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The Future of Talking Heads

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Congress of the Americas

and the Future of Talking Heads

by

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The fifth Congress of the Americas will be held in Mexico on October 17-October 20, 2001, Wednesday through Saturday. An examination of the web site at http://www.udlap.mx/congress/5/index.html will show that past congresses have attracted SHAFR members as well as a President of Mexico, the Canadian foreign minister, numerous ambassadors, and senior political scientists such as Seymour Martin Lipset and Larry Diamond. The Mexican press has described the meetings as "an academic version of Bohemian Grove" and "the Mexican Aspen". The last congress had over 1000 in attendance, including members of the Chinese Social Research Council and a large group from various European political science associations. SHAFR members are very welcome, either with whole panels or single papers, and can register through the web site.

The Congress is sponsored by The University of the Americas along with the American Academy of Political and Social Science, the Hewlett Foundation, Phi Beta Delta, the Popular and American Culture Associations, the Canadian and American Embassies in Mexico, and CONACYT, the Mexican government research organization. It is completely interdisciplinary and is notable for having produced lots of publications, including special issues of The Annals of the American Academy, Policy Research, The Journal of American Culture, The American Behavioral Scientist and other journals. It has drawn strength from hosting the annual meetings of other groups so that everyone could share in sessions: the sixth congress in 2003 will include the annual meetings of the chapters of Phi Beta Delta, the honorary society for internationalists, and the 2005 session tentatively will host the World History Association.
The Congress is one of the few that regularly has panels on the future of congresses. All of us in academia have an interest in the health of conferences and congresses, which in many cases have seen diminishing numbers and budget troubles. Nothing is more depressing than walking down a corridor in a hotel and seeing a half dozen or less in the audience, often outnumbered by the panelists. Watching a row of talking heads seems little competition for all the other options that people now have for their time.

Another problem is that international congresses are really not international because of the vast difference between the financial resources in the United States and many other regions. The fees for attending meetings in the United States, which Americans grumble about, are simply impossible for others. Since the economic crisis of 1994, Mexican academics have been far fewer in number at overseas meetings. One reason for the Congress of the Americas has been to provide a place where American and Canadian academics could meet with really substantial numbers of Latin American scholars. Our registration fee for Mexican professors is only thirty dollars and Mexican students receive free registration. Good hotels, which of course everyone enjoys regardless of nationality, are a fraction of the American cost. It actually is cheaper, figuring the air fares and hotels, for Americans to go to a congress in Mexico than to many held in the United States. Mexico is an overlooked choice for conventions.

So debates over how to run the Congress of the Americas might be of relevance here. One consideration is that although a number of hotels are used, the sessions are all held on a university campus. It isn't easy to get university cooperation for large congresses, but when a congress can be held on a campus and when the faculty and students can be involved, the effect on attendance at panels is remarkable and energizes the participants.

The only places where all delegates to an academic congress would attend all sessions would be the Gobi Desert or the Yukon tundra. The more attractive the setting, the more likely it is that many participants will wander off to see the sights. The University of the Americas is a case in point, located in one of the most scenic parts of Mexico, within walking distance of ancient pyramids and with a backdrop of snow covered mountains. Because it has direct airplane connections via Puebla airport with the United States, cutting out the ordeal at Mexico City Airport, it is an especially attractive site. So it would take superhuman restraint for first time visitors to sit through all the panels. With a bi-lingual campus of students and faculty, we have been able to fill the audiences without trouble and there is no doubt that a full room
brings out the best in most presenters. Despite the difficulties, all scholarly associations have to rethink the big city hotel syndrome. Unless a congress is integrated with the local universities we do not think the attendance problem at sessions can be solved successfully.

Another consideration is the enslavement to the standard panel format. There is a sign or two the logjam in this respect is breaking. The tedious model is four, five, or even in some ghastly cases six or seven panelists trying to get through their papers. The contest between a panelist determined to read all of her paper and the twenty-minute time limit is seldom won by the audience. A candidate for the most frustrating words ever spoken is the comment of chairs that it is a shame that all the time was used up by the papers and there is no time for discussion.

The variety of innovations being tried by various groups include the Town Hall debates at American Political Science Association meetings, the increasingly widespread use of roundtables when no papers are given but a particular subject is thrashed out by a panel of experts, publishing of papers on the Web prior to the actual meetings so the paper is not given but is discussed, and the requirement that everyone coming to a congress have read a core book or books.

While all of these ideas point to a concern about injecting new interest into meetings, the long term prospects are problematical. What will happen in the light of potential competitors such as the evolving Internet and Web for the literally thousands of annual gatherings that are a feature of the professorial life is by no means certain. Lots of questions as to where and how these rites of the profession are held need asking.