

Biographical Statement

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I am honored to be the recipient of LASA's 2023 Kalman Silvert Award. Silvert, whom I had the pleasure to know, was LASA's first president. When working at the Ford Foundation, he labored to deepen democracy and promote human rights in Latin America.¹

The award gives me an opportunity to reflect on what I see as my lifetime contributions to Latin American studies, both scholarly and institution building, and on how much I have learned from Latin America and Latin Americans. If my writings have been insightful, then much of the credit goes to the people I met in the region when doing research.²

My Personal-Intellectual Journey

My interest in Latin America began at age ten, when my parents took me to Mexico on a family trip. The lives of Indigenous Mexicans, so different from those of white middle class Americans in whose midst I grew up, captured my imagination: women market vendors whose children patiently accompanied them for hours in their stalls, as American children would not; families who produced beautiful textiles and pottery, including children younger than me; festivities honoring village saints; a UNESCO job-training program for people with little formal education in Janitzio, a small island in Lake Pátzcuaro. Today, any skills the people of Janitzio had have been brushed aside as the island has been developed into an

“exotic” tourist destination. These and other eye-opening experiences triggered my lifelong interest in the region.

Not surprisingly, I decided to write my PhD dissertation on Mexico. I focused on urban poverty. At the time, Latin America cities in general and Mexico City in particular were experiencing soaring migration from the countryside as governments in the region focused on import substitution which limited opportunities in rural areas in favor of the cities. Unable to afford conventional housing, migrants imaginatively pursued their own solutions to their housing needs, individually and collectively. They formed squatter settlements and organized to pressure politicians to allow them to stay; to build roads, schools, and markets; and to bring in electricity, piped water, and public transportation so that they could get to work, wherever in the city that might be.

How to understand the experiences of the urban poor? Conventional social science “wisdom” at the time—such as Edward Banfield’s amoral familism and Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty, both of which posited that the values of the poor, their individualism and fatalism, kept them from improving their lot in life, and modernization theory, which posited that economic mobility rested on adoption of Western values—missed the mark and left much unexplained. Marxists who posited that immiseration fuels

¹ Chapters in the book *Kalman Silvert: Engaging Latin America, Building Democracy*, edited by Abraham Lowenthal and Martin Weinstein, highlight Silvert’s influence on Latin American studies and his commitment to advancing human rights. LARC, LASA’s publisher, published it in Spanish, in 2021 and you can read it online as well (<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.larcommons.net/site/books/e/10.25154/book7/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1678363767261898&usg=AOvVaw0AF6rnQnMrokMKLcoz55oD>).

² For wonderful descriptions of how Lars Schoultz and Wayne Cornelius underwent fairly similar journeys as political scientists, see their essays in *LASA Forum* when they were recipients of the Silvert Award. They both provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of my essay.

mobilizations for radical change were no more enlightening. Few of the poor supported parties of the Left.

Although I was trained in sociology at Columbia University to be “scientific” and theoretical, the Mexicans I got to know when doing fieldwork in a squatter settlement and inner-city slum convinced me to dispense with the conceptual frameworks in which I had been schooled because they blinded me from understanding the lives of the poor. I turned instead to a more historically grounded structural frame of analysis. I was fortunate that my thesis adviser, Juan Linz, urged me to focus on people in positions of authority, not only on the rank and file. My new analytic lenses led me to understand how poor people’s lives were embedded in broader institutions and processes that limited their economic opportunities and contained their political demands: this is all detailed in my first book, *The Poverty of Revolution: The State and Urban Poor in Mexico*.

Following an earthquake in 1987 that devastated the inner-city slum on which the book had focused, I decided to do a follow-up study. The earthquake had led the “slum dwellers” to defy co-optation and to form vibrant social movements, including one that demanded the reconstruction of their neighborhood rather than permit its demolition for commercial development. Fatalists and amoral familists the “slum dwellers” were not. Impressed by their activism, I proceeded not only to write a lengthy epilogue for a new edition of *The Poverty of Revolution* but also to edit a book, *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, with chapters on social movements throughout the hemisphere. The book has had a long shelf life. It highlights the vibrancy of civil society—among women, Indigenous peoples, workers, and others—and in so doing, it demonstrates the need to bring ordinary people into our understanding of Latin America in the context of broader institutions and cultural forces.

Although I remained interested in Latin American urban poverty and social movements over the years, my days spent among Mexico’s poor led me

to question what impact social revolutions have. Mexico had an extremely bloody revolution in the early twentieth century. Given the huge upheaval, why was there as much poverty and inequality in contemporary Mexico as in other countries, such as Brazil, that never had a revolution? To address this question, I coauthored an article with Peter Evans, a Brazilianist. Further questioning revolutions, I went on to study the impacts of other twentieth-century social revolutions in Latin America, in Bolivia and, especially, Cuba. In my book *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro*, I analyze developments in Cuba since its 1959 revolution. I showed that much (though certainly not all) of what transpired in the country was driven by “underlying” state institutional interests and not merely or mainly by ideology, as conventional wisdom and official proclamations suggested.

Meanwhile, Latin American immigration to the United States was soaring, including from Cuba, both despite and because of the country’s revolution. Rates of urbanization in the region approached those in the United States, even though Latin American cities offered far fewer economic opportunities. Under the circumstances, Latin Americans came to view moving to the United States as their best option—and I followed their footsteps. In *The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the U.S. and Their Homeland*, I showed the conventional paradigm in immigration studies—that key differences in immigrant adaptation and socioeconomic mobility hinge on whether people are US born or foreign born—to leave unexplained important differences among first-generation immigrants who uprooted at different points in time with different lived experiences. Cubans who immigrated in the early days of the revolution and in the post-Soviet era experienced very different Cubas and, as a result, adapted differently to the United States and related differently to Cuba once resettled in the United States.

In the course of uncovering ways that Cuban immigrants spurred changes in Cuba, I became interested in deepening the understanding of economic, political, social, and cultural transformations that immigrants around the

world have unleashed in their homelands. This led me to coedit the book *How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands*. Whereas immigration studies focused primarily on immigrants' new-country adaptation, this book addresses the much-less-understood changes that immigrants have unleashed in their countries of origin.

Most recently, my intellectual journey led me to explore US immigration policies determining which foreign-born individuals can enter with authorization and with what entitlements. Once again, I focused on Cubans, but this time comparing their experiences with those of Haitians. In *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*, I document how inequitably Washington treats immigrants from different countries. I detail the multiplicity of entitlements extended to Cubans at the same time that Haitians were detained, deported, and denied citizenship and other rights. I hope the book, and other work of mine, will contribute to greater immigrant equity and equality.

Next on my agenda? I hope to build on my expertise to convince Washington policy makers to improve treatment of immigrants. I am open to your suggestions!

My Work for LASA

The Silvert Award is intended to honor contributions to Latin American studies above and beyond pure scholarship. I served as president of LASA and was a member of LASA's Executive Council for ten years. As president I pursued several goals that I believe have contributed to making LASA the vibrant association so dear to many of us.

First, I reorganized LASA to allow for the formation of sections. With LASA members free to form and join sections, I then sought to make the association more inclusionary and responsive to members' concerns, and to enable members with specific country or other substantive interests to communicate, to deepen their ties, and to organize around their shared interests. I

also envisioned the sections as offering leadership opportunities. It did not take long for sections to contribute to the vitality of LASA.

Second, as president I negotiated with Oxfam America the Martin Diskin Memorial Lectureship, which annually honors a scholar-activist committed to advancing human rights in the region. The awardees serve as models for all of us to try in our own humble ways to deepen democracy in Latin America.

Third, building on work of LASA presidents who preceded me, especially Lars Schoultz, Carmen Diana Deere, and Maryssa Navarro, I convinced the Ford Foundation to contribute \$2 million to a LASA endowment that has contributed to the transnationalization of LASA. The endowment has played a central role in transforming LASA into a "borderless" association. The endowment primarily enables Latin Americans to attend LASA meetings wherever they are held. It also finances collaborative projects involving LASA members across the Americas. Initially, LASA was a white men's association. I believe I was the first woman to participate in a LASA panel—but by default! I was asked to take the place of a man who in the last minute could not attend the congress. Today, if you walk the corridors of a congress, it is hard to tell what country you are in, and women are at least as active as men.

One of my goals as president, however, had a short shelf life. Together with my wonderful and wise program chair, the late Timothy Wickham-Crowley, we edited two books, *What Justice? Whose Justice? Fighting for Fairness in Latin America* and *Struggles for Social Rights in Latin America*. The books chapters comprise papers presented at the LASA congress the year we oversaw it. I had hoped to establish a yearly precedent so that work of our congress participants would routinely reach a broader audience. The idea, however, did not take hold. Perhaps future presidents will revisit the initiative.

It goes without saying that none of the work of LASA would be possible without the dedicated work of the Secretariat. Under Milagros (Mili) Pereyra-Rojas's stewardship, the Secretariat

has become more professional, creative, and proactive, simultaneously responding to members' wants and concerns. We have all benefited from her work—as well as that of Ghiselle Blanco and others at the Secretariat. It has been a pleasure to work with them over the years. //