

Socioenvironmental Polarization and Rivalry among Great Powers

by **Gerardo Otero**, LASA President, 2021–2022, and LASA2022 Program Co-chairs: **Kata Beilin**, **Enrique Dussel Peters**, and **Birgit Müller**

As our Congress is about to begin on May 5, 2022, we have all been forced to reflect on the dangers of the growing polarization between the Great Powers. This is indeed the main theme of our conference, in addition to the socioeconomic and environmental polarization within Latin America and the Caribbean. The war in Ukraine, which clouded our hearts as the pandemic began to subside, will undoubtedly appear often in our conversations during the Congress, in various contexts. We also think about the significance of the intercultural dialogue that we envisioned in San Francisco and will now be carried out online. Our intention was to search for understanding among different cultural and political perspectives, which we thought could be our academic contribution to peace. This peace would mean that our best possible collaboration would benefit not only the involved nations and peoples, but also the planetary environments with remaining nonhuman species, soils, and water. Nothing is as environmentally destructive as war, apart from being the greatest human disaster. For good and bad, nowadays flows of resources, ideas, and viruses connect all of us. The disasters of recent years have made our planetary interconnectedness more perceptible than ever, and the realization that we are all in it together should prompt more responsibility and generosity in exchanges between different academic discourses and between academia and the world.

Latin American studies have always been interdisciplinary. We have attempted to promote an interdisciplinary dialogue among Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and other regions of the world, integrating current discussions in the various issues of *LASA Forum*

since July 2021. The summer issue, titled “The China and Latin America and Caribbean Relation” and edited by Enrique Dussel Peters, explores the political complexity arising from the growing competition between the US and China in LAC. The fall issue, “Socioenvironmental Destruction, Extractivism and Dependency,” edited by Gerardo Otero, debates the dilemmas and challenges of the extractive economies of the twenty-first century and their colonial roots. The winter *Forum*, “Political Ecology and Environmental Governance,” edited by Birgit Müller, focuses on the irrationalities and ambivalence of policies justifying business as usual while destroying the very basis of urban and rural livelihoods: water, forests, and biodiversity. Our present spring *Forum*, “Climate Change as a Cultural Problem: Transdisciplinary Environmental Humanities and Latin American Studies,” edited by Kata Beilin, discusses transdisciplinary approaches to socioenvironmental problems with renewed conceptual frameworks and in dialogue with Indigenous knowledges.

The excellent presidential panels that we assembled for our 40th LASA Congress will be a continuation of *Forum* interdisciplinary dialogues. Here we highlight some major themes of these panels. Please make sure to check the detailed descriptions, time, and date in the program.

Our keynote speaker is Alicia Bárcena, who will deliver a presentation titled “Latin America, the Caribbean and China: Conditions and Challenges.” Bárcena was the executive secretary of the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) from July 2008 to April 2022. ECLAC has been one of the central

regional institutions of the United Nations contributing to a systematic socioeconomic analysis of the LAC-China relationship since 2010.

Regarding the increasing rivalry between the US and China globally in LAC, we have organized the presidential panel titled “The Latin America and Caribbean–China Relationship in the Third Decade of the Twenty-First Century.” This panel assembles colleagues Enrique Dussel Peters (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), Adrian Hearn (University of Melbourne), Rebecca Ray (Boston University Global Development Policy Center), Chai Yu (Institute of Latin American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), Celio Hiratuka (Universidade Estadual de Campinas), and Cynthia A Sanborn (Universidad del Pacífico), with chair Gerardo Otero (LASA President, Simon Fraser University). These specialists will discuss current challenges in the relationships between the Great Powers and their effects on our region from a variety of perspectives, including socioeconomic and environmental debates as highlighted in the LASA 2022 Congress title.

Three presidential panels, on lithium, Amazonia, and agriculture, bring together perspectives from political ecology and recent strategic developments in Latin America. The focus is on the mechanisms of governance in the face of increasing internal contestation and ambivalent global connections that continue to extract while calling for compliance with international environmental and climate conventions. These three panels highlight the irrationalities of current economic policies justifying business as usual through denial, lies, and the legalization of illegal practices. They also consider political and ecological alternatives for the future.

To decarbonize the planet, one of the main strategies consists of substituting fossil fuels in transportation with a technology based on electricity, powered by lithium-ion batteries. This strategy seeks not only to “stabilize” the global temperature through emission-free batteries, but also to “stabilize” the increasingly profitable renewable energy markets.

The panel “Worlds of Lithium: Between Powers, Powerlessness and New Political Forces” is chaired by Marina Weinberg (University of Amsterdam) with participants Cristóbal Bonelli (University of Amsterdam), Cristina Dorador (Universidad de Antofagasta), Javiera Barandiarán (University of California, Santa Barbara), Felix Dorn (Universität Innsbruck), and Martina Gamba (Universidad Nacional de La Plata). Marisol de la Cadena (University of California, Davis) is the panel discussant. Presenters will deal with the antinomies of moving away from fossil energies and into transportation powered by zero-emissions batteries. The panel explores the tensions of this energy transition, conceived for the Global North, without considering the ecological implications for the sustainability of interdependent ecological processes in Latin America. By separating the world into discrete and distinct continents, it imposes a univocal and universal linear time. China’s increasing demand for natural resources and its offer to build infrastructure have led to the reprimarization of Latin American economies. A patent contradiction emerges between the unwillingness to radically question patterns of production and consumption and instead to extoll lithium, among other minerals, as an ecological and economic stabilizer. Where lithium is extracted, this strategy destabilizes and damages territories located in countries that are already going through severe political crisis, generating, in turn, “territories of powerlessness.” These “territories of impotence” challenge and problematize, from their multiple presents, capitalist energy transitions that claim to enact a univocal planetary route.

The panel “Is There a Future for Amazonia? Contingencies, Conditionalities” features some of the top Amazonia researchers and modelers who integrate a range of social, natural, and simulation sciences on large-scale and long-term Amazon questions: Eduardo Brondizio (Indiana University), Cynthia Simmons (Michigan State University), Gustavo Oliveira (University of California Irvine), Britaldo Soares Filho (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais), and Philip Fearnside (Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia). Susanna Hecht (University

of California, Los Angeles) is the chair and discussant of the panel. The current, accelerated deforestation of Amazonia, which has become a net emitter of CO₂ due to tremendous forest fires, menaces the climate and in particular the rainfall in the entire Southern Cone and presages a Southern Cone dust bowl in the decades to come. “Amazonia is not just a key element in the global carbon system but also functions as a kind of land-to-atmosphere water pump, the source of South America’s atmospheric rivers,” says Susanna Hecht. States have been the explicit territorial owners and enablers of settlement and deforestation, regardless of other forms of legal or illegal interventions in Amazonian worlds. State presence or absence is often strategic, and the forms that this presence takes have huge implications for land, water, and now, of course, air. Between 2004 and 2014, during Lula da Silva’s mandate, for instance, deforestation rates were slowed down and dropped by over 70 percent. A complex tool box aligned at many scales was deployed for Amazonian protection, including massive designation of new protected areas, expanded forms of local governance, enforcement of environmental laws, and deforestation moratoria. By 2022, up to 93 percent of the massive clearings qualify as illegal, but deforesters obtain amnesty, titles are transferred, and holdings reconfigured as legal. The panel discusses the implications of current dynamics on the resilience, justice, and “future history” of Amazonia, integrating sciences, social sciences, and commitment for Amazonia.

The panel titled “Debates on the Future of Agriculture: New Technologies, Agricultural Knowledge, Alternatives, and Rights of Indigenous Peoples” features Víctor Toledo (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), Gregg Hetherington (Concordia University), Walter A. Pengue (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento), Birgit Müller (CNRS, EHESS), and Bernardo Caamal, Maya activist and agronomist. Chaired by Kata Beilin (Universidad de Wisconsin–Madison), this roundtable’s discussant is Gerardo Otero (Simon Fraser University). The panel will envision the possible future scenarios for agriculture in Latin America, considering the impacts that industrial

agriculture has had on the territories of Latin America, in particular Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico, and Nicaragua. The panelists will consider agricultural technologies from the beginning of the Green Revolution to the latest ones that extend the modern agricultural paradigm: proteomics, genomics, nanotechnology, and GA 4.0 and their environmental and social impacts. The damages suffered by the original populations will be one of the main foci of the panelists’ attention.

Among the environmental externalities of industrial agriculture are intangible effects on hydraulic resources and soils, biodiversity, and chronic illnesses of farmworkers and rural populations at the service of modern exploitation, along with the loss of the local knowledge of Indigenous and peasant populations. The panelists will consider how addressing these problems requires the transformation of governance systems for the collective empowerment and autonomy of local actors, and interest in sustainable models, while incorporating different voices affected by extractivist agricultural activities.

When considering optimistic future scenarios, we consider low-carbon eco-agri-food systems, rich in micronutrients, sufficient, sustainable, fair, and respectful of the lifestyles of Indigenous cultures. These systems should not only focus on agroecology but could also integrate the social and solidarity economy and Indigenous and peasant knowledges, in addition to chosen new technologies. Panelists will discuss the obstacles that stand in the way of this optimistic alternative scenario, and the cultural and political values necessary for its implementation.

The panel “Progressive Governments and the Resurgence of the Right in Latin America” addresses sociopolitical polarization. With presenters Carlos Figueroa-Ibarra (Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla), Gustavo Eduardo Córdova Eguívar (Universidad Mayor de San Simón), Kemy Oyarzun Vaccaro (Universidad de Chile), Emelio Rafael Betances Medina (Gettysburg College-Pennsylvania), and Isabela Kalil (Fundação Escola de Sociologia e Política de

São Paulo), the panel will be chaired by Gerardo Otero (LASA President, Simon Fraser University), with discussant Carla Espósito (Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla). This panel will discuss contradictory processes seen in Latin America during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Starting in the 1980s, the neoliberal model was proposed and imposed as the only route for the world. But unfulfilled promises and crises started to manifest themselves with the rise of challenging social and political movements from both left and right. The political map was reconfigured with the emergence of post-neoliberal governments, which in turn triggered a right-wing reaction: this was part of a world-wide extreme right-wing trend with neofascist features. It differed from the neoliberal right that was ascendant at the end of the twentieth century. A new phase of coups d'état and "lawfare" emerged as repressive ways to counter the progressive cycle. The neoliberal crisis also spawned expressions of new social actors and new forms of social struggle: in addition to traditional class and union movements, other varied movements were added, such as the cocaleros in Bolivia, Indigenous peoples, retired persons, feminists, movements for sexual diversity, and others. Social networks became critical new and speedy forms of communication and terrains of struggle, a trend that deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic. This panel seeks to analyze this contradictory process of polarization with the rise and seeming downfall of the progressive cycle, which is seeing a rebound in 2022.

Finally, the United States continues to be a major pole of attraction to thousands of Latin American and other migrants displaced by violence and insufficient economic opportunities. US responses to migrant flows have thus become a major issue of contention in internal politics and consternation in LAC. Addressing this is the panel titled "Fixing U.S. Immigration and Asylum Policy: Lessons from Policy-Oriented Research," chaired by Wayne Cornelius (University of California, San Diego) with the participation of Jorge A. Schiavon (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas), Abigail Andrews (University of California, San Diego), David Hausman (Stanford University),

and Chloe East (University of Denver). This panel will review key developments in US immigration and asylum policy, discuss the implications of recent policy-oriented research in multiple disciplines, and envision future policy directions, including proposals to mesh immigration/asylum policymaking with demographic changes in the United States and Mexico. It also seeks to more systematically address root causes of migration flows from Northern Triangle countries, including the migration caused by socioenvironmental polarization and climate change, which constitutes the main theme of our conference.

We invite you to follow and actively participate in all these debates. The recordings will be available in the LASA channel in YouTube, so please, share them with your colleagues and students as you see fit. We hope we will learn and think together, and that we will leave the conference with new initiatives, ideas, and collaborations contributing to peace, sustainability, and good life. We also hope that friendships, understanding, and common values that we will affirm in our dialogues will allow us to leave this LASA Congress with more hope for the future. //