



A REPORT ON LASA 2009

by Arturo Arias

The XXVIII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in June 2009 in Rio de Janeiro was, as its Program Chairs claimed in the LASA Forum, truly a “Congress of Firsts”: the first Congress in South America ever, the first in decades to take place in a university setting instead of a single hotel with convention facilities, the first with more than 9,000 submissions, and the first with some 5,100 pre-registered participants, over half of them from Latin America. Without question, the geographical setting of Rio and its fabulous human, musical, culinary and other cultural attractions, added immensely to the attraction of the congress.

The idea of having a Congress in South America appeared on the scene since the strategic retreat of February 2002, when I was president of LASA. At that time we stated that the Association had been founded in the mid-1960s, when Area Studies were the vogue in U.S. academia, a focus that originated in the years after World War II. The development of Area Studies was partly a response to the increasing global influence of the United States and to inadequacies about the U.S.’s understanding of the world in the context of the Cold War. Federal funding encouraged this trend, which grew throughout the 1950s and exploded after the Cuban revolution. Increased interest in Latin America in the 1960s was partly responsible for the rapid increase in the number scholars wanting to specialize in Latin American issues and, as a consequence of this same trend, for the founding of LASA.

The political complexity of this decade radicalized many students, who, in turn, traveled to Latin America, threw their own energies into support of popular struggles on the

continent, and then returned to the U.S. to obtain their graduate degrees and initiate academic careers. As a consequence, LASA shifted from a more positivist attitude in its early origin, where there was a clear “us” and “them” divide, to one of solidarity with the struggles and issues of Latin American peoples, where members of LASA saw themselves, not just as academics, but also as activists, agents of solidarity with the various struggles south of the border. Nonetheless, a sense still remained that, somehow, North America was different from Latin America. The political divide had been breached, but a cultural divide continued to exist and to establish basic parameters: Latin America was “down there,” not “up here.”

The cultural studies turn in the 1990s, generated in many ways by the work of dedicated Latin Americanists during the previous four decades, challenged these simplistic assumptions and threw into question the very nature of Area Studies. The notion, for example, that the world could be divided into knowable, self-contained “areas of study” had come into question in the wake of postmodern approaches about population and cultural movements across regions and nations. Demographic shifts, diasporas, labor migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization brought into question the nature of areas’ identities or composition. These questionings in turn influenced the transformations taking place across the board in U.S. academic circles, where many native Latin American scholars came to teach in various fields on U.S. campuses, and interdisciplinary studies encouraged a rapid breakdown of distinct and stable areas, with congruent cultural, linguistic or geographical identities.

And yet, despite this process, LASA did not changed structurally or administratively. Whereas many of its members had been on the cutting-edge of the process of questioning Area Studies and challenging assumptions about their basic premises, the associations that housed them continued to operate within those parameters that their most dynamic members had exposed as lapsed, biased, or the heritage of outdated American policy in the developing world. For people like me, LASA became the way to construct a much more pluralized and dynamic role for and within this sprawling community.

From this blueprint emerged the LASA Strategic Plan, presented to the membership during the 2003 Congress, and approved by electronic mail. With it, came the idea to celebrate the 2009 Congress in South America.

This implied that LASA had to rethink its role in the context of the fluid transformations of the early 21st century, reposition itself as an institution regarding these many complex issues, and transform its *modus operandi*, at a moment when technological innovations and dramatic changes in the world as a whole altered the relationships, exchanges, and flows of knowledge within the Americas. The plan was to rotate from that point on between Latin America and the United States. All these events in rapid succession, represented LASA's determination to no longer be an "American" institution opening up to Latin America, but, rather, a hemispheric one where the Americas were not segregated, nor did they represent a lower tier.

Originally, the goal was to have the Congress in Buenos Aires, with the basic idea that if it went to the Latin American capital farthest to the south, and it was successful, no one would ever object again to a congress being held anywhere in Latin America. However, in the ensuing years, the concrete possibilities of holding it on the shores of the River Plate diminished, and Rio de Janeiro became a truly viable alternative.

We knew that South American cities did not have hotels with large enough convention centers to stage a LASA Congress, so the will to go to Latin America implied organizing them in venues such as the Pontificia Universidade Católica de Rio de Janeiro, where LASA 2009 took place, and articulating a chain of hotels where Congress-goers could find reasonably priced options as happened in this case in the beach communities of Leblon, Ipanema and Copacabana, and the need for a bus shuttle service to transport them to the congress site and back. We also knew that some U.S.-centered scholars would object to traveling so far south; but, in their place, we would gain membership and visibility from the new South American scholars exposed for the first time to a LASA Congress. At the same time, the proximity of Rio's *favelas* and the reality of being in a South American country kept perspectives on our tasks as scholars focused on the fact that to be a Latin Americanist is not a trend, a stylish way of life, nor even a pleasurable

way to make a living, but an important redemptive task that implies communion with the subaltern majorities in need of scholarly complicity and solidarity.

In light of this, the actual logistic challenges, and the problems encountered with the congress were secondary in nature. By way of example, the lines for preregistered participants to pick up their badges and program books on Thursday were *very* long, and tested the patience of most Congress-goers. Despite Rio being a *cidade maravilhosa*, most members resented the lack of a Gran Baile, not because there were no dancing venues in Rio, but because there was a need to meet each other, exchange ideas or simply say hello to new friends, especially people in different fields of specialty, and, given that almost everyone was staying in a different hotel, a Gran Baile could have played this role but, alas, it did not happen. Finally, the few plenary sessions were badly organized, took place at the wrong time, and were extremely limited in their appeal. The return of orthodox political scientists to LASA's Executive Committee was certainly felt in these perplexing choices that failed to attract the great majority of LASA members.

Nevertheless, the great merit of LASA 2009 was that it took place at all, and that it set the tone for future congresses in Latin America, and for greater collaboration between US-based Latin Americanists and scholars south of the border, often "the under-represented," and those who did not speak or read English fluently. For LASA to remain rooted exclusively in the U.S. was to remain symbolically monolingual, an imperial trait that needs to be erased in a globalized world. Refusing to recognize this elementary aspect could very well reinsert this unspoken factor of U.S. members' hegemony within LASA and elsewhere: Latin Americans as objects of study by members of the Association, and, yet, second-class citizens within it. Attitudes like this one created in the recent past the perception among Latin American scholars that LASA was, ultimately, a *gringo* outfit, where they were, at best, only guests.

To close on a celebratory note, the Opening Ceremony and Reception included a magnificent performance of the PUC's Capoeira Group, and the Film Festival, which featured documentaries on Bolivia, the environment, and Indigenous communication, and also had the presence of different Latin American directors, was better than ever.

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