

Uncle G's Rough Guide to Academic Conferences

Gerald Schneider

Academic conferences, be they of the small or large variety, are the initial transmitters of research results. However, aspiring scholars face a multi-dimensional decision making problem in the selection of the most rewarding meeting. Uncle G.'s tiresome field research spanning several decades has firmly established the "convention trilemma" according to which no single convention optimizes the scientific quality of the program, the attractiveness of the venue in which it takes place, and likeability of its delegates simultaneously. This guide presents this new impossibility theorem in convention tourism studies and introduces the definitive conference etiquette that helps participants to survive meetings which only score highly on one or two of these dimensions.

Write a paper and see the world! I'm Jane Austen – fly me!
David Lodge, *Small World*

Here you are. Finally, you have made it. You are standing at the baggage drop-off, ready for takeoff to the 7th Annual Convention of the Global Society for Robotics, Plant Ecology, and International Relations. This is what you have labored for so intensely – your participation in an international scientific meeting and hence your well-deserved entry ticket to the academic jet set. Haven't you overcome serious hurdles to attend this exceptionally important conference? To list just the most important recent accomplishments, you have, firstly, subdued your increasingly disillusioned inner-self and completed (last night, 7 hours before the arrival at the airport) your 6000 words-long revolutionary ramblings on "Deconstructing the International Relations Myth: Secondary Orality and Hypertextuality of the International Studies Association." Secondly, you managed, once and for all, to tell your jealous partner where your joint priorities shall be in the future – with you individually enjoying the high life of the global academic instead of holding sweaty hands during rainy Sunday walks.

As you are waiting for the delayed aircraft, a small doubt crosses your sleepy brain notwithstanding these important achievements and your solemn resolution to make it to the gilded class of the permanent academic traveler: was it all worth it, what will I benefit from this conference which your advisor described as "been there, done that, wrote that f... unpublishable paper!?" Perish these thoughts! We will demonstrate in the following that participating in international meetings, how remote their theme might ever be from your own research priorities, is what you should have aimed for since a long time. Joining the conference circuit will enrich your life, make you a better person and also force you to contribute to the higher social good through your subsidies to fledgling airline companies and societies of higher learning.

We have nevertheless to point out that becoming an academic globetrotter carries risks and frustrations. They stem directly from what we call the “convention trilemma” – and hence the impossibility to find any academic gathering that is optimal on all three dimensions academics use to assess the possible merits of a meeting: the *excellence* of the academic program, *the attractiveness* of conference venue, and the *likeability* of the average individual participant. As no conference is EAL-optimal according to our flawless proof sketched below, potential participants need instructions on how to survive tedious meetings without embarrassing themselves academically and socially.¹ This rough guide therefore provides you with the etiquette of what to do and what to avoid after outlining what the conference industry offers to society and academia.

The “Convention Trilemma” – the impossibility of an academic trinity

Porta (2003: 102) asks the daring, but largely rhetorical question of whether we need real scientific meetings and answers with a qualified yes, stressing for instance the contribution of conventions to our “professional growth.” It is largely only through conferences that academics receive comments from peers placed at other institutions than their own. This facilitates the author of turning the manuscript into a publishable manuscript or of going back to the drawing board by either throwing the study to the waste bin or by recalculating and rewriting it completely. Comparing conventions to “shrines”, Reyhav and Te’eni (2009: 1266) confirm through a survey that “academic conferences are places of situated learning dedicated to the exchange of knowledge”. We prefer a more prosaic tone in our description of the conference industry and would like to point out that there are inefficiencies in this collective evaluation process of the potentially worthy submissions. Callaham et al. (1998) note that almost a third of the papers accepted for an important medicine conference did not state a hypothesis in the abstract. Moreover, the evaluators apparently suffered from publication bias (studies which report positive findings) and rated the “originality” of the studies too highly in comparison to scientific criteria like the soundness of the research design. It is in light of this troubling selection process not surprising that many of the papers accepted for presentation at a conference never make into a journal.

Conferences are also markets in another sense. They are the foremost where you meet future doctoral students, co-authors, squeezes and sometimes even life-time companions. This is important insofar as multi-authored articles are on the rise everywhere, but especially in the social sciences. According to Gazni, Sugimoto and Didegah (2012), the percentage of multi-authored articles has risen between 2000 and 2009 from 25% to 42% and the rise in multi-institutional contributions indexed in the Web of Knowledge has been from 17% to 31%.

Believe it or not, academic conferences are not only beneficial to those who attend them, but also to the wider society (which possibly supports it through public funding). Academic meetings, broadly defined, are about one quarter of the entire convention industry, which spurs spending of 263 billion \$ in the U.S. economy. According to a study on the U.S. convention industry, the United States hosts annually about 270’000 meetings with 51

million participants (Professional Convention Management Association 2011). “Meeting attendees tend to be repeat attendees, routinely and habitually attending the meeting annually, showing the influence of past experience”, say Lee and Back (2008:309).² This recidivist tendency is also widespread among academics who do not only go to the same conventions year after year to meet the same people all over again, but also occasionally to recycle the same idea that has brought them the initial job.

The economic consequences of this academic herding – in political science mainly in spring and autumn when the large meetings take place - have considerable economic and social effects. This should be reason enough for those who doubt that the social sciences can contribute anything sensible to society to shut up and to apply to one of these welfare-promoting gatherings. Needless to say that we have some sympathy for the environmentally conscious colleagues who point out how socially costly these events are. Greene (2008:1466) for instance calculates that 20 medical congresses in the United States, Europe and elsewhere lead to “6 billion person air miles a year or 600 000 tonnes of carbon”. Yet, this narrow perspective neglects the benefits of convention industry, inappropriately termed the MICE sector (standing for meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions). This important part of the service sector had for instance rather elephant-like economic repercussions in the pre-crisis economy of Ireland in 2007. According to one estimate, conferences-related activities, which generated expenditures of €131.1 million, had direct and indirect economic repercussions “far in excess of” this original spending: “€235.8 million in output, €45.4 million in income, €101.6 million in value added, €52.0 million in imports and €9.3 million in product taxes” (Hanley 2012:1581).

However, as important academic conferences are for you and for mankind, they resemble most other social settings outside the Catholic Church insofar as you cannot find a conference that is optimal in all three equally important dimensions simultaneously. Hence, there is no academic meeting that maximizes its academic excellence (E), the attractiveness of the venue (A), and the likeability of the average participant (L). Empirical evidence assembled by Mair and Thompson (2009) show that each conference offers its push and pull factors and that the complex decision making of the potential attendee involves consideration in line with the EAL model such as the attractiveness of the venue. Nevertheless, our more deductive reasoning shows that while you can apply for conferences that are only EA, EL or AL optimal, trying to enlist for an EAL optimal meeting amounts to the search for the Holy Grail.³ This leads to three ideal types of conventions which shall be briefly introduced before we turn to an informal proof of the convention trilemma.

EA conferences offer you a path-breaking academic conference in a stunning location, very often in one of those beach or mountain resorts that you have only read about in the waiting room of your dentist, but never had the nerve or budget to visit yourself. Typical themes of EA conventions are “The Political Economy of Single Malts, Paragliding and Property Taxation in Rural France” or “The Past, Present and Future of Early Retirement in Academia.” As these titles suggest, you should only opt for an EA conference if you have a fat research account,

can rely on negligent controllers in the finance department of your home institution, and are able to contribute to post-panel discussion among middle-aged bores like Uncle G. on acceptable golf handicaps and reviewer honorariums some NGOs and IGOs are allegedly willing to splash out to lazy academics.

At *EL conventions*, you can expect an outstanding program to be mainly presented by untenured faculty members who spend as much time in the local gym as at their desk. Such conferences therefore attract colleagues who have an interest in conference themes such as “Reaching for the Sky: Balancing Ambition and Sun-Bathing” or “Surviving the Office Hour through Never Showing Up.” Be, however, aware that participation in such a gathering requires that you know how to switch from *YouTube* to the word processor on your laptop and how to install the flashy convention app on your smartphone. Once you have made it to the conference, you will fully enjoy the spontaneous theory-practice seminar on the Foucauldian interpretation of beach volleyball and the inevitable discussion on whether showing your biker gang tattoos (including the tramp stamp you received as a boozy undergraduate) in the class-room is acceptable social behavior.

AL meetings unite appealing delegates at attractive venues. Participants at such gatherings are neither deterred by the average quality of the papers presented at past conventions nor the conference theme that invariably ranges from “The New Domino Theory? Formal Models of Collapsing Paper Piles” to “Measuring Ice Cream Cones: Robust Regression of Experimental Data”. Conference delegates will mainly be doctoral students who are given just once a year the possibility to flee the oppressive regime at unnamed programs where they have been enslaved as data monkeys for the past five or six years. Discussions about the progress of dissertation are taboo, spreading gossip about who was seen last with one’s own employer is, conversely, *de rigueur*. The only downside of the excellently chosen conference location on a Mediterranean island is that a gathering was only possible in mid-November as this was the only period with reduced room rates.

The conference dilemma sketched below explains in a definitive manner why conference delegates cannot have it all. Merging program excellence (PE), attractiveness of the venue (AV) and likeability of the participant markets (LP) reaction functions, Figure 1 shows how academic welfare Y and human capital interest rate r respond to market shocks like the sudden inflow of competitors who are brainier than you. Needless to say that the overall market is in equilibrium at the intersection of PE, AV and LP (and hence when the three markets are in equilibrium themselves). However, this ideal state cannot be reached as we will explain through the well-known scenario of an expansionary likeability policy. Such an intervention leads to an outward shift of BP as sympathetic participants can afford to participate in the conference. However, this drives up the human capital interest rate of the conference as participation in it becomes riskier, especially for the elderly delegate whose presentations are no longer well attended. This dramatic effect also invites a massive inflow of speculation capital from other conference organizers and other sinister forces, with the effect that the conference currency Σ (standing for $\Sigma\epsilon\iota\lambda\eta\nu\acute{o}\varsigma$ (Silenius), the Greek god of

beer) and the real exchange rate Δ (shorthand for Διόνυσος (Dionysus), the Greek god of wine) appreciate through some divine forces.⁴ This impact, however, reduces the exchange of ideas at the conference as the alcohol is becoming costlier. In the end, aggregate conference welfare remains unchanged. The conclusion can therefore only be that under a floating exchange rate for conference venues and perfect idea mobility, likeability policy is ineffective! Sadly, one is therefore stuck in an EA situation.

Figure 1 about here

How to survive a conference: The musts and the don'ts

Choosing a conference that is optimal at least on two dimensions and matches your aspiration, budget and skill is obviously only a first step. The second one is the acceptance into the program. Be aware that rejection rates vary widely, but that a rejection can happen to anyone and that this frustrating experience prevents you at least from being forced to write another damn paper.⁵ In case that you are accepted against your inner wish, you should know in advance where you need to go, what events and colleagues you better try to avoid, and which places and happenings carry the Uncle G. rubber stamp of approved experiences that you should never miss.

What you cannot avoid

Registration: This is the place where everyone has to join the queue regardless of his or her self-aggrandizement. Registration desks are thus in their brutal leveling down the earthly equivalents to the gates of hell (or paradise, whatever your afterlife expectation is). The simple goal for you is to receive your name badge which entitles you to privilege of never being forced to look into the eyes of another participant. When reading the names of your colleagues, you should nevertheless avoid candid compliments like: "Of course, I know who you are. I just rejected your recent paper."

Your panel: Unfortunately, you need the luxuries of the German chair system to send one of your underlings to present a paper on which you are listed as the first author, but which you cannot recall to have ever written yourself. Academics situated at non-Teutonic institutions have to present their research themselves. Yet, even if you are a conference novice, do not stand up at 5 am so that you are able to read all the papers that will be presented later on and to go through your own presentation 30 times. Such naïveté will cost you dearly in hours better spent at the bar (see below). Be aware that minimal preparation is sufficient. Start therefore your presentation with a bad joke, continue with some nasty, but largely incoherent remarks about the ideas of competing scholars and claim in the end of your slur that the paper actually contains all these path-breaking results you cannot show because of the inadequacies of the conference software.

At your own risk:

All other panels: Always remember the insight of Lady Macbeth “What’s done cannot be undone —To bed, to bed, to bed!” (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 1). Hence, the conference is over after your 10 minutes presentation and you can get back to your real conference life which shifts back and forth between the three Bs – bar, beach, and bed. It is therefore quite unfortunate if you brought some of your students along or met some of your former colleagues who will invariably force you to attend another damn panel. Use these idle minutes for the recreational daydreaming you learnt to perfect in committee work at your university!

Opening event: This event unites regional politicians and local academic heroes. The latter sort of participant is principally against large meetings and believes that they are vulgar after the Society of Deep Political Thinking has rejected two of his papers. He has nevertheless accepted the invitation to join the opening ceremony to meet the journalists of the local paper, reminding everyone in the audience that he had rather enjoyed staying in the office working on his opus magnum, tentatively entitled since ten years “The Political System of Dullsville in Comparative Perspective.”

The musts of any decent conference goer

The reception: This is the only place where you can get a coupon for a free drink, obviously contradicting the pseudo-deep economist insight that there is no free lunch. At large conferences, there are receptions all the time and hence free boozing (quod erat demonstrandum). We nevertheless recommend that you counterbalance your alcohol intake with some of the finger food that is served on these occasions. Note also that you will have to make some concessions as one of the empirical laws of academic conferencing is that the drinks are always better in those academic sects that you normally do not dare to enter. This then leads to the conference-only observation that pomos can be found at gatherings of quantoids and vice versa.

The bar: Usually the best place to pick up gossip, sometimes even about yourself as around 2am, when there's standing room only, attendees cannot control their tongue after the 6th pint. Forget, however, to engage into in any sort of flirtation, clumsy or not. In the neo-puritanical era in which we are living, an invitation to a sympathetic attendee to drink a glass of wine so that you can “explore the full potential of the conference together” is a guaranteed step towards self-destruction. Flirtation of this sort will provoke “Your panel or my panel?” as the most romantic response. At the worst, you will receive an urgent request from your home institution to go through intensive counseling for your alleged emotional instability after the conference.⁶

Conclusion

This short article has offered aspiring and seasoned conference travellers some insider information on how to improve their meeting experiences. Note, however, that the conference is not over once you are heading back to your office. The dangers of the conference afterlife lurk everywhere and range from biological (hangover) over technological (deleting embarrassing phone numbers from your mobile) to psychological (the after-meeting depression) challenges. If you rejected all the other recommendations of this article, please at least respect this concluding insight: the best antidote against post-conference traumatic experiences (PCTE, in learned circles) is that you immediately start to search for another conference or occasion that will allow you to flee your colleagues and your partner for some time. As you will then soon notice, the conference never stops once it has started!

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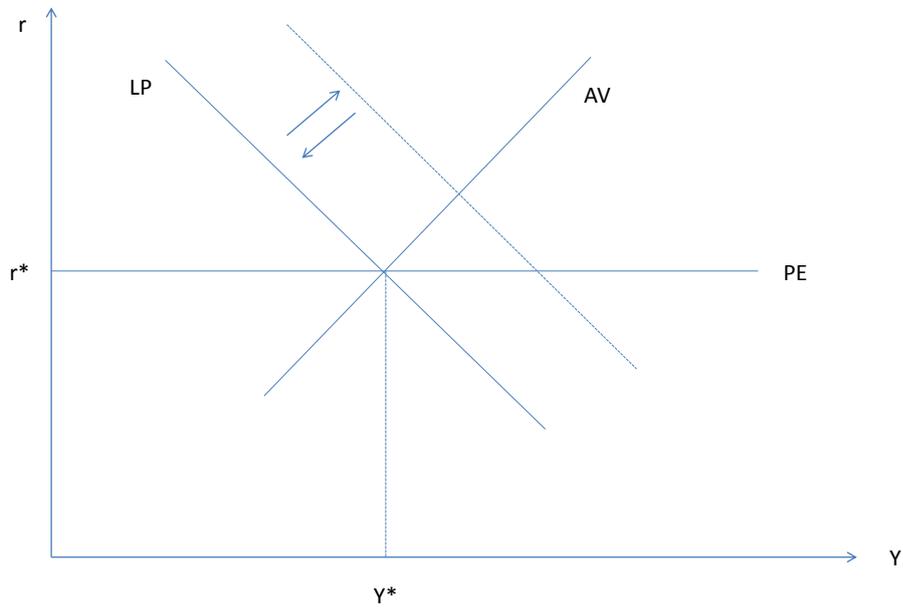
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About the Author

Gerald Schneider is Professor of Political Science at the University of Konstanz, Germany, where he has held the International Relations Chair since 1997. He is also Executive Editor of *European Union Politics* and serves as President of the *European Political Science Association* (2013-2015).

TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: The Ineffectiveness of Expansionary Beauty Policy at Academic Conferences



Notes

¹ To avoid confusion, EAB can also stand for other phenomena including the “Emerald Ash Borer”, “Emergency Air Breathing” or “Epic-Level Attack Bonus” in the “Dungeons and Dragons” game.

(<http://acronyms.thefreedictionary.com/EAB>, 24/7/2013). We are nevertheless convinced that the acronym will be associated exclusively with the conventional trilemma after the publication of this article.

² The observation by British author David Lodge(1984: 231) “That's the attraction of the conference circuit: it's a way of converting work into play, combining professionalism with tourism, and all at someone else's expense” is therefore deeply flawed.

³ Note that an assessment of academic conference quality has come to similar results and lets the authors conclude: “...our analysis of the results by group has shown that there is no clear winner...” (Martin et al. 2010: 154).

⁴ The authors are willing to share a formal proof of this step with interested readers once they have find time to clean their blackboard.

⁵ We believe quite immodestly that you will master the task of writing a conference paper best by paying full attention to Uncle G.'s academic catechism (Schneider 2011).

⁶ According to Mrs Moneypenny (2013), there is no empirical basis for this mistaken assumption that scholarly conferences are venues for both “illicit sex and tedious papers”: “I suspect that before [academics] tear each other's clothes off at conferences, the show each other the data sets and discuss what papers they have seen or plan to see”.