
Business as Usual and More: A Response to Tomáš Bek, Petr Kubala and Terezie Lokšová and a Modest Proposal

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This is a powerfully put ‘manifesto’ and I am sympathetic to its aims. The problem is one of the political economy of conferences and our limited measures to influence it and transform it into a moral economy attuned to issues of social justice. Since an interest in social justice is at the heart of sociology, we might regard doing so as not only a moral imperative, but something that is about our very practice as sociologists.

But the constraints of the present political economy are serious and not necessarily easily surmountable. Some measures can be quite easily undertaken. The section on social responsibility makes powerful recommendations that could be taken up immediately by the ESA and adopted as policy. However, even here, conference organisers will potentially be faced with problems of the nature of the contracts they are required to enter. For example, in many contexts, access to venues also means accepting the catering contracts associated with those venues. This would be the case for most venues in the UK, including universities. The latter run conferences as a means of revenue-generation through a commercial arm and the venue comes as a package that includes on-site catering. The marketisation of higher education in the UK means that there are no university venues available to conference organisers that charge anything other than commercial rates with commercial conditions (including the use of their own catering services, frequently with outsourced staff at the minimum, rather than a living wage). The American Sociological Association finds some way around this by stipulating that venues must have trades union recognition for their employees and they offer cheaper conference fees by not having catering as part of the conference package. However, this means that conferences take place in large commercial hotels and social responsibility in catering choices is made a matter of individual choice—most delegates go to the Starbucks at the hotel.

But the possibilities will be different in different countries where ESA conferences are held and so it should be possible to draw up a list of desiderata under the ‘social responsibility’ heading, where ‘bids’ to hold the conference would need to show how they are being met and, if they cannot be met, what mitigating factors are in play.

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More serious, however, is that the political economy of conferences is not an external constraint upon professional associations, but something of which they are an integral part. Put very bluntly, the problem is this: associations, themselves, need revenue and they have three sources: subscriptions from members, subscriptions from journals, and conference fees. In order to attract members, the association needs to offer services for which it also charges. The solution is to offer differential rates for conferences and journal subscriptions for members and non-members. But it also needs to maximise attendance at conferences, which it does by offering the benefit of presenting a paper. Frequently, the individual academic has to offer a paper in order to get funding to attend a conference. This has several additional consequences. One is that conferences have tended to get bigger and, therefore, more dependent on commercial venues. The sessions have also multiplied with multiple presenters at each session. And so, the modern conference format is born—keynotes and multiple sessions that become too difficult to navigate except through section membership. This is a format that encourages self-enclosure within an academic and highly professionalised and routinised world.

In this context, it is possible to get media coverage, but the experience of the British Sociological Association suggests that this will be dependent on personal academic entrepreneurship—pithy press releases—and research that can be spun as a human interest story. What tends to get little coverage is research addressing pressing serious public issues. Paradoxically, the media tends not to be interested in keynotes and, indeed, in nothing that they might actually need to attend in order to report on it!

So far, so pessimistic...

But perhaps we don't need to change the format of the whole conference, or provide it more cheaply. Perhaps we need to charge more, in order to facilitate a conference within a conference; that is, a parallel conference with a different format and one that is free to attend and addresses local communities, activists, and interested publics. What I have in mind is something that has developed at many festivals and that is a bifurcation between the 'Official Festival' and its 'Fringe'. Often the 'Fringe' is simply a cheaper, less stuffy version of the 'Official' one, but no less commercial. But there is no reason why it should develop in a commercial direction. It could be run as a free event and its costs subsidised by the 'Official Conference'. Those costs could be kept low, simply because a free-event potentially has access to free venues. Keynote speakers at the 'Official Conference' can be asked to play 'unplugged' at the 'Fringe'.

But what makes the Official/Fringe model work is when they are competing, complementary events. The Fringe can't be scheduled to take place the week before or after the Official Conference. It takes place at the same time and they share energy. That would mean some of the audience for the Official Festival would drift off to the Fringe, but also that some events at the Official Festival be made open to non-payers. The former won't really matter because, in the end,

the conference fee is a charge to give a paper and access one's own institution's conference support funding! We should not be 'content with an event that sets self-presentation and networking as its objectives that are fulfilled through participants' sponsored travel to an interesting city and ostentatious social events', but we can leverage it for something more.

And now the set of desiderata of organising requirements for an ESA conference would involve not only commitments to social responsibility, but two committees, one for the Official Conference and another for its Fringe.

In sum, not either/or, but both/and. Business as usual and something completely different!