

6TH WORLD CONGRESS OF THE ECONOMETRIC SOCIETY: INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

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The 6th World Congress of the Econometric Society assembled at the Palau de Congressos, Barcelona in Spain, 22–28 August 1990. The location was a modern and impressive conference building, with highly efficient air-conditioning and perhaps more of a business atmosphere than an academic one.

Estimates of numbers attending ranged from 2,500 from an ever optimistic publisher's representative to 500 from an econometrics theoretician, to whom anything over 100 attained asymptotic properties. A figure of 1,500 seemed more consistent with the list of participants and about 200 accompanying persons to increase the number and variety at the numerous social events. With the European Economic Association Meeting scheduled to begin on the 30th August in Lisbon, there was much less 'wastage' towards the end than often occurs and, indeed, some people were still arriving on the Monday, adding fresh minds to the later sessions.

Whilst aiming for a worldwide gathering, the representation by continent was inevitably heavily biased towards Europe, due to location, and North America. Meetings of the Far East, Australasian and Latin American Standing Committees were scheduled (by invitation) but it is difficult to believe that they were busy affairs or quorate.

Pre-arrival information appeared to vary according to whether you were contributing a paper or not. Paper givers were sent a preliminary program, including general information on how to get to the Congress Hall etc., together with further details of the sessions their papers were scheduled for. Mere participants received only a receipt with the address of the Congress Secretariat. Whilst the difference presumably resulted from a division of labour between the Program Committee and Local Organizing Committee, it could have been avoided with some cooperation between them.

Upon arrival, limited information was rapidly transformed to full information on receipt of the Congress folder — this year, a natty black plastic briefcase with luminous yellow straps, allowing it to be hand-held or casually slung over the shoulder and ensuring that Congressesees (?) could be spotted in crowds and at long distances, even after dark. Frequent attenders of European Econometric Society Meetings rated it preferable to the environmentally-friendly cloth bag provided at Copenhagen in 1987 (still in evidence at this Congress) but dominated by the stylish imitation leather case on offer at Bologna in 1988. One

more adventurous and better funded European conferee sported a real leather case from a recent South American Meeting and demonstrated the advantages of its design whilst standing in a busy foyer — the extraction of information without fumbling on the floor!

In addition to the Program and the List of Participants, the folder included two sizeable Books of Abstracts (one thick book would not have fitted in the folder) together with maps, brochures and invitations to the various receptions and concert. Also, some fifty address labels were included to enable copies of papers to be sent by authors to anyone who placed their address labels in the appropriate envelopes in the foyer area. The success of this apparently efficient system remains to be seen, but if all conferees used their full quota of labels then some 75,000 papers will be circulating the world soon.

As usual, the Congress made little concession to local customs with sessions from 9.00 am to 12.45 pm and 2.00 pm to 6.15 pm (i.e. a short lunch break and no Siesta!) from Wednesday 9.00 am to the following Tuesday 6.15 pm, with a generous FREE MORNING on Sunday for the more religious Econometricians. Organised social events in the evenings left little time for informal exploration of Barcelona, except on the way to or from the events. For some conferees the route inevitably included La Rambla, with its varied interests, no matter where the location of the event.

Of course, it was possible to take time out for visiting during the sessions, but the combination of heat and humidity which met one as one left the chilled confines of the Congress rapidly reduced the appeal of such ventures and made attendance at sessions more attractive.

Many old and interesting locations were used for the receptions and the excellent concert of historical Catalan music was held in the open-air Teatre Grec. However, in travelling around Barcelona, one could not help feeling that the emphasis is now on new buildings and that many of these are still to be completed. With the Olympics coming up in 1992, Barcelona is clearly preparing to impress the world with a range of public arenas and facilities. Many are already complete or nearing completion, including the Estadi Olympic and the Palau de Congressos itself, but many others are 'work in progress' and the atmosphere of one large building site prevails.

On the accommodation front, there seemed to be a general impression that the hotels were already geared to the Olympics in the rates they were charging. Across a range of hotel standards, conferees expressed a sense of lack of value for money, particularly when allocated to the top or beyond the price range they had requested.

With somewhere in the region of 1000 papers being delivered from initial submissions of almost twice that number, it is obviously impossible to do justice to the wealth of knowledge that was being transmitted during a full week of sessions.

In the contributed paper sessions, which occurred each day from 9.00 am to 10.30 am and from 2.00 pm to 3.30 pm, some seventeen parallel sessions allowed four or five (tenuously related) papers per session to be rapidly highlighted or

summarised. Attempts to skip from one session to another to catch individual papers were often frustrated by changes in program, order or location. A high degree of heterogeneity was evident in terms of the quality of presentation, audibility, visibility and the availability of good air-conditioning.

Of more general interest were the five Main Addresses and the sixteen Invited Symposia. Though the latter occurred in pairs of parallel sessions, it was clearly much easier to choose one from two than one from seventeen.

The Main Addresses were given by Reinhard Selten, Franco Modigliani, James Heckman, David Kreps and Jean-Michel Grandmont. They varied considerably both in length and technical content.

Kreps, with the shortest title, 'Nash Equilibrium?', (though misprinted in the Program by omission of the question mark), questioned much of the foundations and methodology of game theory in a manner which encouraged many non-specialists to take more of an interest in the subject and perhaps also specialists to think more carefully before adopting their usual approaches. This took barely an hour, with question time not being required, due to the clarity of presentation.

In contrast, Heckman's Address, entitled 'Alternative Approaches To The Evaluation of Social Programs, Econometric and Experimental Methods' took the audience through a detailed mathematical description, concentrating on the econometric and statistical approaches to the missing data problem and accompanied by a twenty page hand-out, including theorem proofs, etc. With question time cancelled, this presentation lasted some two hours. Whilst admirable in its proficiency, I suspect it did little to attract non-specialists to take more interest in the area.

The Invited Symposia covered a wide range of topics and could be considered to represent the main current areas of interest to econometricians and economic theorists.

In the econometrics symposia, the topics covered were Time Series, Seasonality, Nonlinear Stochastic Modeling and Semiparametric Estimation on the theoretical side and Finance, Labour Supply, Macroeconometrics and Latin American Macroeconomics on the more applied side.

In the economic theory symposia, the topics were Foundations of Game Theory, Repeated Games, Theory of Organisations, Implementation Theory, Endogenous Fluctuations, Incomplete Markets, Behaviour under Risk and Uncertainty and Economies with an Infinite Number of Commodities.

Whilst conferees seemed generally happy with the range and choice of symposia, doubts were expressed about the geographical distribution of the invited speakers with respect to major advances in the fields. Of the thirty two papers, twenty six came from North American institutions, as did fifteen out of the twenty two discussants — half of the symposia had only North American content to them.

No one would deny the prodigious contributions of North American economists and econometricians but such a domination of symposia seems neither representative nor healthy. Surely a major purpose of holding a World

Congress should be to bring together the differing views and approaches which often exist due to geographical separation and the tendency to be influenced by local gurus.

This has particularly been the case in applied econometrics, where the North American frequent use of VAR's has not been adopted elsewhere, with Europeans preferring ECM's. Eventually practices no doubt converge due to the domination of certain Journals or the adoption of new techniques which happen to catch on more generally.

Symposia which allowed leading exponents from different academic or cultural backgrounds to set their approaches against each other, with a discussant attempting to highlight the differences and similarities, if not to combine the better aspects of the two, would indeed serve a useful purpose for conferees and the profession as a whole, in improving this process.

Instead, symposia often consisted of several colleagues surveying the literature closely related to their own individual research and avoiding criticism of each others efforts. This included the discussants, who frequently opted to present their own research rather than dare to criticise the excellent papers just presented.

One was often left feeling that one had witnessed a showpiece rather than a genuine scientific debate. This feeling was reinforced when one noted the high degree of congruence between the Program Committee and the Invited Symposia participants.

The only symposium I am aware of, which seemed to serve the purpose of airing differing views, occurred in the very last session of the Congress, by which time attendance was somewhat reduced and minds somewhat jaded. Robert Hall claimed that explanation of productivity growth required the inclusion of monopoly power and increasing returns to scale. This claim was strongly rebuffed by Robert Gordon, who presented a history of productivity research and claimed that everything could still be explained by mismeasurement of labour and capital, aspects ignored by Hall. With the right of reply not needed in most other symposia, Hall was able to smooth things over by suggesting that whilst mismeasurement was a possibility, monopoly power and IRS were needed for a more general explanation.

Overall, the opportunity to listen to so many leading econometricians and economic theorists, to have access to so many contributed papers and to take part in such a large gathering of academics was an unforgettable experience. It will be a long wait for the next World Congress.