

The Importance of Latin American Studies to the Inter-American Project

By Earl Fitz

Latin American Studies has a crucial role to play in the continuing development of Inter-American Studies as a new and far-reaching field. Intrinsically comparative in its own right, and intended from its inception, in 1966, to study relations between Spanish America and Brazil and the rest of the American nation-states, Latin American Studies has, in effect, validated the entire Inter-American project.¹ Yet because we have, in 2013, entered a new age of Inter-American relations, one in which a host of other academic units, such as Native American Studies, African-American Studies,

Canadian Studies, European Studies, Women's Studies, Environmental Studies, and American Studies, are becoming involved, Latin American Studies faces a spate of both new opportunities and new challenges.² The essay I offer here speaks to this latter issue, the future of Latin American Studies within the fast evolving Inter-American paradigm. My two main arguments will be that, as a comparative, multilingual, and interdisciplinary field, Latin American Studies is uniquely situated in terms of what it can offer scholars who wish to engage with the Inter-American project and that we Latin Americanists should sometimes consider framing our scholarship in the more expansive and inclusive Inter-American perspective.

Defined as the comparative study of any academic or scholarly discipline that relates to our many American nation-states and cultures, Inter-American Studies is inherently interdisciplinary in nature and germane to a wealth of new relationships that are tying the nations of North, Central, and South America together as never before (see Fitz, "Inter-American Studies"). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that the Americas are relating to each other in hitherto unknown ways. New alliances are being formed and new approaches to common problems are being discussed and put into practice. We have

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¹ In my field, Comparative Literature, the Inter-American project has, for over thirty years, been recognized as a particularly productive new area of scholarship. It was, in fact, the official focus of the 1982 meeting of the International Comparative Literature Association (at which I made a presentation on the first examples of the novel genre in the Americas). In addition to the Canadianists involved, Latin Americanists were heavily invested in the proceedings. Pedagogical issues, such as the question of language study, were much discussed. It was agreed that describing one's self as an Inter-Americanist would require fluency in at least three of our American languages while also possessing an at least rudimentary knowledge of a fourth language. In addition to the four main European-based languages of the Americas (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese), the importance of our many indigenous languages and cultures was also stressed.

² Surely it goes without saying that both Africa and Europe play fundamental roles in Inter-American Studies.

entered into a new age of Americanism, one that is as global as it is hemispheric, and new methods of scholarship are needed. As such, Inter-American Studies is a field that engages a wide range of subjects, ranging from literature and art to politics and economics and from anthropology, history, and environmental studies to law, medicine, and education. It is an emergent field defined, in short, more by a methodology (one distinctly pan-hemispheric, transnational, and comparative in nature) rather than any specific content. And since Latin American Studies is crucial to its successful development, it behooves the modern Latin Americanist to consider connecting her particular area of specialization with other cultures in the larger hemispheric American arena.

How is this to be done? The answer to this very good question lies in the nature of the comparative method itself. Whether the topic relates to comparative economic and political systems, comparative religion, comparative anatomy, comparative law, comparative literature, or to a host of other disciplines, the issue is always the same: the scholar must first establish a focus for the study, a common thread that ties all the subjects together so that they can be studied in terms of how they measure up in terms of each other. Slavery, race relations, and miscegenation in the Americas, for example, have long been studied by historians and social scientists, as, more recently, have questions involving Native Americans, immigration, literature, environmental issues, health care systems, and education. Without the establishing of this common American ground, or focus, we are lost in a sea of different and seemingly disparate, disconnected facts. But the list of subjects

common to the hemispheric American experience is limited only by our imaginations.

As all experienced comparatists know, however, it is not similarity that is the key issue but difference. Once the point of the comparison is established, the benchmark around which the comparisons will be made, the comparative methodology moves to an in depth and precise discussion of the differences that separate each item to be studied and that characterize them as specific entities. To write a twenty-five page study of what the items to be examined have in common would be to repeat one's self *ad nauseum* and to no particular value. Yet the basis for the comparison does have to be clearly defined and established at the outset. But once this is done, the scholar moves naturally to a more detailed description of what the distinctive aspects of the subjects being studied are and how they compare and contrast with each other. This provides valuable information, both about each particular item being studied and about how these same items, taken as a group, relate to each other. When applied to issues shared by our various American cultures, this tried and true method can produce some very valuable information, information about how we view ourselves as Canadians, Brazilians, Mexicans, and "Americans" (meaning here the citizens of the United States) and as "Americans," a term understood here, of course, not in the narrow (and still contentious) sense of applying to a single New World nation but to all the nations of the New World, much as the term, "European," can apply simultaneously to specific nations, like Germany and France, and to a particular grouping of nations. One is no less German for also being European and one is no less Brazilian for also being "American" or "Latin American." Regardless of one's

professional specialization, then, the comparative method offers us a fairly objective, non-hegemonic way of bringing a diverse clutch of nations and cultures together for contrastive study. And because it can do this, the comparative method lies at the heart of Inter-American Studies.

What, then, does Latin American Studies bring to the Inter-American table? What contribution does it make to our better understanding of how the Americas relate to one another? The answer to these questions is this: Latin American Studies, for its practicing professionals, entails both Spanish America and Portuguese-speaking Brazil, French and Creole-speaking America (including both Canada and the Caribbean), and our many and still vital Native American languages and cultures. If one thinks of Inter-American Studies as being constituted by seven basic entities or divisions,³ one realizes that, as an established discipline, Latin American Studies concerns itself with more than 50% of them. Of all the many ways of studying the Americas, the natural purview of Latin American Studies is the most comprehensive, and it is for this reason, I contend, that it is so valuable to our fast emerging Inter-American consciousness.

As the extant bibliography shows, there is, as one would expect, a great deal of overlap and confusion over terminology. That is, scholars from both English-speaking Canada and Québec (Braz; Hazelton; Imbert; Chanady), the Caribbean (see Glissant; also Dash), and now even the United States (see Gruesz; Brickhouse; Saldívar) see in what they refer to as “Latin

³ For me, these are (in alphabetical order): Anglophone Canada; Brazil; the Caribbean; Francophone America; Native America, Spanish America, and the United States.

America”⁴ the existence of a geographic and cultural “imaginary” that has a great deal to do with their own cultures. It is quite easy to argue, in other words, that Latin American Studies is the key player in the Inter-American game, the one whose professional ken (indigenous America, past and present, along with English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese-speaking America) most connects with all the others. The inescapable conclusion is that regardless of how one defines it and its patterns of influence, Latin American Studies has a crucial and uniquely productive role to play in the development of Inter-American Studies. It is my firm belief, in fact,⁵ that the exciting new field of Inter-American Studies offers any student or scholar of Latin American Studies many wonderful opportunities for new and exciting work.

An additional strength of the Latin American Studies position is that it encompasses giant, Portuguese-speaking Brazil, our many indigenous American cultures (see Brotherston, 1979 and 1972; Fitz, “Native American Literature”), and French-speaking America (Québec and the Francophone Caribbean). All these cultures figure prominently in the Inter-American paradigm, and, if we want Inter-American Studies to flourish, we must, as

⁴ There is still a tendency in the United States to use the term, “Latin America,” as a synonym for Spanish America. This is misleading and it obscures both the presence and the growing importance of Brazil as a hemispheric power. To clarify things, I suggest we use the term, “Latin America,” *only* when we mean to speak of both Spanish America and Brazil together. Otherwise, we should speak of Spanish America and Brazil as separate entities.

⁵ My position here is based on nearly fifty years worth of teaching and research experience as a comparatist, a Latin Americanist, and as an Inter-Americanist in the realm of literature.

educators, insist that our students study them, including their languages and histories. We cannot become truly effective Inter-Americanists if we concern ourselves with only two of our American languages, Spanish and English, for example, a move that, almost by default, reinforces the false idea that the United States must occupy the center of the Inter-American question. As important as these two languages are to the history and culture of the United States, for example, they do not define the larger Inter-American experience. For all its undeniable power and influence, the United States does not have to be involved in valid Inter-American courses and research projects. It is not the *sine qua non* of Inter-American Studies. No single nation is. Apropos of this very point, mention must be made of a signal though too often overlooked aspect of Inter-American scholarship: the fact that scholars in many American nations are now simply leaving the United States aside and entering into a plethora of new relationships with each other. Although English-Canada (like the United States) has been relatively slow in embracing the Inter-American perspective (Bahia; Fitz, “Canadian Literature”), leaders in Québec, for example, are forging ahead with exciting new *liaisons* with Brazil (the other New World culture to be typically ignored) and Spanish America. And in South America, the Brazilians are initiating new cultural, political, and economic agreements with their Spanish-speaking neighbors.⁶ An economic juggernaut with great potential for continued growth and

⁶ Although relations between Brazil and its Spanish-speaking neighbors are improving at a rapid rate, they have had their own cultural obstacles. Different in so many ways from Spanish America (which itself cannot be characterized as being any kind of monolithic entity), Brazil has developed in unique and distinctive ways.

development, Brazil is also emerging as Latin America’s political leader as well. The South American common market, Mercosur, is only one example of this new hemispheric ordering, one which a United States still largely uninterested in Latin America (or Canada) is simply being left behind.

Yet as the field of Inter-American Studies continues to grow, as it surely will, its most successful practitioners must reach out to their colleagues in U.S.-American Studies programs.⁷ As Latin Americanists, Inter-Americanists, and comparatists, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Silvia Spitta, argue, for example, many U.S.-American Studies programs have already converted into “Americas Studies” programs (193), a move that has the potential to facilitate improved relations between the United States and its hemispheric neighbors. Hoping to speed this process along, a new organization, the International American Studies Association, has even come into being. This group, the IASA, seeks to dislodge the old insularity and parochialism of American Studies and its hitherto single-minded and quite deliberate focus on the United States, and to move U.S.-Americanists into closer contact with their colleagues in Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America. This is a positive move, but one feels that the old problems of restrictive professional training still obtain. If a student knows only one language and one American culture, how well prepared is she to productively engage

⁷ It is interesting to note that, in terms of academic structures, American Studies programs tend overwhelmingly to be attached to Departments of English, whereas Latin American Studies programs are almost without exception separate, free-standing programs. The American Studies Association, a product of the Cold War era, was founded in 1951, exactly fifteen years before the formation of the Latin American Studies Association.

comparative studies with other, different American cultures? We can, moreover, already see that we must not, as too many U.S.-based Americanists are still prone to doing, imagine the Inter-American project as being constituted by two languages (Spanish and English) and by two cultural and political entities (the United States and Hispanic America⁸). The Inter-American paradigm is much vaster and more conceptually complex than the simple dyadic model permits. While it is one thing to express interest in the Inter-American project, it is another thing to be actually prepared, professionally speaking, to practice it. Pointing out the dangers of monolingualism and cultural arrogance to this project, Zamora and Spitta write that the “onus is on faculty members to assure that students experience American cultures other than their own and that they learn Spanish or French or Portuguese, not to mention the more difficult and urgent claims for Nahautl or Quechua or Guaraní” (sic; 193). These are words we need to heed carefully.

This native insularity is an old problem for Americans (meaning here the citizens of the United States) and it is one well known to Latin Americanists, who have long felt the sting of U.S.-American indifference and condescension. As the celebrated Mexicanist (and U.S.-based Latin Americanist), John S. Brushwood, writes of his countrywomen and countrymen in the United States, “our resistance to foreign literature includes more than Latin America.

⁸ This much used yet ambiguous term causes much confusion, especially among U.S.-Americanists, because it can refer both to citizens or residents of the United States who speak Spanish and who are of Hispanic descent and to Spanish-speaking nations from Mexico to Argentina. Portuguese-speaking Brazil is, of course, not “Hispanic” though it is often categorized as being part of “Latin America.”

We are an intensely provincial people, in spite of the lives and money we have scattered around the globe. We resist foreign literatures in general, and this basic position is exacerbated with respect to countries that are financially or militarily powerful” (14). This complaint has been reiterated many times through the decades by a number of prominent Latin Americanists, both abroad and here at home (see Mead,⁹ for example), and it explains

⁹ I must interject here a personal anecdote relating to Professor Mead. Robert G. Mead, Jr., who spent most of his career at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, and who passed on in 1995, was one of the very first Latin Americanists to advocate a comparative and Inter-American perspective, a position that, as late as the 1960s and 1970s, was still regarded by many as radical in nature. A Mexicanist by training, Mead served in the OSS during World War II as an analyst working on Nazi incursions into Mexico. After the war, he became a literary scholar of great renown. At the 1980 MLA convention, I, as a neophyte Latin Americanist, comparatist, and Inter-Americanist, presented a paper in which I argued that a big part of the future for Latin Americanists would involve what I was calling Inter-American Studies, a field that did not yet exist but that I was contending would not only one day exist but come to exert a great deal of influence on a great variety of different disciplines and fields. At the end my session, Professor Mead came up and congratulated me on taking up this issue and this position. He told me that, as a Latin Americanist, he, too, saw this new, expanded, and comparative approach to things hemispheric and “American” as being a part of our collective professional future. But he also cautioned me that he felt it would take a long time for our colleagues in other fields to see, and then accept, what, for Latin Americanists, seemed so obviously true and relevant – Inter-American relations. I would like to take this opportunity to publically thank Professor Mead for those words of encouragement thirty-three years ago to a young colleague struggling to get a new idea the professional exposure it needed. If it is true, as our friend and colleague, Greg Rabassa, has often said, that a kind word among academics is rarer than a Buick in a college town, then Professor Mead

why, up until very recently, Spanish and Portuguese (the latter being the sixth most widely spoken language in the world and the third most spoken language in the Americas, behind Spanish, the most spoken, and English) have not been regarded, here in the United States, as worthy of serious study. And Brazil, even now, in 2013, when it is emerging as a global power, barely registers on the consciousness of the U.S.-American citizenry. This must change, and Latin Americanists, who understand both Latin America (in all its diversity) and the United States (in all its diversity), must take the lead in helping to replace ignorance with knowledge. This, I believe, is both our great task. But it is also a great opportunity for us.

Though the times are changing (Spanish has now become the second language of the United States, for example), Brushwood's contention here still defines the longstanding struggle of things Latin American to gain acceptance and recognition in the American academy. We are better off now than we were in the 1960s, for example, when studying Spanish and Portuguese (and anything Latin American) was considered to be intellectually *déclassé*. In a sense, even the Cuban Revolution of 1959, as important as it was, only served, in the minds of many, to underscore the general disdain that was directed at those who took Latin America seriously.¹⁰ So, in looking at this same question from 2013, we can see that progress has been made. Yet we must do more. And it remains to be seen if even the international approach to American Studies can overcome the deep seated structural problems in what has been

provided us a sterling example of how important doing so can be.

¹⁰ As if to sum up this wide-spread sentiment, Richard Nixon (as I recall) once said something like

this discipline's monolingual and monocultural self-definition. In the meantime, however, and perhaps for the foreseeable future, the extensive linguistic and cultural training demanded of such disciplines as Comparative Literature, Comparative Latin American Studies, and Latin American Studies is successfully preparing its students to conduct the kind of broadly based Inter-American research and teaching that avoids the dyadic trap and that engages at least three of our New World cultures.¹¹ This, I believe, is the kind of expansive, more hemispherically inclusive research we need more of.

And we are getting it, most commonly and most successfully from Latin Americanists in a variety of disciplines, history, anthropology, and literature, to mention three of the most prominent. At the time, it must be said that the recent "discovery" by U.S.-American Studies scholars (Gillman; Porter, Levander and Levine) that other "Americas" exist beyond the borders of the United States both pleases and rankles many Latin Americanists, for whom this is an old and well understood issue. And, for painfully obvious historical reasons, a still contentious one. The crux of the problem, or tension, is that what is "new" for American Studies scholars who specialize in the United States alone is not new to Latin Americanists, whose extensive work on this very topic is all too routinely ignored or given short shrift in the rush of this recent "discovery" of Latin America and to embrace the "new, newest thing" (Gillman; 196) in their discipline. This unfortunate (and, I hope, momentary) disconnection between our scholarly efforts

¹¹ In the realm of literature, we have three recent books that do this brilliantly. See Callahan, Infante, and Moreira.

appears, to many Latin Americanists, to be a vexing reincarnation of what they take to be the old disdain that U.S.-based scholars have long shown anything relating to Latin American and, indeed, to anything either south or north of U.S. borders. As Brushwood, speaking for the great majority of his Latin American colleagues, writes, “Unpleasant as it may sound, the fact is that North Americans prefer to think of Spanish Americans as exotic, often charming, generally irresponsible, and never consequential” (14). And Brazilians, as important as they are to the future of the United States (and to Spanish America), are hardly thought of at all. Sadly, this mindless stereotype, born of ignorance, self-absorption, and bigotry, still has its adherents even in 2013.

Already in the 1960s, though, when Spanish American literature¹² was struggling to establish a beach head in the United States, Uruguayan scholar Emir Rodríguez Monegal, from his post at Yale, lamented what he termed the “blind literary prejudice” against texts written in Spanish and Portuguese that existed here in the United States (3).¹³ In Europe, Monegal observed in great frustration, writers and intellectuals from Spanish America and Brazil were being hailed as innovative artists and

¹² Although many scholars continue to speak of the reception of “Latin American” literature during this tumultuous period (see, for example, Payne), Brazil was, in fact, almost totally ignored. The “Boom” period was a function overwhelmingly of Spanish American fiction, poetry, and drama, not Brazilian.

¹³ Monegal notes that influential critic Edmund Wilson “steadfastly refused to learn Spanish, because he was and still is convinced that nothing has been written in the language that would justify his exertions” (3). Monegal then goes on to say of another hugely influential U.S.-American critic of the time, Lionel Trilling, that he (Trilling) “had read Latin American literature, and that in his judgement it had only an anthropological value” (3).

thinkers and as visionaries of what a more just world might look like, whereas “here in the United States,” a culture not well disposed toward Latin America, “things” were “different” (3). For Latin Americanists, the very apt question Gillman poses (which relates to how her discipline, American Studies, will respond to the call for a newly transnational or hemispheric approach to thinking about the Americas), smacks of yet another manifestation of U.S. imperialism, a newly tarted up version of an old and outmoded form of supposed cultural superiority.¹⁴ The antagonism that, for some, marks relations between Latin American Studies and American Studies (even the international variety) stems from what has long been this dismissive yet also exploitive attitude.

Fortunately, scholars on both sides are trying to come to terms with this tension and resolve it. This kind of cooperation is precisely what we need more of in the future. And yet, as American Studies scholars Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine write,

“Since 1994 the divide between Latin American studies and American studies has, in some respects, widened, with Latin Americanists often accusing Americanists of appropriating specialized fields of knowledge. The all too familiar exceptionalist critique of this ‘new’ American studies scholarship targets scholarship that takes neighboring nations, regions, and communities as its subject because such scholarship too often assumes the US nation as the default unit of intellectual engagement governing ‘comparativist’

¹⁴ Although many, and perhaps most, citizens of the United States feel that Latin America is a backward and inferior culture, it is instructive to remember that while the United States has yet to elect a woman president, several Latin American nations have done so.

approaches. Obsessed with the ‘new,’ this body of work ignores scholarship that has been done in other fields, such as Canadian and Latin American studies, and that is often published in non-US venues and in languages other than English. As a result, it too often reproduces the same totalizing structures of US privilege that include ‘others’ only to subordinate them to US interests, keeping the US at the center of seemingly pluralist debate” (399-400).

In my opinion, this is a fair summary of the basic rub, though I would reduce it even further, to what Aretha calls the need for “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.” Moreover, I do not think the basic problem is one of “appropriating specialized fields of knowledge” but of blithely ignoring the excellent work that generations of Latin Americanists have done on topics of common Inter-American concern. It would also help, I think, if U.S.-Americanists approached the Inter-American project with a little more humility and refrain from simply arrogating it unto themselves by assuming that what they think they know about a place, an “imaginary,” known (all too imperfectly) as “Latin America” (see Porter), is really true. But it would also be useful if we Latin Americanists would recognize the very real contributions U.S.-based Americanists can make to the transnational Inter-American project and engage with them in productive ways. We must find ways of working together, though we must do so in ways that elevate everyone’s game and that eliminate the errors, gaps, and prejudices that we all have. As brilliant as Marta, Neymar, and Messi are as individuals, they are even better when they play with their teammates as opposed to against them.

While we can, to cite one instructive example, all applaud the recent “discovery” of José Martí

and the importance of his famous essay, “Nuestra América,” to our North American colleagues (who typically cite it in English translation), it would be hard to find a single Latin Americanist who, in the last one hundred years, was not fully conversant with this seminal tract, including the very salient fact (one rarely if ever noted by non-Latin Americanists) that it refers only to Spanish America and does not even mention Brazil, arguably Latin America’s most important nation.¹⁵ Then, too, and as Latin Americanists know well, Martí is far from being the only “Latin American” to voice such pan-American concerns. There are many others. Yet few, if any, of these other voices are ever cited, much less discussed, and most especially those from Brazil, whose approach to inter-American relations is of long standing and has always been quite unique. But all this can be learned. The differences, nevertheless, between “nuestra” and “nossa” America, that is, between Spanish America and Brazil (see Newcomb), are of the utmost importance (to say nothing about the differences that separate the various nations of Spanish America from each other) and they must be clearly understood, not only for the future of Latin America but for the entire discipline of Inter-American Studies, and to miss this basic truth is to commit a grievous conceptual and methodological error.

To put this rather thorny (but not insuperable) issue another way, who knows more about the transnational and hemispheric American experience – the good, the bad, and the ugly of it – than the Latin Americanists do? For them, this is not an intellectual problem that deserves

¹⁵ Brazil is, as is well known, one of the BRIC nations so often discussed as rising global powers.

further study but a fact, a lived, and often harrowing, experience, a matter of more than a hundred years of U.S. intervention and aggression, of U.S. support for right wing dictators who commit monstrous crimes against their own people, for the direct subversion of democracy, for censorship, illegal imprisonment, torture, and murder. The current President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, for example, was herself a torture victim during the brutal (and C.I.A.-backed) Brazilian dictatorship, from 1964 to 1985. For Spanish Americans and Brazilians, this issue of inter-American relations is as blood soaked and visceral as it is intellectual, and it cannot be taken lightly. This historically based fact goes a long ways toward explaining why it is that Latin Americanists get edgy when a U.S.-Americanist, however well meaning, seeks to enter the, for some, still quite fraught, Inter-American debate. It is not merely a problem of academic turf wars or even of appropriating or ignoring someone else's work; it is a very real problem of (trans)-American history, injustice, and violence. The work of the many Latin American scholars who have bravely spoken out against this kind of abuse by their North American neighbor – often at great personal risk – cannot be ignored or treated lightly. It is crucial to the discussion, and it is the Latin Americanists who are most acutely aware of it. For Brazilians and Spanish Americans (and for Latin Americanists), this level of hemispheric awareness, moreover, is not a function of a new disciplinary trend but of historical reality, political and economic consciousness, professional training, and linguistic fluency, of both European languages (including both Spanish and Portuguese, in addition to English, and, commonly, French as well) and those of indigenous origin.¹⁶

¹⁶ To be sure, our Canadian colleagues have a strong

For the Inter-American dialogue to move forward, as it must, it is, I believe, incumbent upon the Latin Americanists, who have a uniquely comprehensive grasp of all that is involved, to engage it in good faith – but also with candor and a reliance on facts and not ignorance, erroneous assumptions, blinkered thinking, and outmoded cultural stereotypes. This will not be easy, but it can and must be done, and Latin Americanists are the ones to do it. Modern scholars of Brazil and Spanish America would do well to step up, engage the Inter-American project, and use their expertise for the greater hemispheric good. The Inter-American dialogue must go on and it must go on in honest, accurate, all-inclusive, and comparative ways, and it is here that Latin Americanists can contribute. Because they are the most knowledgeable about the over-all American experience, including relations between the various Spanish American nations (Mexico and the Central American states, for example), between Spanish America and Brazil, and most particularly about the still badly mismanaged relations between the United States and both Spanish America and Brazil,¹⁷ Latin Americanists have an obligation to work with their colleagues in other fields to make sure that the Inter-American dialogue is positive and productive. We can do this, and we should. And we should do it together, with our colleagues in other fields, and in a spirit of mutual respect and support. This is why the

claim to make on this point, too, though when one considers the long and bloody history of grievances suffered by Latin Americans at the hands of the government of the United States of America, it is their case that stands out.

¹⁷ As Latin Americanists know, the governments of both India and (especially) China have been investing heavily in Brazil because they recognize its strategic importance to them.

immensely important Inter-American project,
touching, as it does, so many disciplines and

professions, is such a big part of the future of
Latin American Studies.

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