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Memories from Conferences Past: Reflections on Academic Knowledge Production

Isaac Kamola

Trinity College, Hartford CT

My First Rodeo

I still remember my first academic conference: the 2004 International Studies Association conference in Toronto. I've taken that line off my CV years ago. I presented a poster summarizing a bad seminar paper that introduced some banal yet faddish claim about anti-terrorism policy. I still remember standing in the poster room—which was actually a hallway connecting two banks of escalators—across from another graduate student who wrote a paper on what the latest blockbuster Hollywood movie told us about something relating to IR theory, maybe temporality or some such thing. His poster was large, and colorful—a far cry from the four pieces of printer paper, with an outline and a few block quotes, I had tacked to my board. Nobody had told me what a poster was supposed to look like. Then again, I never thought to ask. With hindsight, I'd like to imagine that this austere presentation was a youthful rebellion against the professionalization process I didn't yet fully appreciate.

After some awkward glances with my fellow presenter across the way, we struck up a conversation—standing under his poster: it being the more attractive of the two. With ten minutes left someone wearing a drab suit actually stopped by my table. He asked a question then grabbed one of the twenty or so copies of the paper I had available for the throngs of scholars I imagined would be taking a keen interest in my work. 'I'm deeply invested in this topic', he said as he walked away. I looked down at the card he handed me: CIA.

After the poster session, and on our way to lunch, my friend Kartik pointed out Robert Cox standing near an elevator. We giddily rushed up to him and, not knowing how to comport ourselves in these environs, blathered something embarrassing, along the lines of: 'We're great admirers of your work, and hope to follow in your footsteps...' He looked

amused and a bit confused, then offered some gentle comment that made the encounter less awkward than it actually was.

Later that day I headed to the other conference hotel for a panel with a title like 'Democracy and Radical Politics'. I was surprised to see the hotel under picket. Three or four hotel workers, signs resting on their shoulders, handed out flyers detailing the labour abuses and indignities taking place inside. As we talked, I noticed professors I knew crossing the picket line, trying to rush unseen to catch the beginning of the panels just getting underway. I remember being sceptical that whatever was taking place inside that hotel was more important than what was taking place outside.

Today, every time I head off to a conference—usually the same conferences housed in the same handful of hotels—I find myself reflecting upon my clumsy initiation into the world of the academic conference. I remember returning to Minneapolis dizzy with new ideas and languages, with introductions that would eventually become friendships, and with a boundless faith in the convergence of powerful ideas. I was thrilled to begin putting names to faces. I still shake my head remembering how a cadre of friends sat in the back of a panel composed of very prominent scholars honouring a very, very prominent scholar—and how we giggled at the accolades lavished upon a work we savaged in seminar the week before. But I also remember returning home feeling lonely and dispirited. It was in Toronto that I also caught a glimpse of the impossibly long path from here-to-there, a journey that included becoming a different person. And, maybe hardest of all, the realization that the kingdom might not be everything we imagined it to be.

Looking back now, if I could tell my 2004 self just one thing, it might be this: 'The academic conference is a cartel—a formal organization regulating inclusion and exclusion. But it is also a gift economy, where intellectual work is generously shared, acknowledged and rewarded'. As I jot down these memoirs of conferences past it is only to highlight the intellectual and personal costs of the hierarchies and asymmetries that pervade the academic conference, while simultaneously celebrating the 'under commons' existing alongside of—and despite—these exclusions. In doing so, I hope to begin asking the question: What would an academic conference of the commons look like?

Deadlines and Reunions

As a graduate student it was brutally clear that one attends conferences to be seen, to network, to cultivate an aura of seriousness, and earn badges of productivity that might eventually be tallied together en route to employment. Conferences existed as a currency, convertible into lines on an otherwise slim CV. Early on I remember an established faculty member confiding in me that, 'later in your career', conferences only serve two real purposes: to build in writing deadlines and for seeing old friends. I must admit that this sentiment didn't make much sense as

a graduate student—since my friends were always around, and my advisor provided plenty of writing deadlines. I remember being saddened by this delimited vision of possibility. All these brilliant, compelling, and accomplished people gathering together, for what?

In the academic press, numerous articles and opinion pieces have raised the possibility that the traditional format of the academic conference might no longer be relevant (King 2006; MC Rom 2015a, 2015b, 2012; Wampole 2015). The authors point out that the typical conference experience is one in which scholars hastily present rough drafts of research papers to nearly-empty rooms of largely disinterested scholars, answer one or two questions only tangentially related to their research (if lucky), and then spend the rest of the conference either sitting through similar presentations or catching up with old friends at the hotel bar. Mark Rom, for example, argues that ‘the structures and incentives of the conventional scholarly conference’ often fail to ‘create stimulating and engaging environments for teaching and learning’, pointing out that the panel format ‘does not serve the best interests of either those giving or those attending presentations’ (Rom 2015a, p. 311). The result is an odd sort of stalemate: ‘Most of the conference program is devoted to panel presentations, whereas the majority of participants’ time is spent in avoiding them’ (Rom 2015a, p. 311). Conference attendance is professionally necessary yet the ‘research panel’ remains an alienating and dispiriting affair for many—especially graduate students, junior faculty, those without full-time employment, and the many, many people working in institutions with high teaching loads and little research support (Rom 2015a; Rutherford 2015).

If fleeing panels to meet up with old friends is a core dynamic at work in the academic conference, this becomes particularly troubling as fewer and fewer of my oldest academic friends are left standing. So many good people have left the academy or find themselves in jobs that preclude conference travel. Others have decided that, as someone located outside the well-grooved social networks of regular conference attendance, participation is no longer worth the time, money and emotional expense.

Their absence becomes acutely felt as conferences become a prism through which so many friendships are sustained. Friends I only see in-between panels, once a year, in a city far from where we live, dislocated from our spouses and children. What does it mean that we are part of a profession that demands that we scatter—often against our will—to far-flung places (often not of our choosing)? Is the annual conference a sufficient enough consolation prize?

The Under Commons

There’s a photograph of us smiling, well dressed and standing awkwardly, under a flowering tree in San Diego. We’d left five months of Minnesota winter to reassemble in the sun, two thousand miles away. That evening, unable to afford a taxi needed to leave the sprawling

hotel compound—and unsure where we'd go if we could leave—a group of us ... David, Mark, Jorge, am I missing anybody? ... sat for hours outside on the hotel patio. I want to remember being next to a pool, but I'm not sure we were. A warm evening breeze, a din of conversation, and cigar smoke from the neighbouring table. We talked and talked. About what I don't exactly remember—given the cast we were probably talking about critical realism. But more importantly we were practicing together, sharing a set of arguments, taking them seriously, responding and countering. Responding to papers we had listened to but did not dare raise our hands to challenge. Around that table, we presented ourselves as scholars with ideas to contribute, and the means to convey them.

Such conversations took place elsewhere as well: a crowded hotel room spilling out with friends, five to a room, sleeping on the floor, polishing our presentations in the wee-hours of the morning, talking, talking, talking late into the night. A long conversation at a tiki bar. A breakfast with friends before heading to the airport. Packed panels, pulsing with energy.

At their core, conferences are about enacting the common—a community based on exchange, relationship, networks, and collaboration. Yet, with so much at stake, these spaces of the common often become reduced to performance, posturing, name-dropping, wining and dining and, for those in the most precarious positions, grovelling and hustling as well. Exclusions abound. Some members of the community move freely through the conference space, with a bustling entourage. Others stand around in awkward and isolated cliques. Some travel luxuriously, while others walk miles to the cheap hotel.

Despite these hierarchies, the academic conference proliferates its own 'under commons'—events of the common where 'marooned' populations co-create singular relations of politics and study alongside (and despite) the enormous neoliberal and professionalizing pressures (Harney & Moten 2004). It is the under commons—the interstitial, creative, and generative spaces that sometimes occur at the bar, at the hotel breakfast buffet, on panels, or in the hallway—that redeem the conference. These fleeting moments make the conference more than its gothic architecture. However, we so often mistake the under commons for the conference. We should never forget that the joy, passion, solidarity, and the desire for an academic world otherwise somehow still exists *despite* the corporate hotels, the gatekeeping, the professionalized polish, and the crushing boredom of formality.

Itchy pants

Academic conferences have always reminded me of high school debate tournaments. People in ill-fitting dress clothes, rushing from place to place, faces exhibiting considerable stress and displeasure. It is a very peculiar thing. Grown adults, and some at the very height of

their field, sitting behind tables draped in beige nylon, more fitting of a macabre wedding than a robust engagement of ideas. I find this odd. I hope I always find it odd.

But the thing I remember most from my first conferences were the throngs and throngs of people, some of whom you feel might someday determine your intellectual and financial future. They are the ones spinning the academic roulette wheel in the sky. They attend editorial meetings; they rush off to grab dinner with their publishers; they sit on search committees and dole out the money. If only I could meet one of them ...

I remember passing the hotel restaurant and seeing a table of very senior scholars, probably a thousand publications between the four of them. One so drunk he was falling out of his chair. Another had a napkin tied around his neck and hunched over a plate of food. They seemed so calm and unperturbed. But for me, everyone just rushed past: everyone talking to everyone else. Finally, a friendly face, an invitation to a nearby restaurant, a ten-dollar beer I couldn't afford, and a seat at the far end of the table—far from the one person I knew, and even further from the famous person I hoped to meet. An awkward introduction, an unlikely conversation, the following year a panel, a workshop, and eventually an edited book. I don't even remember who sat at the far end. I don't remember what power he had over me.

The Tradeshow

Maybe my third or fourth year of graduate school I attended a small, regional conference of political scientists booked at the San Diego Marriot Marquis. Maybe you know it, but the Marquis is a gleaming hotel that shoots up from the city and the waterfront, boasting '1,360 guest rooms, 75,000 square feet of meeting space, a 446-slip marina and an environment that easily transitions from dynamic meetings to resort-style'. Booking a small, regional conference at such a large venue, however, has unintended consequences—what you might call contrapuntal juxtaposition. One evening the main ballroom housed a raging reception hosted by a tire company, complete with large stacks of tires, an entrance adorned with perfectly buffed race cars, and a mob of people taking pictures with someone handsome enough to be a celebrity driver. Across the hall from my afternoon panel was a trade show of small manufacturers and importers of leather goods, belts, and bracelets. Apparently the United States Postal Service also had its conference at the same time given that, during a panel on green anarchism, a serious-looking man walked into the panel dressed in full USPS-blues; complete with shorts, sun helmet, knee-high socks, and a mail carrier's bag. He lasted ten minutes before surreptitiously reaching for his program and, looking nonchalant (but definitely perplexed), slinking out the back door.

I've thought about this experience often and find myself retelling it at least once a conference. In this brief, poetic moment the conference

became just another tradeshow. My academic ability no longer defined my self-worth. Or, more precisely, my academic ability became just a commodity on display, and not the sum total of who I am—just as one should never confuse the whole worth of the woman selling leather wallets with the ledger of her merchandise on display.

The Job Shop

While conferences can be social events, reunions, or steppingstones, for many they are also survival matches. This became evident to me the first year ‘on the job market’ when I participated in the job-search-speed-dating-thing at the annual American Political Science Association conference. I waited in the ‘bullpen’—a claustrophobic room in the conference hotel, filled with anxious graduate students and contingent faculty. We tugged at our jackets and pored over our notes. Everyone was anxious. Then someone walked into the room. Silence. They called my name. I slowly stood, straightened my jacket, and walked towards the door. Handshake. Then we headed to a small round table somewhere in the adjacent ballroom, surrounded by hundreds of other such tables. Little placards guided the way. The interviewer’s colleague sat at the table with a gigantic stack of file folders, the first one opened to my CV. She said something like: ‘It’s really nice to meet you. We’ll have to be quick because we’re running late and have another appointment in ten minutes. So, why are you interested in College X?’ I wanted to say: ‘Because you’re hiring and I don’t have a job’. But instead I talked about size (large good, or small good), ‘fit’, the emphasis on teaching (or Model UN, or whatever else was listed in the ad), and occasionally, with a straight face, location. As I spoke I actually began to imagine that this far flung institution would be a perfect fit. I had to act quickly. After all, I only had ten minutes to convince two strangers to take special interest in my future application, which might lead to a short list, then a campus interview and, if all goes well, a job offer, at which point I’d be in the position to actually decide if I wanted to make this work. But this decision could not even happen unless I first convinced everyone at that table—including myself—that I really wanted this job. That I wanted it with all my heart, mind, and soul.

The din rising from the nearby tables was deafening.

The Conference Marxist

My friend wanted to introduce me to his advisor, a Marxist theorist and activist. On my friend’s urging, I had read this fellow’s book with great enjoyment. My friend and I attended the advisor’s panel in a vast ballroom headed with a table of seven panellists and an even smaller audience scattered throughout the hangar-like room. After the panel ended, my friend made the introduction ‘Yes, I’ve heard all about you. Your work sounds great. We’re heading out to dinner. Why don’t you two join us?’ He then explained how he had identified a restaurant with great care, and already knew what he intended to order.

All I can really remember from that dinner, however, is the voracity with which he slurped mussels, and that sunken feeling of spending my entire budget on one meal.

The Indignities of Transportation

When arriving at the airport gate one can usually identify the people heading to the academic conference. Reading thick library books with boorish titles, or annotating papers. Sometimes they are friends, or familiar faces. Sometimes strangers that you just know are ultimately headed to the San Francisco Hilton or the Marriot in Washington, DC.

Even though a deluge of academics converges upon the same city at the same time, upon deplaning the foot traffic always seems to split. The best dressed, older men and women rush towards the taxi stand—pulling their luggage with long, powerful strides. They grab their phones. Talk, and plan. Another crowd, often younger, often with more sunken eyes, harried from having taken a multiple-legged trip, slowly moves towards the shuttle service or, if available, the metro station.

I remember the first conference I attended with a full research budget. I grabbed a taxi at LAX and rode it all the way to Hollywood (\$85 + tip!). I remember getting out of the cab and stepping into the bright, California sun. I strode into the gleaming hotel—feeling as if I had finally arrived.

Air travel

I now have a three-year old daughter and six-year old son. Every time I attend a conference these days I leave my wife with an incredible amount of childcare. If the panel schedule permits it, I rush to the airport in the wee hours of the morning to ensure that I don't leave her solo with bedtime the night before. I arrive at the gate and, setting the bag down, slide into the faux leather chair. I unwrap my toasted bagel and sip the hot coffee. After a minute or two, I pull out the laptop and begin checking my email, balancing the computer on my knees.

After the chaos and noisy grind of childcare, I have come to enjoy the modernist qualities of air travel. Straight lines. Well-waxed floors. Buffed metal trash cans. All contributing to an efficiency, a dream-like quality. I kick my feet up. Optimistically imagining the next few days of conference unfolding before me. Savoring the solitude of air-travel.

Towards the Abolition of the Drink Ticket

Conference receptions are fine events. But the thing I despise most is the drink ticket. Some people, namely those with access to the section chair, get tickets and therefore drink for free—while the rest pay exorbitant hotel prices. The result: groups of graduate students and outsiders standing around, waiting. Wondering. 'Hey. Where did you get that ticket?' 'That guy over there, in the suit. But it was the last

one...’ ‘Are you going to have a drink here?’ ‘Nah. I think I’ll wait for dinner...’

My proposal: tape all the tickets to the wall. Need one? Please take one! To each according to their need ... This is not, of course, a revolutionary change but simply a small reminder that commons—even ones based on the exchange of ideas—don’t appear by accident. They require thought and cultivation.

Vaughan’s

I got the call just as dinner was wrapping up. ‘Isaac’, he said. ‘I’ll be there in fifteen. We’re going to Vaughan’s. We cannot miss this’. I gave the typical committal-non-committal conference answer. Something like, ‘Swing by. And we’ll go from there’. The lethargy of the large dinner group was beginning to set in. The check was taking forever, and folks were discussing their evening plans. Some had panels needing preparation. Others were meeting friends back at the hotel. I was tired and contemplating heading back as well. Allen called again: ‘I’m outside. Don’t let me down, man’.

Driving through the narrow streets of the Baywater District, Allen pointed out various old haunts and recounted stories of the New Orleans he knew as an undergraduate. We pulled up to Vaughan’s Lounge, which from the outside looked like a decomposing shed. Inside it was crowded and inviting, everyone smiling and dancing elbow-to-elbow, drinking and smoking. The music as heady as the beer. A few friends and friends-of-friends joined us. Between sets we retreated outside to pick-up from where the afternoon panels had left off. The music and camaraderie emboldening us to say things we should have mustered in public. The music wrapped up, and the crowd dispersed. A handful of us ended up perched at the bar, continuing to discuss the panels, and their limitations. We made bold declarations about the political possibilities of certain lines of argument. Laughed at the audacity and arrogance of whole fields of scholarship. We recounted personal moments in the classroom that left us disarmed. We cast ourselves as outsiders, regrouping on the far-flung fringes of a vast empire. Barbarians at the gate. At 3am the bartender kicked us out, and rightly so.

Conference on the Picket Line

I had this crazy idea in the Dubai airport. I was between Istanbul, where I was free-loading at a conference my friend was hosting, and Cape Town, where I was going to begin dissertation research. The Istanbul conference was incredible. An intimate affair, with scholars whose work I respected the most. We enjoyed beautiful meals, with conversations lasting long into the night. But the highlight was staying at my friend’s mother’s house, communicating only through a Turkish-English dictionary. Looking back, I can’t believe it all happened. So disjointed from time and place. Something that felt so accidental that you begin to

wonder if it even happened at all. A feeling only magnified by a twelve-hour layover.

Checking my email in Dubai I was thrust into long email threads about the pending clerical workers' strike at my graduate institution. Having previously been active in strike support activities, I jumped right into conversations concerning plans for the walkout on the first day of school and the feasibility of moving classes off campus. Maybe conflating the picket line in Toronto with the soiree in Turkey, I was suddenly struck with an idea: what would it mean to locate an academic conference in the middle of a strike? I deliriously emailed some friends suggesting a 'People's Conference'.

A few months later a few dozen of us—undergraduates, graduate student workers, striking clerical workers, union supporters, faculty—found ourselves in the sanctuary of the Baptist church a block from campus that served as strike headquarters. The union president introduced the event: 'Sisters and Brothers. I bring you words of solidarity from AFMSCME Local 3800...' Union representatives updated us about the particulars of the current contract negotiations. Someone presented a paper theorizing various radical strategies for campus organizing. A union elder offered an oral history of labor disputes at the institution. A professor of literary criticism theorized academic labor in the language of Italian Marxism. I would love to say the experiment was a huge success. But, in truth, the imposition of a conference onto this political space felt a bit forced. Taking time to learn and listen, discuss and share, in this very particular format, seemed out of sync with the reality of those with their livelihoods on the line. The conference seemed a naïve, if well-intentioned, distraction from the phone calls that needed to be made, actions planned, posters hung, walk sheets printed, and volunteers organized.

In retrospect, I think it fair to say that conferences and picket lines do different pedagogical work. A strike is an idea that travels, collaborates, and becomes refined, but is always organized by an objective greater than the idea itself. Conferences, in contrast, provide the scaffolding for the production and circulating of ideas, a sort of conduit, clearinghouse, or factory floor. The strike is a tactical engagement, with momentum and tectonics of force. Conferences, in contrast, claim to be nothing more than a slow pondering progression of thought. While conferences are, of course, always political, we can easily forget that. Not so with a picket line. With the benefit of hindsight, I wonder if the next experiment—rather than situating the conference on the picket line—might be locating the picket line within the conference hall.

The Walk Back

I like to drink beer, especially at conferences. I like the heady mixture of ideas, friendship, awkwardness, and the reflective and professional regret that tends to well up in those moments. This is particularly true of the walk back to the hotel at the end of the night. Usually with one

other person—sometimes a friend, sometimes an acquaintance—hatching plans, throwing around ideas, imagining co-authored papers, or panels, or books. Cooking up a whole stew of possibility as an unknown city spins around you. Someone asks for change or cigarettes. There's inevitably an awkward run-in with a colleague or someone from a panel whose name you don't remember. Maybe you reviewed her article at some point? The clumsy questions: 'Did you ever publish that paper?' 'You should really do something with that...' 'So, where are you these days?' Squinting eyes, fluorescent lights—the morning panel only a few hours away. A premature headache. No place to hide.

It's the right combination of honesty and humility. As if the whole day up to this point has been too much.

Our Surprises Indict Us

I was lucky enough to host a book workshop at my home institution. (Luck, of course, has nothing to do with it. I happen to work in a department that, at some point, received money from wealthy alumni to honor a beloved professor. As a consequence, when the returns on the endowment are up, those of us in the department can access these resources for such activities. No wealthy alumni, no workshop).

For the event, my co-editor and I brought all the authors to campus to present their draft chapters. The result was a continuous, two-day long discussion about African anticolonial theory, which morphed seamlessly into a sustained conversation about the political possibilities and imaginaries of the present moment. The discussion kept spiralling outward, sweeping us into a shared language. The book project seemed to materialize before our eyes, as a collaborative object that only barely existed the day before.

In her closing remarks, a colleague of mine made the brilliant comment that revolutions often arrive unexpectedly, not because they emerge out of thin air but rather because of a collective failure to appreciate the alternative futures already existing all around us. 'Our surprises indict us', she concluded. The failure to see the new world already amongst us is only possible because we often lack a political imagination expansive enough to see what is before our very eyes.

As folks packed up to head home, they returned to this phrase to describe the conference itself. 'This was a surprising conference! I wish all conferences were like this'. 'Wow. That was thrilling'. 'What a treat. Made me remember why I got into this racket in the first place...'

What does it mean that having a vibrant intellectual exchange within a conference setting comes as an unexpected surprise? Our surprises indict us.

I guess what I am trying to say is that I am quite sure that, as a community, we are better than the conferences we attend.

That the conference is a form, not a fact. As such, it can be amended, riffed on, replaced, and even transcended.

While cloaked as a vast intellectual sea of meritocracy, conferences are actually amplifications of inequality and exclusions.

But conferences also contain utopian promises. Anyone who has spent time surrounded by their good friends and comrades from graduate school knows what I mean. Anyone who has been asked a question from a perfect stranger only to see their entire world flipped upside down also knows what I mean.

This, of course, raises the question of what a conference might be otherwise. What would it mean for the under commons to become the conference—rather than existing on its margins.

At the very least, let us start by not conflating the academy with intellectual life; our position in the university with the value of our contribution; contingency with failure; stability with merit; travel budgets with private goods. And, finally, let us not confuse the academic conference *as it is* with the conference *as it might become*.

Isaac Kamola is assistant professor of political science at Trinity College, Hartford, CT. His research examines critical globalization studies, the political economy of higher education, and African anticolonial theory. He is the author of *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* and co-editor of *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive* (2017) and *The Transnational Politics of Higher Education* (2016).

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