

The Conference Method

Workshop hosted by the project “The Scientific Conference: A Social, Cultural, and Political History”¹ (SciConf) and the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences
Zoom, June 17, 2021

<https://kva-se.zoom.us/j/63172982275?pwd=dzRqc2p0eUtOeDBiQU5tSjZJL0Y0QT09>



¹ Funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA), <https://heranet.info/>.

Aim of the workshop

The project which organizes this workshop (see below) studies the history of international conferences in the natural sciences. It has several associated partners who share our interest in conferences and one of them is the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. With this workshop we want to make our work in history of science relevant to active scientists and scholars. It is equally important for us to get input from experienced conference participants and organizers from the sciences. We hope the workshop will fulfill both aims.

Though the Covid-19 pandemic has been a great obstacle to our work as well as many others', it has put the spotlight on an issue that we are interested in: What is important about conferences and what is less so? More than a year of virtual meetings should have provided some insights on that count. For this workshop, we choose to address the question from the perspective of conferences as a *method*, not only in a technical but in a social, cultural, and political sense.

The international conference as a (scientific) method

It might be claimed that international scientific conferences originated in Scandinavia. According to a "full list" of international conferences 1681–1899, published in 1960 by the *Union des associations internationales*, the first two took place in 1681–1682 and 1815. In 1839, however, the Meetings of Scandinavian Scientists (*Skandinaviska naturforskarmötena*) began and were to continue for almost a century.² They convened seven times before more international science meetings were organized – the first one being in meteorology 1853.³ Thereafter their number – and size – has grown vastly, even though a quantitative estimate is difficult because of a dearth of statistics for the last century.

In the late 1940s conferences became an object of study by UNESCO that sponsored meetings and publications on "the technique of international conferences". They were now described as an important method for bolstering internationalism. One of the first conferences on conferences was a meeting in Eastbourne in 1956 sponsored by the Macy Foundation, of cybernetic fame, and with connections to the UNESCO initiative. The cold-war context of these early efforts to systematize knowledge about conferences is indicated by Brock Chisholm, first director-general of WHO and chair of the Eastbourne meeting, who described conferences as "those powerful instruments whose misuse could destroy us all, but whose most effective use could help to speed our progress toward a better future".⁴ Conferences were seen, in relation to the cold war and soon also decolonization, as a means to avoid conflict often by spreading the gospel of western culture: democracy, markets, and not least science.

² Nils Eriksson, "I andans kraft, på sanningens stråt ...": *De skandinaviska naturforskarmötena, 1839–1936* (Göteborg: Acta universitatis gothoburgensis, 1991).

³ Les congrès internationaux de 1681 à 1899: Liste complète / full list (Bruxelles : UAI, 1960), pp. 11–12.

⁴ Mary Capes, ed., *Communication or Conflict. Conferences: Their Nature, Dynamics, and Planning* (Tavistock publications: London, 1960), p. xi.

In 1968 Margaret Mead, famous anthropologist and a keen observer of conferences, published a book (with Paul Byers) called *The Small Conference*.⁵ Here the idea was to analyze in some sociological and psychological detail what made conferences efficient for developing new ideas (rather than international relations). Mead repeatedly used the phrase “the conference method” in this context, and we have borrowed it as the title of this workshop, albeit with a slightly different meaning.

Mead described the conference as a scientific method which, when done right, produces unconstrained intellectual exchange and promotes new thinking. Hence her focus on the *small* conference that she thought was better suited for such purposes than large gatherings. But the scope could be widened to include many other science-related issues, for the development of which the conference may also be described as a method, or a technique. The following four are important non-technical aspects of the conference method.

First, conferences have long served as an arena for international relations in science as well as politics, a function that is often described in terms of “science diplomacy”. Since World War I at least, the intermingling of political and scientific international relations has affected the feasibility of certain kinds of research and development. An example is the enormous growth of nuclear and particle physics after World War II, with the Pugwash conferences functioning as a platform for intricate science-diplomatic games where the autonomy of research, as well as scientific funding, in both the western and eastern blocs were at stake.

Second, conferences have since the 19th century been platforms for integrating scientific knowledge with general culture and enhancing the status of science as a useful and credible enterprise. The British and American associations for the advancement of science are prime examples, and so are the semi-public conferences at world fairs, and latter-day international meetings on topics of public or political concern, like the UN conference on the human environment in Stockholm 1972 or the much-publicized conferences concerned with AIDS and HIV from the 1980s.

Third, the importance of conferences for the internal culture of science is hard to overestimate. Cultural and social aspects of conferences are vital for socialization within the scientific community itself, and for creating and maintaining status hierarchies. As the sociologist of science Harry Collins wrote, in a brief comment on conferences in his book on gravitational waves, at meetings “the community [of researchers] learn the *etiquette* of today’s truth: it learns what words and usages are properly uttered in polite company”.⁶ Different kinds of conferences work differently from this perspective. Whereas large ones emulate markets (for products, ideas, or jobs), smaller ones are more important for socializing

⁵ Margaret Mead & Paul Byers, *The small conference: An innovation in communication* (Paris & The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1968).

⁶ Harry Collins, *Gravity’s Shadow: The Search for Gravitational Waves* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 451.

young researchers into accepted ways of thinking and communicating within their areas of specialization.

Finally, as conferences have increasingly involved scientists from all over the world, they are obviously important to the functionality of science as a global endeavor and culture, which is often considered crucial for its progress. But they have also served as a means of exclusion from the purportedly cosmopolitan culture of science – on grounds that have shifted over the years, but which have included sex, religion, ethnicity, and political inclination. Access to conferences is simultaneously open and restricted, which exemplifies an important contradiction in modern science – that between universalism and special interest, starkly visible in the aftermath of World War I, during the cold war, and today with the rise of China as a scientific great power.

The project

The workshop is organized within the project “The Scientific Conference: A Social, Cultural, and Political History” (SciConf) which –as the title indicates – studies aspects of conferencing that are not primarily technical but that are nevertheless part and parcel of the conference method in the sense that they are important for understanding how and even why science is done. The project is divided into four “case studies” that together cover a large chunk of the history of international science conferences chronologically speaking, but of course only a small part from an empirical perspective.

Case 1 (Paris) focuses on conferences in connection with so-called universal expositions from the 1880s to the 1950s; case 2 (Maastricht & Amsterdam) investigates the culture of chemistry conferences in the period 1910–1960; case 3 (London) studies the intersection between medical science and social issues in interwar Britain as well as international medicine conferences in the wake of World War II; case 4 (Uppsala) analyses the so-called Nobel Symposia from their inception in 1965 to the end of the Cold War.

Project participants

Paris: Charlotte Bigg, Thomas Mougey

Maastricht & Amsterdam: Geert Somsen, Georgiana Kotsou

London: Jessica Reinisch, Laura Forster

Uppsala: Sven Widmalm, Jenny Beckman

Associated project member: Waqar Zaidi (Lahore)

Program

<https://kva-se.zoom.us/j/63172982275?pwd=dzRqc2p0eUtOeDBiQU5tSjZjL0Y0QT09>

10.00–10.15: Welcome and introduction, Sven Widmalm, Uppsala

10.15–10.30: Geert Somsen, Maastricht & Amsterdam, “How Global is International? A Historical Reflection on Conference Participation”

10.30–10.45: Jessica Reinisch, London, TBA

10.45–11.00: Charlotte Bigg & Thomas Mougey, Paris, "The conference as public display of science"

11.00–11.10: questions

11.10–11.20: break

11.20–11.35: Jenny Beckman, Uppsala, TBA

11.35–11.50: Waqar Zaidi, Lahore, "More than just Science: Mythmaking and Scientific Conferences"

11.50–12.00: questions

12.00–13.00: lunch

13.00–c. 14.00: panel discussion – Hans Ellegren, Uppsala; Ericka Johnson, Linköping; Dan Larhammar, Uppsala

c. 14.00–15.00: open discussion