are confronted by the dilemma of reconciling scarce resources, high expectations from colleagues and students, and skeptical attitudes from university administrations. How different centers have tried to deal with such constraints and demands is certain to be illuminating. Together, we might generate a significant statement about the value and contributions of our organizations, reflecting both depth and breadth. In addition, I hope that this will be another



opportunity to consider how the conference theme of “Democracy and Memory” is one that encourages us to investigate and discuss both deeply and broadly.

In planning for this workshop, and the many panels and other events for Chicago, the new annual schedule of LASA Congresses has, of course, been a challenge to the Secretariat, Program Co-chairs Florencia Garramuño and Raúl Madrid, and to those who have taken time and effort to propose papers and panels. This year, 622 sessions have been proposed, an increase of 21 over last year; 1,174 individuals have submitted paper proposals independent of panels, 151 more than last year. Both of these data points indicate strong interest in LASA Congresses and are a challenge to planners who are responsible for reviewing and scheduling a large number of excellent panels across many different disciplines.

Indeed, we are still adjusting to the quicker pace needed for planning and responding to deadlines. In particular, deadlines for joining LASA in order to submit proposals and request travel funding have been an on-going concern of members and Secretariat alike. This year, the Secretariat extended deadlines to ensure broad participation and it will continue to make efforts to keep us on track for the annual event. Members and would-be members also need to anticipate the deadlines that appear under “Important Dates” on the LASA website. With another year’s experience to reflect upon, we should be on schedule for subsequent meetings.

The State of Latin American Democracies in the Early Twenty-First Century

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I am excited about the program that is being prepared for the Chicago meeting and am deeply grateful to the track and section chairs who are working to ensure that we have a stimulating and inclusive Congress and that we can maintain our goal of being both deep and broad. Florencia and Raúl are working overtime to ensure an excellent program, the track and section chairs are on schedule to meet deadlines, numerous committees are engaged in the hard work of reading materials and discussing awards, the Film Festival is taking shape, and the Secretariat is making sure that the Congress flows smoothly and efficiently for all. I think we can all look forward to a great meeting in Chicago in May. I look forward to seeing you there. ■

In an effort to include different voices and perspectives from key players in Latin American politics, we have invited former Ecuadorian president Jamil Mahuad (1998–2000) to provide his analysis of the state of Latin American democracies in this second decade of the twenty-first century. He contends that democracies must pass a test of legitimacy to understand their true nature. In essence, they must be examined based on their legitimacy of origin, legitimacy of behavior, and legitimacy of results. President Mahuad is not very optimistic about the results of this legitimacy test and leaves the reader with a warning based on neuroscience theories of perception: beware of those who destroy Democracy by using democracy. ■