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THE CUBAN CONTROVERSY

On March 2, 2006, The Associated Press issued a press report about Cuban academics being denied visas by the American government. The academics—58 philosophers, economists, and historians—were planning to attend the Latin American Studies Association Congress, which was held later that month (March 15-18) in San Juan, Puerto Rico, when they were told that they would not be allowed to enter the United States. Although only Cuban academics were barred en masse, at least a dozen other academics, from various Latin American countries, were denied visas as well.

LASA is the largest professional organization in the world engaged in the study of Latin America. Twenty-five percent of its 5,000 members reside outside the United States. The LASA International Congress, held every eighteen months, is the world's premier forum for expert discussion on Latin America and the Caribbean. Seventy-two percent of the 4,868 presenters in San Juan were non-US residents.

The AP report was spread among IASA members by Soraya Castro Mariño of the University of Havana. Here are some of the reactions it sparked.

March 6—**Djelal Kadir** (Pennsylvania State University, founding president IASA)

'Given the experiences of the last few years, it should be clear to LASA that the USA is no longer intellectually democratic or politically free as a venue for academic and scholarly discussion and exchange. Perhaps LASA should consider other venues than the US or its territories (Puerto Rico) where to hold its annual congresses. Should they do consider other options, we at IASA might consider how we could be helpful to our LASA colleagues.'

March 7—**Sonja Torres** (Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro)

'[...] it's about time LASA woke up to the fact that, being a Latin American Studies association, perhaps they should move to other venues. But, frankly, I think they're pretty much in the same situation as the ASA; i.e., they probably HAVE to hold their meeting on US territory in order to guarantee funding, grants, etc. THIS is definitely a big advantage IASA has over exclusively US-based associations!'

March 8—**Cristina Giorcelli** (Università di Roma 3)

'Holding the Convention elsewhere would seem to be the solution. I do not see how the US membership would still insist on holding their Conference when so many of their Latin American colleagues are prevented from participating!'



March 14—**Jane Desmond** (University of Iowa, vice president IASA, Co-Director of IFUSS, International Forum for US Studies)

'Frankly, having dealt with the US attitudes toward Cuba for several years from this side when trying to work with Cuban colleagues, travelling there, and bringing graduate students on IFUSS projects there, I am not very hopeful of any change under this administration. However, it is important to register our strong disapproval to build momentum for change in the future and of course at the same time to express our continued desires to build and maintain working relations with Cuban scholars through email work, and through exchanges at scholarly meetings outside the US'.

March 9—**Manju Jaidka** (Punjab University)

'[...] we, in India, sometimes face such visa problems with Pakistan. Last year about two hundred of us were denied visas to attend a conference at Lahore. Security reasons were given. Understandable, I guess, given the violence that occurs sporadically'.

March 14—**Helmbrecht Breinig** (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg)

'It is not only unacceptable but also unwise that the US should join the ranks of those crippling academic dialogue. It would be detrimental to American political, cultural, and economic activities worldwide'.

On March 17, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* announced that the executive council of LASA was no longer planning on organizing its meetings in the US. Even though the association was already under contract to hold the 2007 conference in Boston, the executive council said that LASA would 'make every effort' to relocate the congress.

'As long as the United States government's current visa policy with regard to our Latin American colleagues persists, we can no longer, in good conscience, hold our congress inside the United States'.

LASA's president, Sonia E. Alvarez, a professor of Latin American politics and studies at the University of Massachusetts, stressed that the decision was made out of a concern for academic freedom, not ideology. 'We are an area studies association. We can't carry out our work if we can't dialogue with our colleagues from Latin America'.