

1995 ALLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION MEETINGS — WASHINGTON DC

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On arrival at the Washington Hilton, one of the official hotels for the 1995 meeting of the Allied Social Science Associations (ASSA), my first reaction was to wonder whether I had come to the right place. The hotel lobby was heavily populated, predominantly by males, dressed in a style I tend to associate with corporate lawyers rather than academic economists. The predominance of males, while a source of regret, was no surprise. The apparent dress code was a surprise. Relatively casual attire, as worn by the 'representative' European conference goer, was conspicuous by its scarcity. Dark business suits, white or striped shirts with ties and even, in some cases, collar pins, were to the fore. When it came to outerwear, there were two dominant schools; the dark overcoat school, and the trench coat school. (Unfortunately I was unable to ascertain whether membership of an outerwear school provided an indicator of the economic views of the wearer. This might be an interesting research project for sociologists of economics, in the spirit of Axel Leijonhufvud's (1973) pathbreaking study of *Life among the Econ.*). The first indication that these sartorially (dis?)advantaged people might, after all, belong to the dismal science was when my daughter asked 'Dad, why do these guys look so serious and miserable?' (she really did make some such remark).

The timing of the conference, which this year ran from January 6 to 8, is linked to the key role it plays in the US job market for economists. Preliminary interviews, for academic and some non-academic positions, are conventionally held at the conference. Until recently the meetings took place in between Christmas and the New Year. The move to the slightly later date means that economists no longer have to forsake their families during the holiday period. On the other hand, since many children have returned to school by this time, it makes it more difficult for them to accompany their parents and see the major cities of the USA.

Registration for the conference was straightforward and inexpensive. The registration fee, for those who preregistered by 2 December 1994, was \$40.00, and on-site registration was \$50.00. Membership of one of the ASSA associations was not required, nor did it affect the registration fee. Registration packets were minimalist, consisting of a 374 page conference program with addendum; an hotel directory, listing participants who had made reservations through the official conference housing service before December 2; a name badge; a letter confirming attendance and payment of the registration fee; and some tips

for travellers on fire safety. There was no 'free' conference case to add to my collection, though I cannot claim to have suffered from the absence of this traditional conference item.

Official conference accommodation was spread over six Washington hotels, with a subset of three (the Sheraton, Hilton, and Omni Shoreham) acting as the main centres for the conference. The Sheraton was the site for conference registration, the exhibition hall, and the majority of conference sessions. Additional sessions took place at the Omni Shoreham and the Hilton, and the latter was the centre for the job market. This group of three hotels was linked by a commendably efficient shuttle bus service. Daily room charges (at conference rates, excluding taxes) ranged from \$70.00 for a single, through \$200.00 for a Junior Executive suite, up to \$788.00 for the top range two bedroom suite. My 'double', which accommodated a family of four in reasonable comfort, was good value for a daily rate of \$94.16 (including tax), with a view of the Washington Monument thrown in for good measure. Car parking, at \$12.00 a day, seemed less of a bargain. No meals were included in these prices, and the eating facilities at the Sheraton and Hilton tended to get crowded at regular meal times. Other sources of food were, however, readily available. They ranged from a convenient bagel store across the street from the Hilton, through a bewildering variety of ethnic restaurants, to smart and expensive dining establishments. From my limited sampling, Washington's reputation for good restaurants is well deserved.

The attractions of Washington DC as a location may in part explain the attendance, which was high even by ASSA's standards. Approximately 4,100 participants were listed in the hotel directory. Since this list excluded people making hotel reservations after December 2, those sharing a room without a separate reservation, and those not staying at the official conference hotels, attendance was well in excess of this figure. To put this attendance in perspective, AEA membership is around 20,000, while, according to the Bureau of the Census definition, there are approximately 130,000 economists in the USA (Klamer and Colander, 1990, p. 7).

A rough count, using the information given in the hotel directory, suggests that around 90 per cent of participants were from the USA, with a further 4 per cent from Canada. Europe contributed around 3 per cent of the participants, with the UK providing the largest share (36 participants listed) followed by the Netherlands (18), France (15) and Germany (13). The other nations making it into double figures were Hong Kong (25), Australia (16), Japan (15), and Korea (13). In common with most economic data, these numbers should be treated with caution. As noted above the hotel directory does not provide a comprehensive list of participants, and I do not guarantee the absence of miscounting (though I would be happy to provide a copy of the hotel directory to any reader interested in replicating the study). Further the reported location of participants is based on the address from which they registered not their university affiliation. Since I registered from an address in Voorheesville New York, I was listed as coming from there in the hotel directory, despite citing the University of Edinburgh as my affiliation. My name badge compounded this, so that I appeared to be from the

University of Edinburgh, Voorheesville, New York (a small elite campus comprising one professor and no students).

ASSA itself is something of a misnomer, or perhaps a hangover from the heady days of economic imperialism when economist missionaries set out to introduce the mantra of rational maximizing agents to other social sciences floundering in their pagan wildernesses. The 50 associations represented at the conference were more or less exclusively economics based. The American Economic Association (AEA) is the dominant organization and the brand name 'AEA conference' is often used to refer to the generic product. Using the number of sessions organized as the measure, the AEA is indeed dominant, contributing 130 regular sessions, or roughly one third of the total. Using the same measure, there are six 'mid-size' organizations: headed by the Econometric Society (63 sessions); the Union for Radical Political Economists (URPE; 33 sessions); the American Finance Association (33 sessions); the American Real Estate and Urban Economic Association (29 sessions); the Industrial Relations Research Association (28 sessions); and the North American Economics and Finance Association (27 sessions).

The remaining 43 associations only contributed around 14% of the regular conference sessions. This competitive fringe for the most part catered for niche markets. In some cases the niche was identified by geographical area, including three separate associations focussing on China. In most other cases the niche related to the sub-field within economics (e.g. the Health Economics Research Organization, with the impressive acronym HERO), or the 'school' of economics (such as the associations for evolutionary and social economics). Some of the organizations represented at the conference are harder to fit into conventional categories, these include: Economists Allied for Arms Reduction (which impressively lists two Nobel Laureates, Arrow and Klein, as its executive officers); the International Society for the Intercommunication of New Ideas; and the National Association of Forensic Economists.

There were three regular session slots per day on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday of the conference. The first slot, with a start time of 8.00 am, was generally less well attended than the later slots, with start times of 10.15 and 2.30. Each slot lasted for roughly one and three quarter hours, with most sessions involving a chairperson, three to five presenters, and two to four discussants. This format has become a conference standard. While it can work effectively at specialist conferences, it appears to be less effective at a more general meeting. Presenters have little time, making it difficult to communicate anything of substance, especially to a relatively generalist audience lacking in detailed background knowledge relating to the topic being presented. One can do little more than attempt to stimulate an interest in the topic, creating an itch to find out more, though even this can be difficult to do in the time available. In some cases presenters appeared to have little of substance to communicate, leaving the impression that presenting a paper was little more than an excuse to obtain funding to attend the ASSA meetings. This criticism applies with more force to the relatively general sessions run primarily by the AEA, where it was often hard

to discern the common theme linking together the presented papers. Discussants, in their turn, rarely appeared to have had prior sight of the papers they were supposedly discussing. This tended to further reduce the coherence of individual sessions as well as detracting from the quality of discussion. Perhaps some thought should be given to varying the format of sessions on an experimental basis. For example including some sessions with only one or two presenters.

The criticism inherent in these comments needs to be qualified. I did enjoy most of the sessions I attended, though often this had more to do with seeing eminent economists perform, than for anything relating more closely to the supposed topic of the session. Further, given the scale of the conference, my own personal impressions and the broadly similar views I gleaned from a biased sample of colleagues, may not be representative. Given this limited sampling it would be invidious to single out and identify individual sessions I happened to attend or hear about for criticism (or praise). It may be that the above criticisms stem from a poor choice of session to attend. Indeed, choosing sessions at a conference of this scale is no easy task. One selection criterion, 'spot the famous economist', proved a disappointment when the advertised notable(s) failed to put in an appearance as happened at two of the sessions I attended. Though Bob Solow, soon to retire from MIT, did not disappoint, living up his reputation as an entertainer. Over the course of the conference I came to attach increasing weight to the location of the session. Many of the smaller venues were cramped and uncomfortable, even for those lucky or early enough to find a vacant chair. Sessions held in spacious ballrooms had a distinct advantage.

The following small sample, drawn from the Friday 10.15 slot, gives some indication of the vast range of topics on offer: weakly correlated instrumental variables; auctions and contests; Kenneth Boulding's economics as a moral science revisited; gender and the environment — feminist issues in economic development; studies in capitalism's value forms; the use of statistical tests for discrimination by regulators of financial institutions; mentoring within the economics profession; Clintonomics — trade policy; what's on the internet for economists; rhetoric and economic behavior. The remaining 51 sessions available in this slot were similarly diverse. This diversity makes it difficult to identify the major themes, fads and fashions of the meeting. Although some topics, such as 'rhetoric' (often with Donald McCloskey presiding, presenting, or discussing) put in frequent appearances, it was the breadth and variety of what was on offer that left an overwhelming impression. Particularly as the breadth and variety of American economics is not readily apparent from perusing the contents of core economics journals or the curricula of the major US graduate schools.

In addition to the regular sessions, there were numerous other diversions with which one could fill one's conference day. Major lectures, such as Amartya Sen's AEA Presidential address, and the Richard T. Ely lecture, given this year by George Schultz. Both these major lectures were held at 4.45 pm after the regular sessions had closed. For the hungry and thirsty, there were breakfast gatherings, formal luncheons, and a myriad of evening cocktail parties. In the exhibition hall there were some 90 exhibitors presenting their wares. The exhibitors were mostly

drawn from familiar academic presses, though they included some other organizations such as the National Institute on Aging, and Dollars & Sense Magazine. At a more informal level, with so many economists gathered in one place, the conference provided a highly valuable opportunity to meet with many old and some new friends. Attendance at ASSA meetings is worthwhile for this alone. While for those wishing to escape, there were the plentiful delights of Washington to be visited, without the humidity and tourist hordes of DC in summertime.

A review of the ASSA meetings would be incomplete without some reference to the 'meat market' (aka professional placement service), since this provides the major activity for many participants at the conference. Although I cannot comment from direct experience, either as an interviewer or interviewee, there does seem something strange about the practice of conducting professional interviews in hotel bedrooms. Tales from the meat market abound. It does not appear to be that uncommon for beds to be unmade, dirty laundry to be lying about the room, for one or other party to be sitting on the bed, and, although less common, it seems that some interviewers take to lying on the bed. While it may be difficult or costly to avoid the use of bedrooms, perhaps the AEA could provide and publicize some guidelines on interview etiquette in an attempt to improve the experience for all concerned.

References

- Klamer, A. and Colander, D. (1990) *The Making of an Economist*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Leijonhufvud, A. (1973) Life among the Econ. *Western Economic Journal*, 327–337.