

# Latin America, the Caribbean, and the British Academy

**Professor Linda Newson FBA**, *Chairman of the British Academy's Area Panel for Latin America and the Caribbean*, describes how the Academy supports research on – and with – this dynamic part of the world.

The Latin America and the Caribbean Panel was formally established in 2005, along with an Africa Panel, following a decision by the International Policy Committee to broaden and deepen the British Academy's connections with parts of the world with which it had previously had no institutional relationship. The Panel currently comprises ten academics drawn from humanities and social science disciplines in UK universities, together with the presidents of the Society for Latin American Studies and Society for Caribbean Studies, and representatives of the British Council and British Museum.

## Institutional agreements and partnerships

The British Academy's traditional approach to establishing formal links with institutions overseas has been through signing agreements with similar academies overseas. However, for the most part such institutions do not exist in Latin America and the

Caribbean. At best, the interests of the humanities and social scientists fall under the umbrella of academies for the sciences. In seeking to establish agreements the Panel therefore decided to focus on the major funding agencies of selected countries.

One of those was CAPES (Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education), and in September 2007 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with them and the Brazilian Academy of Sciences. This is the first agreement that the British Academy has made with any institution in Latin America and the Caribbean. Aimed at facilitating research collaboration, it also provides for an annual meeting of scholars in both countries on an agenda of common interest. The first meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro in November 2008 on the topic of 'Debating Difference in Contemporary Society' (Figure 1). Leading social scientists from the UK and Brazil dissected the theoretical framework through which difference is discussed, debated inequality in the labour market and in modern multicultural society, and considered the intersection between violence and sexuality and its role in the construction of gender difference.

At the same time progress is being made in signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Consejo de Ciencias Sociales in Cuba, which it is hoped will provide support for UK scholars researching in and on Cuba.

Partnerships between institutions in the UK and those in Latin American and Caribbean countries are encouraged through our flagship scheme, the UK–Latin America and the Caribbean Link Programme. This provides awards of up to £20,000 each to support a programme of seminars on a topic of mutual interest within the humanities and social sciences, with one held in the UK and the other in a Latin American or Caribbean country. So far the topics have included social policy and inequality, stardom in Brazilian cinema, disability, archaeology and linguistics in the Andes (reported on page 11), and governance in the non-independent Caribbean (Figure 2). The programme is still in its infancy, but these awards have already produced significant publications and, as intended, have resulted in formal agreements between partner institutions that will

Figure 1: A discussion session during the 'Debating Difference in Contemporary Society' meeting, held in Rio de Janeiro in November 2008.





Figure 2:  
From a poster  
advertising a  
British Academy-  
supported  
seminar, held at  
the University of  
Puerto Rico in  
April 2008.

extend beyond the lifetime of the awards. Not surprisingly, these awards are highly competitive: while receiving over thirty applications a year, at present we can only commit to supporting two.

### Other opportunities for support

The other scheme which has helped develop links with individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean is the Visiting Fellowship Programme, which is run by the British Academy's International Policy Committee. This scheme enables early-career scholars from overseas, working in any branch of the humanities or social sciences, to spend two to six months in the UK undertaking a clearly specified research project. Some funding is earmarked for scholars from Latin America and the Caribbean, and so far seventeen awards have been made on topics as diverse as Shakespeare in Caribbean literature, graffiti in Pompeii, post-conflict societies in South Africa and Colombia, the sociology of domestic maids in Brazil, and black British Caribbean migrants in Cuba (see page 21).

Of course it should be stressed that these dedicated funding opportunities are not the only way in which the British Academy supports research on and with this region. In the 2007/08 academic year, the Academy

made research grants totalling over £500,000 for work relating to Latin America and the Caribbean. One example is the work on the urban slums of Brazil, Venezuela and Bolivia, reported on page 16.

In addition, through its Learned Societies Programme, the British Academy supports the Joint Initiative for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean (JISLAC) – a consortium comprising the Society for Latin American Studies, the Society for Caribbean Studies, and the Standing Conference of Centres of Latin American Studies.

### Research co-operation

The Latin America and the Caribbean Panel also plays a national role in facilitating research co-operation and funding. In March 2008 it held a conference on Latin American and the Caribbean Research Funding. The aim was to bring together the major funders of research on the region in the UK and from Latin America to exchange information on their funding policies and strategies. It was attended by representatives from DIUS, DFID, ESRC, the British Council, and from CAPES (Brazil) and the Consejo de Ciencias Sociales (Cuba), and about thirty scholars from UK universities. It was clear from the conference that there was a need to improve communication between the scholarly

community and government, and that attempts should be made to develop links with European organisations. The latter is actively being pursued.

It is the intention that a follow-up conference will be held, but it was thought appropriate first to commission a review of the state of Latin American and Caribbean studies in the UK; this is scheduled to appear in Spring 2009. This is being undertaken alongside the development, by JISLAC, of a research portal of scholars' interests.

### Wider communication of research

The Latin America and the Caribbean Panel has been particularly active in conceiving and supporting a number of events that have attracted wide audiences. Particularly successful was the symposium that was held at the Academy on 'Mexico City through History and Culture' in October 2007. This symposium involved some of the most eminent scholars of Mexican history and culture from both Mexico and the UK. The keynote speaker was Mexico's foremost urban chronicler, Carlos Monsiváis, an extract of whose talk appears on page 19. The symposium attracted a capacity audience and was broadcast on Mexican television. The full papers presented at the symposium are to be published in the British Academy's

*Occasional Papers* series in 2009. Through this event the Panel has developed a close working relationship with the Mexican Embassy, with whom it intends to mount a significant conference and other events on the centenary of the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

Meanwhile, we have supported a number of events focusing on film, including conferences on film and the Falklands/Malvinas war (Warwick University), and on urban Latin America in film and music (University of Manchester). In November 2008 Professor Paul Julian Smith, newly elected a Fellow

of the Academy, gave a lecture on 'Transnational Cinemas' – to link up with the 7th Discovering Latin America Film Festival (Figure 3). Professor Smith examined three theoretical models of transnational cinemas, which he illustrated with films clips and insights into films that were shortly to be premiered in the UK. His lecture drew a large audience that included many people from outside the academic world.

For 2009 the Panel has planned a study day on Mexican food history. This is to be held at the British Museum in association with the Moctezuma exhibition – the last in the

Museum's series of very popular exhibitions focusing on emperors.

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More on the British Academy's International Engagement programmes, and on the work of its Area Panels, can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/intl](http://www.britac.ac.uk/intl)

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Figure 3: *The 2008 film 'Blindness', by the Brazilian film director Fernando Meirelles, is discussed by Professor Paul Julian Smith FBA at the British Academy, November 2008.*

