

---

## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

---

The tides of change lap at the shores of Latin American studies. Those who study Latin America may be most likely to perceive change when it first appears in subjects of their teaching and research. There are, however, other sources of change that shape teaching and research on Latin America, some of which stem only indirectly from developments in the region or are not linked to Latin America at all. Intellectual influences are one example. Latin Americanists cannot avoid being influenced by the prevailing theoretical and methodological trends of the academic disciplines in which they work. Indeed, they must address the concerns of their disciplines if Latin American scholarship is to achieve influence beyond the community of regional specialists.

Other sources of change are institutional in nature, shaping the context in which Latin American studies takes place. Such changes receive less attention than changes in the content of teaching and research. The larger institutional context in which scholarship develops is one or two steps removed from ordinary scholarly preoccupations. Moreover, institutional consequences tend to be experienced as a local problem ("We didn't get the funding . . .") rather than understood as part of a larger phenomenon.

A major change whose intellectual consequences are still poorly understood is the shift in the institutional locus of research in Latin America from the public university to the nongovernmental research center or "think tank." Although such centers existed before the military dictatorships of the 1970s, their numbers multiplied rapidly in response to the purges and lack of academic freedom that characterized Latin American universities under bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes. The success of the Latin American research centers in attracting both foreign and domestic funding has insured their survival under democratic regimes. This success, however, poses certain questions. Has the research component of the public university been weakened in consequence? Will the think

tanks “reproduce themselves” in the sense of recruiting and training new generations of researchers (a function previously carried out by the university)? Are the think tanks too vulnerable to the changing whims of foreign foundations?

In the United States, a different set of institutional questions emerges. The university remains the locus of research on Latin America as well as the center of teaching. But the fate of Latin American studies in the United States is inextricably linked to the health of foreign area studies in general. The ability of Latin Americanists, like other foreign area scholars, to claim resources for teaching and research is a function of the importance attached to their endeavors by such potentially fickle constituencies as students, university administrators, and government agencies.

The historic variations in support for foreign area studies in the United States are well known, if not often contemplated. These fields were poorly funded and were considered esoteric until the implications of Sputnik—or more precisely, the possibility of Soviet predominance—dawned on American leaders. For about a decade afterward, the large private foundations and the federal government provided universities with sizable subsidies as an incentive for establishing foreign language and area studies programs. Fidel Castro’s dramatic and well-publicized triumphs were particularly beneficial to Latin American studies, which were added to the list of foreign area fields considered worthy of support.

The academic community responded to the new inducements with alacrity. New programs were established, new cohorts of scholars recruited, and new journals founded (including *LARR*). The institutional and intellectual fruits of this unprecedented collaboration were remarkable. It would be only a modest exaggeration to say that the library collections, the published research, the communities of scholars, and the other spin-offs of this process became an asset not only to the United States but also to the foreign countries studied, which in many cases could not mount their own efforts for political or economic reasons.

The zenith of federal funding was reached in 1967, when the costs of the Vietnamese War began to intrude. Following Richard Nixon’s election as President in 1968, the value attached to foreign area knowledge, at least as measured by federal investment, began to diminish in favor of armaments. The fact that foreign area scholars were frequent critics of U.S. foreign policy did little to enhance government support. Universities, which initially had been offered a fifty-fifty split by the government in sharing the costs of area studies, began to assume more and more of the expense.

Today even those foreign area programs that enjoy status as federally funded Title VI centers receive only about 5 percent of their program expenses from the government. The large foundations have long since ceased to fund U.S.-based foreign area studies. The decline of the dollar

on world currency markets has hurt foreign area research by U.S. scholars and reduced the collection of foreign area materials by U.S. research libraries. These difficulties come at an especially ominous period in which a nationwide retrenchment in the funding of U.S. higher education is underway. In short, the U.S. international education effort is in trouble.

To these institutional problems must now be added the realization that the original rationale for public investment in foreign area studies, namely the Cold War, has collapsed along with the Soviet Union. It is perhaps fortunate that revelations concerning the lapses of intelligence that contributed to the Persian Gulf War and the slanting of intelligence for political purposes under the Reagan administration have underscored the importance of having unbiased information about the world. To paraphrase a well-known dictum, foreign-area knowledge is too important to be left to the intelligence community. Those who believe that knowledge of all the world's societies and cultures is of theoretical, practical, and perhaps even moral importance now face once again the challenge of making the case for foreign language and area studies to students, to administrators, and to potential sources of funding.

Gilbert W. Merkx  
Albuquerque, N.M.