

The Otros Saberes Initiative: A Shout-Out for the “Second Wind”

by CHARLES R. HALE | University of Texas at Austin | cr hale@mail.utexas.edu

The Otros Saberes initiative was founded about a decade ago at an Executive Council meeting in Puerto Rico leading up to the 2005 LASA Congress. A number of people participated enthusiastically in that initial discussion, including Sonia Álvarez, Lynn Stephen, Joanne Rappaport, and George Yúdice; over the next two years the organizing group expanded considerably. The initiative gradually evolved into a vibrant series of activities, focused especially on funded research with support from the Ford Foundation, Harvard University, the Open Society Institute, the Inter-American Foundation, and the School for Advanced Research, and on the opening of a scholarly track of the same name in the 2007 LASA Congress in Montreal. The central idea of both the funded research and the scholarly track was to promote deep and sustained collaboration between intellectuals inside and outside the academy to produce knowledge validated by and useful to both. Around the same time, an overlapping group of LASA members organized to mark the first decade of the LASA/Oxfam America Martin Diskin Lectureship by raising supplemental funds that would allow the committee to name a dissertation writer and a senior scholar who exemplify Martin’s commitment to activist scholarship. I consider this two-part award to form part of the broad spirit of the Otros Saberes initiative.

After this strong and exciting start from 2005 to 2008, which I coordinated with Lynn Stephen, and a subsequent round coordinated by Rachel Sieder, the initiative languished for five years, for reasons that others will have to explain. Fortunately it now has caught a second wind. The first two rounds of funded research focused on indigenous and Afro-descendant cultural politics and on legal pluralism, yielding, respectively, an edited volume published by SAR Press (Hale and Stephen 2013) and an

interactive website that will go live in the next couple of months. These activities also brought more than a dozen civil-society-based scholars to two consecutive LASA Congresses, exposing them to the scholarly exchange and enriching that exchange with their presence. Finally, and most important, the initiative yielded a flow of research findings and *saberes* that, because of the way they were produced, had an unusually strong chance of making a contribution to social-justice-oriented problem solving. I commend LASA President Debra Castillo, Program Co-chairs Aída Hernández and Luis Cárcamo-Huechante, Otros Saberes Track Chairs Shannon Speed and Maylei Blackwell, and Executive Director Milagros Pereyra-Rojas for creating the conditions for the second wind, and I look forward to the fruits of these efforts when we return to Puerto Rico in 2015.

This brief article, occasioned by my having been a founder and strong supporter of the Otros Saberes initiative, has two objectives. First, I review three compelling reasons—practical, ethical, and epistemological—for LASA to support and advance this initiative. Second, I note some of the challenges that faced the initiative when I rotated off the Executive Council in 2008. I conclude by emphasizing the great promise of Otros Saberes and by urging LASA members who are convinced by these arguments to join the effort to keep it vibrant.

Otros Saberes: The Rationale

In its most basic form, the practical rationale for LASA to endorse Otros Saberes is the least controversial and perhaps most compelling. It could even be presented as a matter of professional self-interest. LASA-affiliated scholars are

devoted to research and other forms of knowledge production on a wide array of topics in Latin America; civil-society-based intellectuals are keepers and producers of an enormous portion of this knowledge, available in many forms, from unprocessed data to highly sophisticated analysis. Who would deny the value of partnerships meant to garner this knowledge, allowing the scholar to achieve the strongest possible grounding for the conclusions he or she reaches?

The problem with leaving the argument in this rudimentary form, of course, is that it tends to reinforce the deep-seated hierarchies whereby the purveyors of “expert knowledge” take in available inputs like a vacuum cleaner and offer little more than an impenetrable or otherwise self-referential piece of scholarly writing in return. There are, of course, many instances—increasingly at the insistence of the civil-society intellectuals themselves—where the relationship is structured as a more horizontal or reciprocal form of exchange. Still, these arrangements retain a bottom-line logic that is often fairly instrumental—epitomized by a market exchange, whereby the scholar pays partners for their time and data—which ultimately stands in tension with the broader spirit of Otros Saberes. Ideally, the practical benefits are reaped while the relationship is fundamentally transformed: scholars and civil-society-based intellectuals work together to define a research topic, conduct the research, and interpret the results. This way, the scholar accrues the practical benefits of access and exchange, while the entire research process goes much further toward validating diverse forms of knowledge and placing them (or their creators) in sustained dialogue with one another.

The ethical mandate is equally strong, although more variable in its persuasive force, because it depends on whether LASA members and leaders endorse the ethical principles to which *Otros Saberes* appeals. Latin American studies, like U.S. academia in general, emerged in the context of class, race, and gender hierarchies, such that for generations its cadre generally hailed from white, male, and middle- to upper-class sectors of society and reproduced privileges associated with those sectors. This homogeneity did not mean, of course, that everyone agreed intellectually and politically or that they defended the privileges conferred upon them. But on both ethical and intellectual grounds, this inherited cadre of Latin American studies needed to change, which generally occurred only when excluded or marginalized groups mobilized. Again reflecting broader patterns, LASA membership today is more diversified—very much to the benefit of the field—even if we still have a long way to go.

One key element of this diversity, in striking contrast to the early days, is the presence of Latin America-based scholars. This presence challenges in salutary ways the intellectual compass and scope of Latin American studies, breaking down north-south hierarchies, both conceptual and political, which had been hard-wired into the field from its inception. Yet to leave the matter there would be to neglect, and inadvertently reinforce, hierarchies internal to Latin American societies, whose academic establishments have been built on elite privileges and exclusions that run parallel to those in the United States. The ethical mandate engages both realities in tandem: to open spaces in LASA to the greater participation and voice of those positioned on the margins of their respective societies, in both the north and the south.

The *Otros Saberes* initiative makes a modest contribution to this ethical mandate, though in an unconventional way that one hopes would be especially persuasive to LASA members. It is not an affirmative action program. (I am a strong advocate of these programs as well, an example of which is the travel fund for indigenous and Afro-descendant LASA members.) Rather, it identifies specific realms of knowledge production that have been marginalized in Latin American societies and creates opportunities for the protagonists to bring those *saberes* into the flow of scholarly exchange at the Congress and related venues. For example, the first round of research funding, which focused on indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, posited that despite the long history of scholarly attention to these peoples, the knowledge they have produced, especially in contexts of organized efforts for redress and empowerment, has been neglected. When the six research projects came to fruition, they brought a cohort of black and indigenous intellectuals to the LASA Congress, and in addition brought forth novel research questions, forms of data and knowledge, and analyses and interpretations, thereby enriching scholarly exchange as a whole. The argument does play differently when the focus is topical rather than identity based, such as round two's exploration of "legal pluralism." But the basic logic remains: if the *saberes* in question are substantive and challenging to mainstream academia, and they are *otros*, in the sense of being marginalized or suppressed, opening these spaces will bring forth both forms of enrichment.

The third rationale is epistemological. I will present this one in a more superficial manner, both because its full elaboration would require a different and more extensive exposition, and also, quite

frankly, because a definitive argument along these lines—to my knowledge—has yet to be made. In fact, I am most comfortable thinking of this rationale as a hypothesis, which comes in two parts. First, knowledge produced as a collaboration between conventional research routines and sustained practice (i.e., efforts to resolve a problem or transform a social condition) will yield insight and understanding that otherwise would be impossible to achieve. I am reasonably confident that this part of the hypothesis has been borne out by the cumulative results of activist/collaborative/engaged research over the years. I can cite two examples from the first round of *Otros Saberes* research. The civil-society-based members of the team that studied the *Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales*, in Oaxaca and California, consisted of indigenous women intellectuals who had experienced gender discrimination within an organization that had been known mainly as a strikingly successful example of transnational indigenous rights organizing. Their practice of organizing for gender equality fused with the skills and training of academy-based researchers to produce a novel and powerful analysis of the problem. Similarly, Afro-Puerto Ricans who had experienced racism, and who themselves grappled with the complexities of internalized racism, provided leadership for an oral history project that explored these issues with unprecedented depth and sensitivity as they play out in Puerto Rico. (To pursue these examples at greater length, see chapters 4 and 7 in the *Otros Saberes* edited volume.)

The second part of the hypothesis is more challenging and potentially more far-reaching. By situating ourselves at the intersection of sustained practice and conventional research routines we participate in a process of knowledge

creation that is substantively distinct from that of mainstream research routines. Davydd Greenwood (2008) makes this argument, for example, recuperating the classical philosophy term *phronesis* to refer to “practice-proven theory,” a category of knowledge that he claims was systematically suppressed in the course of institutionalization of U.S. social science in the twentieth century. Donald Stokes makes a parallel argument for the natural sciences in his fascinating book *Pasteur’s Quadrant* (1997). Patricia Hill Collins (2000), a founding proponent of standpoint theory, presents black feminist theory as a distinct epistemological practice, with parallel reasoning. Admittedly, we still have a lot of work to do in this realm, which I view as the next frontier for those committed to opening our academic institutions to this kind of research in humanist and social science scholarship. What an exciting prospect to have LASA out front in pushing these boundaries, rather than waiting for others to validate emergent trends!

In conclusion, let me note four challenges that I hope will be addressed by the newly energized efforts in this realm. The first is institutionalization. While thrilled by the rejuvenation of Otros Saberes at the impetus of LASA’s current leadership, we should be sobered by the preceding hiatus. This program needs a solid institutional status to make it less vulnerable to the periodic shifts in priorities and commitments. The second, closely related challenge is funding. Otros Saberes requires reliable budgetary allocations that could (and I believe should!) come in part from LASA coffers, but in all fairness must be met primarily by new funds. Generous donations from the foundations cited above provided a terrific start in this endeavor and helped to prove the concept. The current challenge, I am convinced, needs to

be met through a dedicated endowment. Third, and more conceptually, we have to make sure that Otros Saberes evolves in response to balanced impetus: both what is beneficial for the Association and what the civil-society-based protagonists who participate demand and need. This piece, for example, gives much more emphasis to the former, an artifact of its particular purpose, which does not do justice to the broader endeavor. Finally, related to this previous point, we need further reflection on the ultimate objective of the initiative—to open spaces within LASA for horizontal dialogue among a wide variety of *saberes*, on the assumption that this dialogue both reflects and contributes directly to the processes of institutional and social change to which we are committed. Toward this end, some even have suggested that the initiative needs to be renamed, from Otros Saberes to diverse, plural, or multiple *saberes*. Regardless of the name, though, the challenge remains.

All this is food for thought as we prepare for what is sure to be an exciting Congress in Puerto Rico and a promising relaunch of the Otros Saberes initiative.

References

Collins, Patricia Hill

2000 *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Greenwood, Davydd J.

2008 “Theoretical Research, Applied Research, and Action Research: The Deinstitutionalization of Activist Research.” In *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, edited by Charles R. Hale, 299–340. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hale, Charles R., and Lynn Stephen, eds.

2013 *Otros Saberes: Collaborative Research on Indigenous and Afro-Descendent Cultural Politics*. Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced Research Press.

Stokes, Donald E.

1997 *Pasteur’s Quadrant: Basic Science and Technological Innovation*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. ■