

The Captured Academy: How Authoritarian States Colonize the Institutions Meant to Resist Them

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Abstract— This article examines how authoritarian states convert the procedural safeguards of democratic scholarly associations into instruments of their own legitimation, using the Cuba Section of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) as a critical case. Building on the concept of “sharp power”, it situates the manipulation of academic space within a longer genealogy that begins with Soviet efforts to subordinate universities, continues through the Cuban state’s replication of that template after 1961, and persists in the transnational networks through which Havana’s authoritarian public diplomacy still circulates. Drawing on the case of LASA’s Cuba Section, the essay traces a recurring mechanism, state-organized delegations that present themselves as autonomous academic sections, the presence of security-linked officials on ostensibly scholarly panels, and a procedural asymmetry that tolerates criticism of Washington while obstructing criticism of Havana. This asymmetry reflects a broader ideological unevenness within Latin American studies and the wider academic left, in which left-wing authoritarianism receives systematically more indulgent treatment than its right-wing counterpart. But the defense of academic freedom is a public good whose value depends on its consistent, non-selective application, and that institutional capture is best countered by coherent universalism, by centering the testimony of those most affected, and by monitoring the transnational channels through which authoritarian influence travels.

Keywords— Academic freedom; institutional capture; sharp power; Cuba; Latin American; Studies Association; authoritarianism and public diplomacy.

Introduction

There is a particular species of cynicism at work when the agents of an authoritarian regime turn the language of rights against the people those rights were designed to protect. Scholars of comparative politics have grown accustomed to recognizing this inversion in electoral politics, the strongman who wins a vote and then dismantles the vote. The pattern is less often recognized in academic life, perhaps because the university is conventionally imagined as a space apart, governed by principles immune to the logic of power. That assumption is comfortable. It is also, this article argues, mistaken.

Editorial Note. The author declares that all ideas presented in this document are his own, except in cases where other sources are expressly cited, in which case they will be referenced. The author, being a native Spanish speaker, declares that he has used AI tools to review the preliminary translation and final editing of the article

Authoritarian states have long sought to project favorable narratives internationally. What has changed in recent decades is the sophistication of the methods and the vulnerability of academic institutions to them. Scholars of authoritarian influence operations have developed the concept of “sharp power” to describe a mode of foreign influence distinct from the “soft power” of cultural attraction and from the hard power of coercion (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Sharp power involves the strategic manipulation of information environments: not winning hearts and minds through genuine appeal, but shaping the conditions under which information is produced, circulated, and received. The concept also describes the capacity of an authoritarian state to penetrate, from within, the deliberative and representational structures of the scholarly associations that study it. This influence operates, crucially, through ostensibly open and legitimate institutions.

Across Latin America’s “Pink Tide” era and beyond, a pattern has emerged that deserves more sustained scholarly attention: authoritarian and populist regimes of the Left, together with their international allies, have become sophisticated practitioners of what might be called institutional capture, the strategic use of the rules, platforms, and legitimacy structures of democratic academic organizations to advance illiberal agendas (Grundberger, 2024). They do not break down the gates of scholarly life. They walk in through the front door, carrying membership cards.

The case of Cuba, examined here in relation to the influence of the Cuban state within the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), offers one of the clearest and most instructive illustrations of how this works. It is a story not of tanks and censors but of conference panels and procedural maneuvers, of ideological briefings disguised as collegial preparation, of intelligence officers introduced as scholars, and of the soft but systematic management of who gets to speak, and about whom. It is, moreover, a pattern of authoritarian influence with roots and memories spanning more than a century, reaching far beyond the borders of the Caribbean. But, before moving on to the development of the topic, I want to dedicate a few words to the context and condition from which I am writing this text.

As I write this text from the United States, in my present position as a visiting scholar, I want to close with a reflection on the convergences and distinctions between the authoritarian harassment of academic freedom in my native country and my present work context. There is certainly a great difference between an institutional system subjected to authoritarian tension, with illiberal populist elements that erode norms, capture institutions, or stigmatize dissent, and a consolidated autocratic regime, where repression is not a trend but an established structure¹. What differentiates a democracy under stress from a consolidated autocracy is not only the degree of repression, but the institutional regime of costs, whether speaking out, organizing, publishing, litigating, or emigrating carries manageable consequences (judicial due process, reputational damage, electoral defeat) or consequences that negate the very possibility of reversing them (imprisonment without due process, forced exile, the disappearance of independent media, single-party rule).

Simultaneously, in the United States, from where I write these lines, early warnings point to real, undeniably authoritarian phenomena: verbal and administrative attacks on universities, pressure on the media, rhetoric delegitimizing the judiciary, and the politicized use of federal agencies. Since March 2025, the federal government has frozen or cancelled billions of dollars in grants and contracts to Columbia, Harvard, Cornell, Northwestern, Penn, and Brown, conditioning the restoration of funds on federal oversight of admissions, hiring, and governance (Henry, 2026); with undeniable impact in environment of academic freedom (Chemerinsky, 2025). Scrutiny of visas for international students and scholars has tightened in parallel, a pressure I do not experience as an abstraction, given my own status as a visiting scholar. Yet these tensions occur within a system where the critical press operates without prior censorship and with massive reach, and its journalists are not imprisoned for their work. The courts, including judges appointed by the government itself, have repeatedly ruled against executive actions, and litigation forced the partial restoration of funding frozen at Harvard (Cantwell, 2026). There are competitive elections at the state and federal levels, a parliamentary opposition with real power, and mass demonstrations, without attending them being, in itself, a crime. And academics and artists openly criticize the government without disappearing from the public sphere.

¹To assess the impact of different contemporary authoritarianism on the state of academic life and freedom on a global scale, see Scholars at Risk. (2025). *Free to think 2025: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*. Scholars at Risk Network; Spannagel, J., Kinzelbach, K., & Saliba, I. (2020). *The Academic Freedom Index and other new indicators relating to academic space* (V-Dem Working Paper). University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute.

But in contemporary Cuba, the main reference point for my own experience, reflection, and formation, the structure is categorically different. A single party reigns, constitutionally enshrined as the “supreme leading force”. There are no competitive elections, nor a legal private press; organized dissent is illegal by definition, not by the interpretation of an ambiguous law. Independent journalists, dissident artists, and any citizen who takes a critical public stance face the harshness of prison, not media controversy. The difference is not one of “intensity of the same phenomenon”, but of architecture, a system with institutional self-correction (albeit damaged) versus a system designed to prevent self-correction.

It is precisely here that my two vantage points converge rather than diverge, and where this essay’s argument about LASA’s Cuba Section finds an unexpected mirror. What is happening to Harvard, Columbia, and their peers is not the Cuban model transplanted: no editor has been jailed, no outlet shuttered, no election cancelled. But the same underlying logic named throughout this essay, the colonization, from within, of the procedures that are supposed to protect scholarly autonomy, is visible here too, in a different register: conditioning federal funds on ideological compliance in admissions, hiring, and curriculum is an attempt at institutional capture, not merely a policy dispute (Evans, 2025). That Harvard could sue, and that a court could order funds restored, is itself the clearest evidence that the “institutional regime of costs” described above still functions in the United States: the challenge was costly, but not irreversible. In Cuba, that same challenge, filing suit against the ministry that revokes a magazine’s license, or against the officers who detain a dissident scholar, is not a legal remedy; it is the act that produces the next arrest. This is the asymmetry that matters, and also the warning, institutional capture of universities is now a documented, escalating strategy on more than one side of the ideological spectrum and in more than one country, and whether it succeeds or fails will depend on exactly the mechanisms of self-correction, courts, a free press, organized mobilization, that a consolidated autocracy like Cuba’s is designed, by its very architecture, to foreclose.

This distinction does not imply minimizing either risk. Early warning about the United States is legitimate and necessary precisely because institutional erosion doesn’t announce itself with a headline, democracies don’t usually die from a coup, but from the accumulation of normalized precedents. Early mobilization, litigation, investigative journalism, civic pressure, is the reason the American system still maintains these checks and balances. It would be a mistake to read “it’s not Cuba” as “there’s nothing to worry about”. The Cuban tragedy, in turn, is a reminder of the value of solidarity, always scarce, free from geopolitical constraints: history shows that part of the international left has downplayed Cuban repression out of ideological affinity with the regime’s anti-imperialist narrative,

while part of the right has exploited the Cuban case without consistently upholding the same standard of human rights elsewhere. Both forms of exploitation harm the real victims.

But there is common ground that can be defended without relativism, a commitment to freedom of expression, due process, and political pluralism as universal goods, not selective according to the convenience of the ideological adversary of the moment. Those who defend academic freedom in the United States and remain silent about the imprisonment of artists in Cuba, or vice versa, are not defending principles, but sides. Consistency demands applying the same standard, distinguishing precisely the magnitude of the risk in each case, without diminishing the urgency of either.

A Tradition with Roots: Soviet Origins of Academic Capture

Returning to the analysis of the problem (authoritarian influence on the academic field) and the specific case (the Cuban Leninist regime and its influence on spaces and figures of the Western academy), we should understand that the Cuban pattern did not emerge from a vacuum. It belongs to a genealogy that begins in 1917, when the Bolshevik seizure of power inaugurated a new relationship between communist states and the institutions of knowledge. Understanding that genealogy is essential to understanding why the contemporary pattern is so stable, so recognizable, and so resistant to reform².

From the earliest years of Soviet power, the Bolsheviks understood universities and scholarly associations not as autonomous spaces of inquiry but as terrain to be contested and ultimately controlled. Lenin's 1922 deportation of more than two hundred leading Russian intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists, the episode known as the "Philosopher's Steamer", was the most visible expression of a systematic policy, those who could not be politically subordinated were to be removed. The university was to function, in the language of the party's ideological directives of the early 1920s, as an instrument of class struggle rather than as a space of disinterested inquiry. Academic freedom, in this framework, was not a principle to be respected but a bourgeois mystification to be exposed and dismantled³.

²To understand the specific mutations caused by the totalitarian phenomenon on the intellectual condition, as well as its consequences and disillusionments, see Crossman, R. (Ed.). (1949). *The God that failed*. Harper Brothers; Milosz, C. (1953). *The captive mind*. Alfred A. Knopf.

³For further information on the effect of the Soviet regime, in its various phases, on the academic community and intellectual life, see: Kagarlitsky, B. (1988). *The thinking reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet state, 1917 to the present*. Verso; Shlapentokh, V. (2014). *Soviet intellectuals and political power: The post-Stalin era*. Princeton University

What followed internally was the progressive subordination of all disciplines to ideological control. The Lysenko affair, in which Trofim Lysenko, backed by Stalin, imposed a scientifically fraudulent theory of heredity on Soviet biology, destroying the careers and lives of geneticists who refused to endorse it, remains the most notorious example of how party authority could colonize even the natural sciences. The social sciences and humanities, however, were subjected to a far more systematic and durable form of party supervision. Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy became the mandatory framework within which all legitimate scholarship had to be conducted. Those who deviated were not merely wrong; they were, by definition, politically suspect.

The external dimension of this project was equally deliberate. The Communist International (Comintern), founded in 1919, functioned among other things as an instrument for projecting Soviet influence through the organizational networks of sympathetic leftists across Europe and the Americas. Intellectual fellow travelers, the writers, academics, and artists who visited the USSR and returned with favorable reports, or who participated in front organizations such as the World Peace Council, were not, in most cases, conscious agents of Soviet intelligence. They were something both more numerous and, for present purposes, more instructive, individuals whose ideological sympathies led them to apply a double standard, scrutinizing Western liberal democracy with rigor while extending reflexive solidarity to the Soviet experiment.

The manipulation of international academic and cultural organizations was a deliberate Soviet strategy, documented extensively by scholars of communist influence operations. The International Association of Democratic Lawyers, the International Organization of Journalists, and the Women's International Democratic Federation, these and dozens of similar bodies were established or captured by communist networks from the late 1940s onward, not to advance the stated objectives of their mandates but to provide platforms for Soviet foreign policy positions while appearing to speak in the independent voice of civil society. The pattern was consistent: legitimate-sounding organizational names; democratic procedures deployed selectively; systematic exclusion of dissenting voices; and the exploitation of the moral prestige of the Left's genuine commitments, to peace, to anti-colonialism, to worker's rights, as cover for a different agenda.

When the Cuban Revolution consolidated itself as a communist state after 1961, it inherited this entire tradition, not as an external import but as a self-conscious model. The structures Havana built for managing academic life, from the ideological supervision of university curricula to the use of official scholars as delegates to international forums, replicated the Soviet template with local adaptations. Casa de las Américas, founded

in 1959, became an important instrument for projecting Cuban cultural prestige internationally while maintaining internal ideological discipline over what could and could not be said. The organization's genuine contributions to Latin American literature and the arts were real; they were also, deliberately, the currency that purchas international credibility for a state that was simultaneously censoring, surveilling, and expelling those whose intellectual commitments it found inconvenient.

What the Soviet and Cuban cases share, and what connects them to the LASA pattern examined below, is a fundamental inversion of the relationship between institutional form and institutional purpose. Academic freedom, as a principle, exists to protect inquiry from power. The Soviet contribution to the history of this question was to demonstrate, with systematic thoroughness, that the language of liberation could be turned into an instrument of its own opposite: that the vocabulary of solidarity, anti-imperialism, and progressive commitment, which had genuine emancipatory content in some contexts, could be weaponized through organizational control and the cultivation of sympathetic fellow travelers to silence precisely the voices that most needed protection. LASA's Cuba Section did not invent this playbook. It inherited it.

Cuba: The Architecture of Silence

Beyond this tradition, understanding why Cuba matters as a contemporary case study requires understanding what academic freedom looks like when an authoritarian state dismantles it systematically from within. In Cuba, the university is not an autonomous institution: it is an extension of the party-state apparatus. This is not a metaphor. Academic careers are built or destroyed not according to scholarly merit but according to political alignment. Students and faculty who deviate from ideological orthodoxy face what can only be called a formalized regime of cancellation, not the informal, contested, and frequently overstated phenomenon that dominates campus debates in the United States, but a top-down, institutionally enforced system of exclusion with no appeal mechanism and no independent judiciary to check it. Recent scholarship situates this apparatus within a longer arc of regime transformation, from revolutionary mobilization through a totalitarian phase and into the more adaptive, technocratic authoritarianism of the present (Chaguaceda & Gratius, 2026).

Expulsions for "ideological deviation" are routine. Surveillance is built into the academic environment. Those who persist in critical inquiry find themselves not merely marginalized but eventually compelled to leave the country, a process that masquerades in the bloodless language of economics as "brain drain" but is more accurately understood as coerced exile. The scholar is not formally expelled from the nation; the conditions

of her remaining are simply made untenable. This system does not operate blindly across the social landscape; its costs fall disproportionately on those already vulnerable, women, racialized Cubans, LGBTQ scholars, and those from regions lacking the informal networks of protection that proximity to Havana's elite can provide. The denial of academic freedom, in this sense, is not merely a political phenomenon. It is a social one, reproducing and reinforcing the inequalities it claims, in its official ideology, to oppose.

What makes the Cuban case particularly instructive is the regime's insistence on a revolutionary and anti-imperialist legitimacy narrative. This is not incidental; it is load-bearing. When academic freedom is suppressed by a government that presents itself as the heir of liberation struggles, as the defender of the Global South against Northern imperialism, and as a model of social achievement in health and education, the suppression becomes harder to name. The frame of solidarity muffles the cry. And, as the following sections show, it provides the rhetorical cover that enables the same suppression to travel, intact and largely unchallenged, into the heart of the international organizations that claim to oppose it.

The Cuban state has become a skilled practitioner of sharp, or incisive, power within academic spaces⁴. Research collaborations are cultivated that provide international scholars with access to archives, interlocutors, and fieldwork sites in exchange for narratives favorable to the regime, or at minimum for the exclusion of narratives unfavorable to it. International conferences become platforms for Cuban state-affiliated academics whose work amplifies official positions. Organizations whose funding or collaborative relationships intersect with Cuban institutions develop, over time, structural incentives to avoid antagonizing the regime.

⁴The academic output on the link between the policies of the Castro regime and its influence on the intellectual field is extensive, but much of it remains in Spanish, without English translation. Among the most thought-provoking works, in both languages, see: Aguilera, C. A. (Ed.). (2009). *La utopía vacía: Intelectuales y Estado en Cuba*. Linkgua/Hypermedia; Camero Guevara, Y., Chaguaceda Noriega, A., Díaz Torres, I., González Arenas, B., González Marrero, C., Hernández, H. E., Puerta Riera, M. I., & Thiemann, L. (2023). *Sharp power y redes intelectuales: La presencia de Cuba en América Latina* (Y. Welp, prólogo). Editorial Dunker / Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C.; Fusco, C. (2015). *Dangerous moves: Performance and politics in Cuba*. Tate Publishing; González Marrero, C. (2021). *Literatura, política y sociedad: Cuatro representaciones de imaginarios en la Revolución cubana*. Editorial Hypermedia; Grenier, Y. (2017). *Culture and the Cuban state: Participation, recognition, and dissonance under communism*. Lexington Books; Guerra, L. (2012). *Visions of power in Cuba: Revolution, redemption, and resistance, 1959, 1971*. University of North Carolina Press; Iglesias Utset, M., & Díaz Infante, D. (Eds.). (2024). *Sartre y Beauvoir en Cuba: La luna de miel de la Revolución*. Editorial Casa Vacía; Rojas, R. (2015). *Fighting over Fidel: The New York intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution*. Princeton University Press; Rojas, R. (2023). *Breve historia de la censura y otros ensayos sobre arte y poder en Cuba*. Rialta Ediciones.

The result is a skewing of the global academic conversation. Certain perspectives are amplified; others are marginalized. The experiences of scholars who have been expelled, surveilled, and exiled, the people who know the system most intimately, are rendered largely invisible within the very international forums ostensibly dedicated to understanding Latin American societies. Official discourse fills the vacuum their silence creates.

This is the essential mechanism of institutional capture. The authoritarian state does not need to control the organization outright. It needs only to shape, gradually and deniably, the conditions of what is discussable within it. Nowhere has this process been more visible, or more consequential, than within LASA's Cuba Section.

A Delegation Disguised as an Academic Section

LASA, the Latin American Studies Association, is the preeminent, U.S.-based professional organization for scholars of Latin America across the social sciences. It encompasses thousands of members across dozens of countries, organizes a major annual congress, publishes leading journals, and wields real influence over the shape of the field. By its own account, and its own genuine aspiration, it is a democratic, pluralistic institution committed to scholarly integrity and human rights. Its bylaws, internal elections, and deliberative procedures function as institutional safeguards designed to prevent any government, party, or special interest from appropriating these communities and converting them into instruments of agendas alien to scholarship itself (Lopez, 2026).

For decades, LASA's Cuba Section operated in ways that made a systematic mockery of those principles, not by violating them from the outside, but by manipulating them from within. The first and most structurally revealing element of this capture lies in the nature of Cuban representation. Delegations traveling to LASA congresses reportedly underwent ideological briefings before departing Havana. They traveled as large officialist contingents led by senior political figures who assigned "tasks" and demanded daily reports on the proceedings. The scholarly merit of the papers presented was, at best, secondary to their political function.

A section within a democratic professional association is, by definition, a space composed of scholars acting in their own capacity, endowed with intellectual autonomy and loyalty to the ethical norms of their profession. A delegation that receives instructions regarding which positions it must defend is not an academic section; it is an extension of a government's foreign-relations apparatus. The use of LASA's name, institutional prestige, and democratic procedures as legitimizing cover for

such an operation constitutes, in itself, an act of fraudulent appropriation of institutional capital.

The presence of figures linked to the Cuban security apparatus in these spaces makes the diagnosis unavoidable. LASA included among the speakers of an academic panel on the July 11, 2021 protests in Cuba Colonel Abel Enrique González Santamaría of the Cuban Ministry of the Interior, identified as a close associate of Alejandro Castro Espín within the now-dissolved National Defense and Security Commission (Diario de Cuba, 2026a). Once the panels of a scholarly association incorporate an intelligence colonel as an "academic" voice, the boundary separating academia from state propaganda has effectively disappeared. The conference program becomes a laundering operation, and LASA's institutional prestige the currency being laundered.

The Asymmetry Revealed: One Rulebook, Two Standards

LASA's relationship with Cuba has deep historical roots. In the context of Cold War Latin American studies, Cuba occupied a charged symbolic position: for many scholars on the Left, it represented resistance to the kind of U.S. imperialism that had backed dictatorships across the region, funded coups, and supported the torturers of the Southern Cone. That solidarity had genuine moral content. The problem is that solidarity can curdle, can become, over time, a refusal to apply the same critical scrutiny to left-wing authoritarianism that one applies, rightly, to right-wing authoritarianism. What begins as a corrective to ideological blindness becomes an ideological blindness of its own⁵.

Events in early 2026 brought this double standard into sharp focus (14ymedio, 2026). A proposed declaration by the LASA Cuba Section concerning the human rights situation on the island called for national dialogue, demanded an end to intellectual censorship and police repression, and expressed solidarity with demands for amnesty for political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. It did not advocate foreign intervention. It did not call for sanctions. It made the kind of statement that LASA, by its own professed values, should have been able to adopt without controversy.

The controversy that followed was revealing precisely because of its asymmetry. The same institutional mechanisms that had previously enabled declarations critical of United States

⁵On the influence of Far-left, specifically, communism, on Western intellectuals, see Aron, R. (1962). *The opium of the intellectuals*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; Caute, D. (1988). *The fellow travellers: Intellectual friends of communism*. Yale University Press; Hollander, P. (1981). *Political pilgrims: Travels of Western intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928, 1978*. Oxford University Press.

policy toward Cuba functioned without friction when criticism targeted Washington. When criticism was directed at Havana, what emerged instead were delays, pressures, and appeals to preserve a supposed “climate of respect.” The rulebook was identical; its application was not. Thasymmetry reflects not neutrality but a double standard incompatible with the ethical foundations of any academic association that claims a commitment to intellectual pluralism.

The rhetorical strategy deployed by defenders of the status quo deserves examination in its own right. The U.S. embargo, or “blockade”, in the Cuban government’s preferred framing, was routinely invoked as justification for avoiding discussion of internal abuses. This logic suggests that criticism of the Cuban government becomes inappropriate so long as Washington maintains a hostile posture toward the island. Independent Cuban journalists have argued, to the contrary, that tying human rights violations in Cuba to the embargo shifts responsibility away from the Cuban state and disregards the experience of the victims of political violence on the island. Applied consistently, this reasoning would make meaningful discussion of human rights impossible in most international contexts. Its selective application in the Cuban case suggests that it functions less as a principle than as a political tactic, one the regime has, unsurprisingly, found useful to cultivate.

Rebellion from Within

What makes the LASA Cuba Section case particularly difficult to dismiss as the projection of external political agendas is that so many of its most forceful critics have come from within: historians, sociologists, journalists, and intellectuals who are themselves LASA members and Cuba scholars, whose careers and personal histories are bound up with the island and with the organization.

The contradictions became impossible to sustain in one especially stark instance. Historian and essayist Alina Bárbara López Hernández, herself co-director of the Cuba Section, has experienced state harassment, restrictions on movement, and prosecution for acts of civic dissent, including a state-imposed prohibition on traveling abroad to attend a LASA congress (Diario de Cuba, 2026b). LASA had already expressed concern over the repression directed against her and against anthropologist Jenny Pantoja Torres. When a co-director of the section becomes a documented victim of political persecution, while factions within the same section attempt to silence discussion of such abuses, the institutional incoherence is total. The organization is, in effect, simultaneously expressing solidarity with a scholar and enabling the structures that repress her.

Other scholars responded through resignation. Following LASA’s refusal in 2021 to condemn state repression after the July 11 protests, a mass uprising that the Cuban government suppressed with mass detentions, show trials, and long prison sentences, several Cuban academics and intellectuals publicly left the organization. Their reasoning was precise: an association that cannot defend academic freedom when its own members are being persecuted has forfeited the credibility with which it claims to defend academic freedom at all.

These departures were not the outbursts of political partisans. They were the considered judgments of scholars who had invested years in the organization and found, at the moment of reckoning, that the investment had been made in an institution unwilling to honor its own principles when honoring them was costly.

Asymmetry as Pattern, Transnational Stakes as horizons

The pattern within LASA is not an aberration. It reflects a wider tendency across Latin American studies and much of the broader academic Left in the Global North: a well-documented asymmetry in the application of the principles of academic freedom and human rights, organized almost perfectly along ideological lines. Right-wing authoritarianism is, historically, condemned vigorously and, in most respects, correctly. The academic community mobilized, rightly, against the dictatorships of Pinochet and Videla, against the repression of universities in Brazil under military rule, and against the rollback of academic autonomy under Bolsonaro. These were and remain genuine threats deserving of collective response.

Left-wing authoritarianism, by contrast, tends to be treated with considerably more ambivalence. Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, regimes that have imprisoned intellectuals, shuttered independent universities, expelled critical scholars, and placed the instruments of knowledge production under direct state control, are addressed in many academic spaces with a care and qualification rarely extended to their right-wing counterparts. Violations are contextualized into near-invisibility. Critics of these regimes are suspected of serving imperial agendas. Scholars who have personally experienced repression at the hands of left-wing states find that their testimony carries less epistemic weight than the testimony of those who have never had to pay a price for what they think.

This asymmetry is not merely an intellectual error, though it is that. It is a political gift to the authoritarian states that benefit from it. Every time a left-wing government’s suppression of academic freedom is treated as too complicated to criticize directly, the legitimacy of that suppression is marginally but

measurably reinforced. Every time an organization that claims to defend academic freedom applies its principles selectively, those principles are weakened, and the scholars who need them most are abandoned.

The Cuban regime has long understood the strategic importance of intellectual and academic spaces. Universities, conferences, journals, and professional associations have been viewed as arenas of influence through which political legitimacy can be projected internationally. This does not imply that every scholar sympathetic to the Cuban government acts as a state operative. It does, however, indicate that authoritarian systems understand the symbolic and political value of academic legitimacy and systematically seek to shape it. LASA provided an exceptionally valuable platform. Its Cuba Section, operated for decades as a quasi-official delegation, was the mechanism through which that platform was accessed and exploited. What is at stake in this analysis is not merely the integrity of one organization or the treatment of one country in the scholarly literature. The stakes are transnational, in two senses.

First, the networks through which authoritarian narratives travel are themselves transnational. The Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) has been documented as a vehicle for Cuban authoritarian public diplomacy, an organization that provides legitimacy, platforms, and international reach to a regime's preferred narratives while marginalizing the scholars that regime has expelled (Chaguaceda & Fernández, 2025). A similar pattern appears in other regional bodies, in certain foundations, and in specific editorial networks. LASA is one node in a wider system. A rigorous defense of academic freedom requires tracing the invitations, the panel compositions, and the editorial decisions that structure these networks, and asking what interests they serve.

Second, the damage done by institutional capture radiates outward. When a major academic organization fails to apply its principles consistently, it does not merely fail the scholars most immediately affected; it degrades the normative infrastructure that everyone depends on. Academic freedom, like the rule of law, is a public good whose value depends on its generality. A principle applied only to congenial cases is not a principle. It is a preference. The scholars expelled from Cuban universities, living in exile in Madrid, Mexico City, or Miami, who have watched their careers dismantled and their voices systematically excluded from the very conferences that claim to represent their region, are not a peripheral concern for debates about academic freedom in the Global North. They are its test case. If the defense of academic freedom flinches precisely when it is needed most, precisely because the repression is being carried out by a government whose anti-imperialist rhetoric appeals to the sympathies of the academic Left, then the defense of academic freedom is not a principle at all.

Conclusion: Toward a Coherent Universalism

The path forward begins with a commitment that sounds simple but proves, in practice, demanding: coherent universalism. Academic freedom must be defended wherever it is threatened, regardless of the ideological character of the threat. This means applying the same scrutiny to left-wing authoritarianism that the academic community, at its best, applies to right-wing authoritarianism. It means resisting the temptation to treat political sympathy as a license for analytical charity.

It also means centering the people most affected. Behind every instance of academic repression is a specific person, a scholar who lost a position, a student expelled for what she wrote, a researcher who had to choose between her work and her country, a co-director of an academic section who is simultaneously harassed by the state whose delegations dominate that section. The defense of academic freedom should be organized around these individuals, ensuring they have institutional affiliations, that their experiences are visible in global scholarly discourse, and that their testimony is taken seriously rather than filtered through the ideological preferences of those who have never had to pay a comparable price for intellectual honesty.

And it means taking the transnational dimension seriously; understanding that authoritarian influence does not stop at national borders, that it works through the channels of legitimate institutions, and that defending open scholarly life requires monitoring those channels with the same rigor one would bring to any other form of institutional corruption. None of this requires abandoning the critique of imperialism, the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America is real, its effects ongoing, and it provides genuine context for understanding how authoritarian narratives gain purchase in academic spaces. But context is not exculpation. The proposed, and ultimately sabotaged, 2026 LASA Cuba Section declaration condemning human rights violations on the island made precisely this distinction, it defended Cuban sovereignty while insisting that sovereignty cannot become a justification for silence regarding political prisoners, police repression, or intellectual censorship. That distinction is fundamental. The existence of external pressure does not obligate critics to silence; it obligates them to more careful, more honest analysis, not less. The authoritarian capture of democratic academic institutions represents a specific and underappreciated threat to intellectual life, one that operates not through censorship imposed from outside but through the colonization of the procedures and norms that govern scholarly debate from within. It is harder to name than jackboots; it is no less corrosive.

Selective silence is not neutrality. It is a choice. In the case of Cuba within LASA, it has been a choice with victims,

scholars whose expulsion from their country has been replicated, softly and procedurally, within the very organization that claimed to represent them. Academic freedom, in the end, is not a ceremonial commitment. It is a structure that must be maintained through specific choices, about whom to invite, whose testimony to credit, which violations to name, and which silences to break. Alina Bárbara López Hernández knows this. The scholars who resigned from LASA after 2021 know this. The Cuban academics living in exile who have watched their expulsion from their country replicated, softly and procedurally, within the organization that was supposed to represent them, know this too. They deserve, at minimum, the honesty of those who claim to be defending the same principles they were expelled for practicing.

The case of LASA's Cuba Section illustrates the full anatomy of authoritarian capture of academic sphere: a governing structure operated as a quasi-official state delegation; ideological briefings before congresses; an intelligence colonel seated on an academic panel about a civilian uprising; procedural resistance precisely when declarations targeted the Cuban state rather than Washington politics; and the effective silencing of members who are simultaneously victims of the system they are not permitted to criticize. These are not anomalies. They are, as the documented record makes clear, the product of a long-standing structural pattern, authoritarian logic normalized within a pluralist space through the gradual accumulation of double standards, compliant majorities, and the powerful lubricant of political support to authoritarian ideas and practices.

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