

Science on the Move: The 7th EuroSEAS Conference in Lisbon in 2013

PAULO CASTRO SEIXAS¹

Citation Seixas, P. C. (2013). Science on the move: The 7th EuroSEAS Conference in Lisbon in 2013. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(2), 386-390.

What is the role of *International Scientific Conferences* (ISCs) in the scientific system? This is the question I address based on a brief report on the coordination of the 7th EuroSEAS Conference in Lisbon in 2013.

In some circles of the scientific community, ISCs have been underestimated as ‘merely’ places where research is tested or science consumed rather than produced. I will argue that on the contrary, just like in the economic system in general, the place of consumption is also where new designs and ideas are produced, not only where production is assessed and decided. Besides, considering that the services on the one hand and science, technology, and entertainment on the other are the engines of the economy, ISCs represent an obvious asset in a global economy. Although research on international conferences has increased lately (e.g. Cutting, 1995; Green, 2008; Drife, 2008; Ngamsom & Beck, 2000; Olsen, 2004), analyses focused on motivations and constraints of attending an ISC and the economics of the event itself rather than a thick analysis of the role of ISCs in the global cultural dimensions and the scientific system in this context. Drife (2008) states that “in the 1980s the internet was expected to replace meetings; in the 1990s electronic conferences were promoted; and last year [2007] a ‘Facebook for science’ appeared. None of these can replace genuine communication” (p. 1466). I would argue that more than just for communication, an ISC is the place for cosmopolitan production of the self and, as a consequence, the proper realm for scientific production. As Cutting (1995) puts it concisely: “In essence, you should travel, see places, meet people, make friends, and identify one or two ideas that you can apply in your own work or research” (p. 249).

1 Paulo Castro Seixas is an associate professor of sociology at the School of Social and Political Sciences (ISCSP) of the University of Lisbon, Portugal, and a researcher at the Centre for Administration and Public Policies (CAPP). He researches and works on development (on consultancy) in East Timor as well as on urban studies in a transnational context. Contact: pseixas@iscsp.ulisboa.pt

In 2007, I presented a paper at the EuroSEAS (European Association for South East Asian Studies) Conference in Naples and subsequently became the representative of the Iberian Peninsula on the Board until 2010. The intention was to boost South-East Asian Studies in Portugal and Spain. In September 2010, I coordinated a panel on East Timor at the EuroSEAS Conference in Gothenburg and – as secretary of the Board – accepted to organize the 2013 EuroSEAS Conference in Lisbon, Portugal. At the time, the political and economic situation in Europe and Portugal in particular was already difficult due to the 2008 financial crisis in the US, the Greek default and bailout program (May 2010), and the Irish and Portuguese default crisis and bailout programs (in November 2010 and May 2011). This context created considerable constraints and affected organizational decisions in the following years.

EuroSEAS conferences are events of international relevance and EuroSEAS itself is an institution with members and representatives from all continents. Though this is very interesting, it also creates several problems. In 2010, as the new secretary, I became aware that EuroSEAS was a formal organization from the Netherlands with a president from Germany, a secretary from Portugal, and a board to be managed from several countries. Besides, the webpage was hosted and managed by Italy and the logistics of the latter ISC were with the Swedish team in Gothenburg. Last but not least (moreover in a crisis context), the management of a EuroSEAS conference was expected to be a task of the university/faculty which hosts the secretariat. With this in mind, three years was the right amount of time to prepare an ISC: The first year may be spent trying to acknowledge the situation, the second preparing, and the third being alarmed . . .

The new board of EuroSEAS had four meetings being held in Germany and in Portugal. The members of the organizing committee of the Conference (myself with the new representatives for the Iberian Peninsula, Rui Feijó from CES-University of Coimbra and Lúcio Sousa from Aberta University) divided among themselves the organization and management of the meetings within a tight schedule of lecturing and research. Although inevitable problems arose to set up those meetings, the good moments created in a complex mix of intense shared international decision-making and tourism overcame the time spending and concerns with logistics and costs. In an international period of economic contraction, the board had difficulties supporting their own travels and conference sponsors were hard to find.

The turning point was the Porto meeting in June 2012 during the summer solstice that is commemorated with the Saint John's street party in Porto. The harsh conditions presented by the Portuguese public administration made it difficult to manage an ISC through a public institution. Thus, besides this option, I presented to the Board two others: a) choosing a company to manage the conference or b) to create an association for that purpose, assuming the managing of the ISC ourselves. Bearing in mind three briefings with companies that organize ISCs, the experience as participant in an ISC organized by companies and my own experience as an NGO manager, my option was quite obvious from the beginning: A company was a good choice if I preferred to save myself some work, but an association would fit the responsibilities of boosting South-East Asian Studies as it was originally intended to. So, in late 2012, AIA-SEAS was formalized resulting from a network of Portuguese and Brazilian colleagues, since it was hard to find Spanish colleagues. The idea of a conference organized for colleagues by colleagues also influenced our decision. This is a choice that confronts both the expropriation of the production of ISCs when outsourced and the impersonal conference setting that is often created by external entities.

In the beginning of 2013, we were already in the alarm level period. The Call for Panels ran between September 2012 and January 2013 and the Call for Papers and registration had to begin. Decisions had to be made: An accountant was needed, the webpage should be improved to have a proper registration office, an institutional account was a pressing need, and payment by credit card was a goal. All those bits and pieces were done but not without problems. Despite all the constraints, the Call for Panels and the Call for Papers were a success with around 100 and 650 proposals, respectively. Nevertheless, some problems emerged with the registration office and with the credit card payment; confirming that economic globalization implies always cultural differences, the conference reached its momentum. The momentum includes the two months prior to the conference: The frantic period in which everything must be ready (complete online program, the abstract booklet to be published, the keynote speakers and their logistics arranged, the accommodation of the grantees, the conference lunches and coffee breaks, the conference dinner, the social program, the publishers and their needs, the local secretariat of students and their role, the attention to the proper contacts with institutions: faculty, embassies, research centers, and so forth).

Finally, after more than 3,000 emails, the 7th EuroSEAS Conference took place at the School of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Lisbon from 2 to 5 July 2013. We had 77 panels with around 450 participants from Europe, the US, Asia, and Australia. Regarding publishers, NIAS, GIGA, Cambridge University Press, Routledge, ISEAS, and BRILL were present. The conference was a success as many mentioned, and several colleagues fell in love with Lisbon. For me, it was a fantastic challenge and the conference momentum was a non-stop week of work from 1 July (when the local secretariat prepared the conference bags) to 6 July (the social program to Sintra and Cascais).

Besides logistics, it is relevant to highlight some ideas and trends of the conference. The role of the conference organizer does not lend itself to an in-depth analysis, but I may leave some hints. On one side, area studies have been at stake already for some time, but the old empires are trying to keep their symbolic territories in hand; on the other, the traditional strong theoretical positions seem to confront both a lighter/diplomatic way of doing science or/and the challenge of a wider comparison in a perspective of global interdisciplinary studies. Thus, the critical perspective will always be a must. The late nineteenth century anthropological idea of cultural circles constituted a scientific asset both to support comparison and to establish its limitation within a certain area. This idea supported the colonial gaze, was reified in museum representation cultures and is still part of today's geopolitics. Meanwhile, a mix of cultures (hybridism) basically through the imbalanced transnational commoditization of culture is also a way to describe contemporary situation. As a consequence, area studies conferences are still the confrontation of two generations. Besides, science plays an undeniable part in the process of cultural commoditization. Thus, to say the least, sometimes it seems that we are facing blurred boundaries between critical ironies in a scientific analytical context and selling cultural gadgets for scientific entertainment.

I have no doubt that an ISC is a place to present research, many times even hosting the first public presentation of preliminary work, which is being prepared for publication. But an ISC is much more than that. An ISC is a place to play and display the role of a researcher among peers, even before the senior ones whom we had only had been in contact with through reading their books. Besides, these contacts are expected as possibilities to pave the way for new publications either in journals or

books. These gatherings in informal international settings are also the proper places to reinforce old teams/reputations and to create new ones as well as to initiate new international projects. Finally, publishers want to be present and even sponsor big conferences because they want to be 'just in time' spotters and co-producers of all these dynamics.

To conclude these notes on a conference, I would say that an ISC is in fact science on the move and in the making involving (1) universities/cities/countries, (2) research teams and theoretical perspectives, and (3) scientific and personal reputations. The conscience of the economic relevance of international conferences creates two paradoxical trends: a) the continuous scattering creation of new ISCs as a way to promote science production poles and b) continuous attempts to captivate, even to institutionalize in a certain locale, the ISC which already represents a brand. Thus, ISCs are indeed producing realms of science and new indicators for the continuous negotiation between geopolitical and economic center and periphery in science production.

References

- Cutting, W. A. M. (1995). How to do it: Participate in an international conference. *BMJ-British Medical Journal*, 310, 249-251.
- Drife, J. O. (2008). Are international medical conferences an outdated luxury the planet can't afford? *BMJ-British Medical Journal*, 336, 1467.
- Green, M. (2008). Are international medical conferences an outdated luxury the planet can't afford? Yes. *BM -British Medical Journal* 336, 1466.
- Lodge, D. (1984). *Small World*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Ngamsom, B., & Beck, J. (2000). A Pilot Study of Motivations, Inhibitors, and Facilitators of Association Members in Attending International Conferences. *Journal of Convention & Exhibition Management*, 2(2-3), 97-111.
- Olsen, K. A. (2004). The economics of international conferences. *Computer*, 37(6), 90-92.