

Semester in Northeastern Brazil

In the spring semester of 2006 I spent four months in northeastern Brazil through the School for International Training (SIT) “Brazil: Culture, Development and Social Justice” program. Primarily located in the city of Fortaleza, I stayed with a lower-middle class family while my program centered on studying various social programs that work to enhance the rights of women, indigenous people, rural peasants and urban poor in an effort to alleviate their misery and injustice. Although I had been to Brazil before, I was now able to make assessments in a more holistic light. With my host family I discussed the middle-class experience which consists of a challenging balancing act between the country’s drastic dichotomy of rich and poor. Through the vast outline of culture, development and social justice, my understanding of Latin America and its diversity was enhanced because, even just within Brazil, there are major differences among social and economic classes, sexes, races, ages and regions.



Attempting to match the Brazilian faces to the academic situation, our seminars did not consist of a single topic. Through attending presentations of Brazilian professors on topics such as land and women’s rights, meeting members of an urban slum organization, seeing the living conditions of the rural landless through trips to Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) encampments and settlements and to indigenous villages, and exploring creative development techniques such as a community currency and youth technology trainings, we saw a glimpse of the diversity of Brazil’s poverty. When we traveled to the state of Pernambuco, also in the northeast, we visited two Quilombos which are communities originally founded by runaway slaves. Their situation was



also similar to many of the other rural poor in the aspect of land tenure. Although the Brazilian constitution grants land rights to those who work the land in a productive manner, none of the rural people we met in the encampments, the indigenous community or the Quilombos had titles to the land that they have been cultivating for decades or even centuries.

Relating to women, in Pernambuco’s capital Recife, we met with community educators working to prevent violence against women and to empower women through helping them earn an income. Our group even ventured to the popular city Salvador da Bahia to learn about the structural discrimination against Afro-Brazilians that challenges their acceptance to

universities, participation in politics, alleviation from poverty, etc. Whatever we studied, marginalized people were our theme.

Perhaps my most growing experience during the four months, however, was during the one month of my Independent Study Project in which I went alone to Tabua, a community of 500 people in the northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte. Although I had been to Tabua when I was 16 and have maintained, the research project was an exceptional experience because I learned so much about the people that I thought I already knew. My research was titled “As Lutas pela Terra de Tabua” or “The Struggles for the Land of Tabua” and was a historical account of the community’s struggle for land tenure. It was humbling to have my friends’ relatives describe for me how their lives were threatened while fighting a legal battle for their land rights. Although one of their community members probably should have been the one to do so, I had the honor of writing their first account of the movement that saved but also legally created their ancient community. I learned, of course, that their story was unique, but similar to the situations I had listened to throughout the semester.

Internship at the Latin America Working Group (LAWG) –Objective 2

Interning at the Latin America Working Group (LAWG) in the summer of 2007 showed me a human face of U.S. foreign policy. The advocacy work that the associates and program associates do at the LAWG is proof that the same winds of change breathing life into Latin American social movements are struggling against the norm in Washington, DC.

While my internship was largely centered on assisting an associate in advocating Mexico and border related issues, I also had the experience to expand my horizons through sampling other areas of LAWG work. Such experiences helped me to maintain at least a basic awareness on the background of and possible pending changes to the Cuban Embargo and Plan Colombia. In addition, I worked on updating LAWG’s Guatemala website. This activity informed me on the current issues regarding violence against women, corruption and impunity, election-targeted violence and efforts to rebuild after the war. Nonetheless, each of these seemingly different topics covered at the LAWG are all focused on changing for the better, the US policy towards Latin America that has proven ineffective and damaging. By advocating under the umbrella theme of action at home for economic and socially just livelihoods in Latin America, the LAWG showed me how research, coalition networking, education and designing solutions can make changes on the Hill for people’s lives thousands of miles away.



Relating to Mexico, I just happened to be at the LAWG when the Senate was debating what would have been the most comprehensive immigration reform in over twenty years. Just as the bill was controversial among the anti-immigrant population because it allowed a path to citizenship for the approximate 12 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States, it was controversial among LAWG coalition members because it was too harsh. Even though a path to citizenship was included, heads of households would have had to return to their home countries to wait for legalization—a wait that could have separated families for up to 13 years. To advocate reform, however, my main job was depressing but important. I had to track the deaths of migrants crossing the border so that shifts in migration patterns caused by the various walls can be identified.

Also related to Mexico and governments, the LAWG hosted a woman, Hortencia Enriquez, whose missing daughter is one of the over 400 women and girls that have been abducted, murdered and often raped in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua, Mexico since 1993. Because of neglect from Mexican authorities, the LAWG helped Hortencia strategize her testimony with the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and members of Congress. During this week of several meetings, I was able to meet personally with Hortencia and her lawyers to see how they were using international pressure to make change in their country. I went to most of the hearings, including one at the U.S. House of Representatives Sub-Committee on the Western Hemisphere. After the experience I wrote an English and Spanish “Voces/Voices” piece for the LAWG’s *Advocate*, which gave a background to the plague of femicide in Mexico and the transcribed words of Hortencia.



As my work focused on Mexico but I was able to talk to various experts and go to many hearings on other topics my understanding of Latin America was enhanced. I now have the pleasure to say that I heard new Mexican Ambassador to the United States speak, I learned about violence against the press, displaced Colombians, etc. Furthermore, it was amazing to know that there are wonderfully intelligent people strategically working to improve U.S. relations in Latin America through social and economic justice.