

Conference Science Overcomes Borders? International Scientific Conferences, Conventions and Congresses in the 20th and 21st Century

Prague, Vila Lanna, 23rd – 25th November 2016

Scientific congresses, conferences and symposiums have constituted a major mode of communication in science, whether this concerns dialogue between scientists alone or communication processes taking place between scientists and the general public. At the same time, official scientific gatherings have been a major source for the mobility of scientists. Because of frequent trips to foreign conferences, congresses, etc., scientists have been traditionally among people travelling abroad more than on average. We can consider the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century as the golden era of large-scale industry conferences; the time of more specialized conferences came later on. Some large congresses had a principal influence on the development of entire scientific disciplines and participation in them could have a breakthrough effect on the careers of individuals.

Events commonly visited by thousands of experts from the whole world are organized even today (in particular in natural science and technology). Many critics object, however, that these are mostly representative events with a minimum impact on the development of science. However, there is no doubt that international conferences have had a commercial as well as political and ideological purpose. In Czechoslovakia, similarly to other countries of the Eastern Bloc, international scientific meetings were among very few events which brought a large number of foreigners from the West to the country at once. Although this situation was very attractive for Czech state officials in terms of finance and promotion, there were great concerns about the danger of ideological diversion. The organization and logistics of large conferences were very complicated and complex negotiations were necessary within and outside the scientific community.

Prior to 1989 and partly in later years, participation at conferences abroad and organization of international gatherings at home had an extraordinary importance for the personal prestige of the Czech and Slovak scientists involved (the right to travel to a conference or congress in the West was an important and valued privilege) and these scientists had a rare opportunity to acquaint themselves with the development of global science and establish precious contacts.

Czechoslovak scientists who participated at foreign conferences literally became ambassadors of their country. They were expected to manifest appropriate behaviour, e.g. in contact with foreign media. When they returned, they provided information on the situation in the foreign scientific community as well as on the social situation in the place of the congress or conference. This was not only done publicly, in the form of media presentations, but also internally, using methods based on reporting to the employer institution, and possibly also to power authorities.

The issue of available finance was and to a large extent still is a major (and often the most important) factor of participation of scientists at conferences, congresses and symposiums. Trips to foreign conferences were usually accompanied with a financial support from a private or, more often, public entity, which significantly favoured researchers well established within the social system and in key institutions. Organization of international scientific gatherings required many times more resources. The financial aspect of international conferences is a major issue even now. The use of modern communication technology (video conferencing, etc.) has shown to be a possible solution to this problem in recent years. The immediate personal contact between individual scientists, however, still seems to constitute an essential condition for a full-value scientific conference, such as conventional conferences and symposiums. Therefore, such gatherings are certainly not about to end and cannot be called irrelevant.

The conference will focus not only on the development of the phenomenon of scientific gatherings since the beginning of the 20th century, but also on the current situation and future prospects. We would like to address the general characteristics associated with the issue of international scientific conferences as well as the specifics of such meetings determined by the Czech or Central European region.

Organized by the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences as part of the research programme Forms and Functions of Communication of the Academy of Sciences AV21.

The official languages of the conference are Czech, English and German.

Deadline for submission of abstracts (up to 250 words) is May 31st, 2016, please send the abstract to the e-mail address: dyorackova@mua.cas.cz.

On behalf of the conference organizers:

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