

# From the President

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## Precariedades/precariado

I write this column as the United States continues to be overwhelmed by tens of thousands of refugee minors fleeing Central American violence, young people whose pasts are filled with danger, whose present is unsettled and future beyond precarious. By the time this issue of the *Forum* reaches your eyes, you will have already submitted your proposals to the Secretariat for our May International Congress in Puerto Rico, and perhaps you have been thinking over the last few months about how your work might engage the theme, “Precariedades, exclusiones, emergencias.” These three concepts address a widespread sense of urgency around key current social, political, and cultural conditions in nuestra América, while speaking as well as to both frustrations and pockets of burgeoning hope.

Each of the next three issues of *LASA Forum* will include a “Debates” section around one of these three concepts as a way of beginning the discussions we will take up more intensely in May. In this issue, scholars from Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Argentina, along with senior scholar Michael Bérubé from the United States, speak to the concept of *precariedades*, especially focusing on the ways that precariousness in the academic workforce carries profound implications for intellectual endeavors, educational quality, and public policy. Future *Forum* issues leading up to our annual meeting will focus on the other two key concepts and will be coordinated by LASA2015 program chairs Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (*exclusiones* in the winter issue) and Luis Cárcamo-Huechante (*emergencias* for the spring issue).

In his influential 2011 book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, British labor economist Guy Standing asks us to take a much harder look at the way globalization has been changing labor relations in general at the recent turn of the century, and

increasingly so since the economic crisis of 2008–2009. This book and its 2014 sequel, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, offer central contributions to his ongoing polemical analyses of the global phenomenon of an emerging class of workers that he calls the *precariat*, taking the term from 1980s French theory (Spanish: *precariado*, in parallel with the Marxist concept of the proletariat/*proletariado*), in order to describe a group characterized by instability, inequality, and insecurity. Regardless of considerations of national origin or political status, he argues that the way these contemporary individuals insert themselves into laboring life cannot be adequately understood by structures derived from the nineteenth-century industrial-age working class that inspired Marx and Engels. To begin with, the precariat, unlike the classic Marxist model of the proletariat, has no secure identity. Citizenship, Standing writes, fundamentally “is about the right to possess an identity, a sense of knowing who one is and with whom one has shared values and aspirations.” The members of the precariat are more “denizens” than “citizens” of the states in which they reside and—however fitfully—work.

Standing’s argument is controversial and meant to be so. Yet it resonates strongly with the rapid paradigm shifts we see in corporate preferences for a flexible, temporary workforce, the increasing popularity of unpaid internships and “volunteer opportunities” for young adults, as well as the globalized turn toward contract labor. But Standing takes his argument even further, suggesting that “the precariat is at the centre of the turmoil around multiculturalism and personal identities. A defining feature of all denizens is absence of rights.” Migrant laborers, especially those defined by ethnic and cultural difference, are the quintessential hidden face of this body of people, but they are the extreme case of a more general



erosion of rights: the right to education, the right to work, the right to migrate, the right to stay in one’s home country, the right to have rights. These precarious laborers, however silent, increasingly come to define this more general condition, epitomized in the “zero-hour contract” in which employees are required to be on call but offered no set hours or minimum schedule. Likewise, the precariat has access only to a fragmented public sphere of action to remedy these abuses: Internet cafes and social networking, the chaotic democracy of the worldwide Occupy movements, the 49,000-member Facebook group Badass Teachers.

Unsurprisingly, the scholars writing in this *Forum*’s “Debates” speak from the context of the institution most familiar to many of our members, that of university teaching and scholarship. While the conditions of the academic workplace vary tremendously throughout the Americas, one of the huge shifts in higher education in the United States and many countries in Latin America has been to move away from permanent faculty hiring toward a system of contingent, contract labor, increasing the class of denizens rather than empowered citizens of academia. Ironically, many of the educational reforms in countries from Mexico to Chile respond to stated and explicit goals to promote a “North American” model of higher education, at the same time that the United States is rapidly abandoning it. No wonder students are protesting. While it would be naive to expect answers from the participants in this debate, the short papers here are a clarion call to think more deeply and engage more actively in our local institutional practices. ■