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Conference Highlight: Fifteenth Annual Lat.Crit. Conference

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Conference Highlight: Fifteenth Annual Lat.Crit. Conference

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHT: FIFTEENTH ANNUAL LATCRIT CONFERENCE

By: Alex Bernsbteyn¹

The Fifteenth Annual Latino/a Critical Legal Theory Conference, which took place from October 8-10, 2010 in Denver, Colorado, was themed “The Color of the Economic Crisis: Exploring the Downturn From the Bottom Up.” The conference explored how the economic crisis affects marginalized populations differently—such as socio-economically disadvantaged people, racial minorities, immigrants, and domestic violence victims—and how their realities must be a central point of discussion when considering economic justice and reform. Most of the conference attendees were law school professors who shared their relevant research. Students, practitioners, and advocates also came to present ideas, learn from others, and build collective support for a call to progressive action.

A main focus of the conference was the impact of the economic crisis on immigrants living in the United States. Immigrants, broadly speaking, are vulnerable to scapegoating during economic downturns, as evidenced by the new Arizona immigration law. The opening lunch presentation included an engaging speech by Hans Meyer, from the Colorado Immigrants’ Rights Coalition, who began by asking immigrants in the room to stand. Only a handful of people stood up. He then asked those whose parents or

grandparents were immigrants to stand, those who were in love with an immigrant to stand, those who had immigrants living in their neighborhood to stand, and, finally, those who simply were in solidarity with immigrants to stand. By the end of the speech, the whole room was on its feet.

Many of the panel discussions on opening day focused on the current immigrants’ rights battle. For example, experts on a panel titled “Immigration, Economic Crisis, & the State” examined U.S. immigration policy from a number of angles. Gabriella Sanchez, from the Arizona State University School of Justice and Social Inquiry, gave an anthropological evaluation of how Arizona’s immigration

law isolates, ostracizes, and places immigrants in Maricopa County under a spotlight of criminal investigation. Tania Valdez, a student at the University of California, Berkeley Boalt Hall School of Law, reminded attendees that American laws that affect immigrants often have unintended yet severe consequences on immigrants’ families who were left behind in home countries. Valdez’s paper focused on The North American Free Trade Agreement’s effect on indigenous women in Mexico and laid the foundation for a critical analysis of how the inherent inequalities of that regional trade agreement push men to migrate for work, leaving their wives wholly dependent on remittances for their family’s survival. Maria Pabon Lopez, from Indiana University

Maurer School of Law, gave a comparative overview of how Spain has developed a creative solution to deal with its shrinking economy and influx of immigrants—the country has begun paying immigrants to return to the countries from which they came. While she did not advocate for a similar solution in the United States, she did argue for innovative immigration reform that acknowledges the potential clash between an influx of immigrants and an economic downturn, and for a solution that preserves the dignity of all people.

During the event’s

main dinner, Mary Romero, from Arizona State University, gave a powerful speech, bolstered by photographs, focusing on Arizona’s new unjust immigration laws. She offered anecdotal information related to the new laws, including how listening to Mexican music or not looking directly into the eyes of police officers may constitute reasonable suspicion for police to stop a person for “papers.” Some of the photographs featured Latinos and Latinas being shoved into the back of police cars. Other photographs were captioned and showed children crying out hysterically, “they told me to shut up and that mommy was leaving.” The real impact of anti-immigrant backlash during the current



Above: Plenary speakers of “Latina/o Education and Justice: Leading Voices, Lessons Learned.” Credit: Tayyab Mahmud

Great Recession spoke for itself in these photographs.

Other panels explored the experiences of people who not only suffer economically, but also endure other forms of injustice. Robert Ashford, from Syracuse University, conveyed his thesis that the economic crisis did not cause poverty, but rather that poverty caused the economic crisis. Judy Goldscheid, from The City University of New York School of Law, spoke on the hidden dangers of economic fluctuations in the family setting, where domestic violence tends to increase with economic hardship. James Hackney, from Northeastern University School of Law, made the case that critical race theory must be examined as an inherent element in

economic crises because race is a critical part of every aspect of solution-building. Danne Johnson, from Oklahoma City University School of Law, argued that lifeline non-governmental organizations, which provide food and shelter to those in poverty, should benefit from government bailouts because they provide essential services that the government has neglected to offer.

These examples of innovative and thoughtful speakers, theories, and arguments are just a small sample from the Fifteenth Annual LatCrit Conference. Over 200 attendees gathered for meals and ideas. Each of us exchanged smiles and handshakes upon recognizing that we were advocates for the same issue: social justice during economic crisis.



LatCrit student Scholars and one of the LatCrit founders cutting a cake to mark LatCrit's Quinceañera.
Credit: Tayyab Mahmud

Endnotes

¹ Alexandra Bernshteyn is a third-year law student at American University, Washington College of Law. She serves as an Assistant Marketing Editor for *The Modern American*, and she attended this year's LatCrit conference on the publication's behalf.

For brief interviews of LatCrit attendees and participants, see The Modern American website at www.wcl.american.edu/modernamerican.