

# From the President

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It is a tremendous privilege to serve as LASA president as we plan the historic 50th Anniversary Congress for next May in New York City. The association began in New York in 1966, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution's brash challenge of hemispheric hegemonies, and LASA's early development was in great measure tied to the deepening of the region's (not so) cold and dirty wars of the 1970s and '80s. Since I came of age as a historian and a "Latin Americanist" around this time, mentored by Emilia Viotti da Costa, one of Brazil's leading intellectuals who had herself been expelled from the Universidade de São Paulo and forced to re-create her intellectual and political life in the North, it is not surprising that my apprenticeship was steeped in the hemispheric debates and interdisciplinary reverberations about Latin America's neocolonial past and the dissident models of development (many emanating from the global South) about how to overcome it. Nor is it surprising that my intellectual and political agendas have often turned on questions pertaining to the United States' formidable and complex presence in Latin America, and its intersection—in political-economic, social, and cultural terms—with Latin America's tumultuous "Century of Revolution." That century would ultimately wend its way from what was Latin America's first great revolution, in Mexico, seven years before the Soviet revolution, through the implementation of the Central American Peace Accords in the mid-1990s. But it was during the late 1960s, '70s, and '80s that the region's brutal Cold War left an indelible imprint in Latin America's killing fields and barrios and on so many LASA members, north and south. For many of us who came to study the era's social movements, forms of repression, and memory struggles, Latin America seemed suspended in those critical decades "between tragedy and promise," as my

fellow historian Steve Stern has aptly put it. Now, as LASA celebrates its first half century, it seems terribly important to critically take stock of where Latin America and LASA have been and, more importantly, where they may be headed. Over the past 50 years, LASA members have gone from grappling theoretically with the region's neocolonial condition, guided by a few metanarratives, to deconstructing the multivalent and transnational processes, flows, actors, identities, and knowledge that shape its potential for transformation in a postcolonial, post-atrocity moment. In the span of a half century, the field itself has changed and an array of new approaches, methodologies, and collaborative strategies make the study of Latin America more exciting and relevant than ever before.

As a historian, one of the very few who have presided over our association in recent decades, I am proud to oversee our anniversary Congress. My professional life has developed in connection with LASA's evolution, and my penchant for interdisciplinary historical research owes more to LASA's congresses than I can acknowledge. The association's generative force in my life has often seemed serendipitous: LASA congresses kindled ideas for international symposia and volumes; galvanized extended discursive communities; and even birthed a long-lived seminar (with my late wife and colleague Patricia Pessar) that integrated historical and anthropological approaches. (To extend the generative metaphor, we used to joke that our now twenty-five-year-old son had been conceived after one of the memorable Gran Bailes!)

Like many of us, I just returned from the inspirational Congress in San Juan, continuing to marvel at the potential for interdisciplinary renovation and innovation



that LASA epitomizes. Among the memories I will treasure from San Juan are the standing-room-only welcoming ceremony that featured two young women who brought down the house and underscored LASA's changing demographics: *boricua* poet and writer Mayra Santos Febres and Oaxacan hip-hop artist Mare Advertencia Lirika. Also deeply inspiring was the speech by Kalman Silvert Lifetime Achievement Award honoree, Chilean sociologist Manuel Antonio Garretón. Manuel Antonio inflected the disciplinary challenges that attend studying political parties and national political processes in a cross-disciplinary and socially conscious context, and ended by expressing his commitment to the pluralism of LASA, especially the San Juan Congress's commitment to the kind of grassroots collaborations that have marked the relaunching of the Otros Saberes initiative. It seems to me that if LASA and area studies have any prospect of navigating the formidable economic, epistemological, and often ideological challenges posed by the burgeoning presence of "global" and "security" studies, they will have to assert their own claims to appropriate and refashion global studies. As past president Charlie Hale has pointed out, this will entail a continuing commitment to the core principles that have always guided LASA: deep contextual understanding based on language, culture, and history; new conceptualizations of interdisciplinary and grassroots collaboration; and a broadening of the processes of community building, social transformation, and of knowledge formation itself. A timely reengagement with these principles, long staples of LASA's

mission in its first half century, will help to sustain us during the next 50 years.

Program chairs Ariel Armony and Amy Chazkel discuss the structure of the landmark 2016 New York Congress, “LASA at 50,” elsewhere in this issue. Here, I want to allude more generally to the broader goals of LASA during its anniversary year. We have never been bigger or more diverse: LASA is now approaching ten thousand members, almost half of whom live in Latin America. Since over 20 percent of our membership are students, in keeping with our goals of promoting a more diverse and engaged association, the Executive Council and Secretariat are working with student members to enhance their participation and better represent their interests. In the same spirit of promoting a more vital and inclusive LASA and building on the energy of the San Juan Congress, we look forward to promoting the *Otros Saberes* website and launching the third phase of *Otros Saberes* in New York City. The rationale is clear: the creation of new methodologies and intellectual practices, enhanced by social media, have enabled Latin American studies to expand notions of collaboration, research roles, and knowledge production. The vitality of *Otros Saberes* and the possibilities it affords to promote partnerships between academic scholars and intellectuals and knowledge producers based in civil society constitutes one of LASA’s most exciting initiatives moving forward.

LASA’s return at 50 to the great hemispheric metropolis in which it debuted in 1966 is fortuitous for many reasons. Most importantly it allows us to critically take stock of Latin American studies and chart new directions in a transnational, multicultural urban center that itself underscores the extent to which the field

has changed. New York should provide an ideal location for featured sessions on the intersection of Latin American and Latino/a studies; the possibilities for meaningful immigration reform; the shifting parameters of relations with Cuba; an intergenerational conversation among leading journalists who have reported on Latin America over the long haul; a frank discussion of the divergence or convergence of research agendas in the global North and South; and an examination of new dimensions of Latin American studies and global studies across dynamic North-South and South-South contexts—to name but a few. To build interest toward the 2016 LASA Congress, future issues of the *LASA Forum* will feature dossiers on several of these themes.

The 50th Anniversary Congress will afford us an opportunity both to celebrate our long-running enterprise and to subject it to critical scrutiny. Through several special events within the Congress and outside it, “LASA at 50” will also provide an opportunity to experience a unique Latin American, Caribbean, and global city. In a variety of cultural contexts we will interrogate conventional notions of North and South, core and periphery, inner borough and outer borough, and in the process expand our understanding of Latin American studies. I encourage you to join me in New York to celebrate our first 50 years and begin talking about the next 50! ■