EXECUTIVE PROGRAM COMMITTEE REPORT

2010 ANNUAL MEETINGS OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Executive Program Chair
Annual Meeting Report 2010

Monica Heller, Executive Program Chair

Background

I was asked by (then) President-Elect Virginia Dominguez to act as Program Chair for the 2010 Annual Meetings in New Orleans; the request was made at the 2008 meetings, thus giving me a precious two-year lead time. I was able to put together an Executive Program Committee and, with their help and that of Prof. Dominguez, to draft a Call for Papers by August 2009.

Prof. Dominguez sought me out in order to further the goal of internationalizing and multilingualizing the AAA, since I am neither an American nor based in the United States, and am active in professional networks in which English is not the language of work. The composition of the Executive Program Committee also reflects those objectives, as well as the long-standing goal of including anthropologists representing a broad range of interests, areas of expertise and work contexts. The CFP is, I believe, fairly self-explanatory; however, I do want to note that it aims not only at speaking to a wide range of anthropologists (and their collaborators), and at connecting with the spirit of moving beyond methodological and institutional nationalism, but also at situating the meetings in the local context in which they are held. This last position is partly tied to the reasons for the Executive Board’s decision to hold the meetings in New Orleans in the first place (a concern for post-Katrina social conditions there), and partly to a broader orientation to anchoring the theme of circulation to an anthropological sensitivity to space and place.

I took on the task, then, with the following aims: 1) to encourage participation from as broad a range of world anthropologies as possible; 2) to encourage submissions in languages other than English, with creative ways of ensuring multilingual intercomprehension; 3) to encourage innovative ways of producing anthropological knowledge; 4) to connect the meetings to New Orleans.

Some highlights

1. Despite concern that the use of non-unionized hotels might discourage attendance, this year we actually received a record number of paper submissions: 4261. The number of individuals registering was also a record (4978), while we had the third highest number in AAA meeting history of panel submissions: 558. At the time of writing (27 September 2010), the number of registrations stands at 5253.

2. As of June 2010, there were 4038 US-based participants, and 940 participants from 67 other countries, including Argentina, Colombia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, Gabon, Iceland, Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, Oman, Singapore, Turkey and South Africa, as well as the more predictable participation from Canada and the UK. To our knowledge (which is
limited by lack of access to program details) there are sessions planned to take place in Spanish and French.

3. We eliminated the category of Presidential session, limiting ourselves to a small number of Executive sessions, adjudicated by the Executive Program Committee. There were several reasons for this: both Prof. Dominguez and I felt that having a large number of highlighted sessions risks devaluing those sessions, as well as adding to an already overloaded program, competing with the main bulk of the program, and potentially privileging a « golden circle » of insiders. We therefore aimed at creating a category of sessions linked explicitly to the theme and different from the panels likely to come through sections. In other words, we took the position that sections are responsible for the bulk of the scientific program; the EPC should then add something to the program that sections cannot achieve on their own. We defined our criteria as follows: proposals should speak directly to the theme of the conference and serve to engage the broad constituency of anthropologists and our interlocutors. We particularly encouraged proposals which cut across approaches and domains of enquiry, and which bring together people who do not normally participate in the same conversations. These proposals could take the form of traditional academic panels, but we also strongly encouraged innovative ideas. We received 33 proposals, of which 12 were selected. Of the remaining proposals, 5 were suggested (and accepted) as beyond-quota section invited sessions. Each proposal was evaluated by three EPC members. Whenever possible, we matched panel descriptions to EPC members’ areas of expertise. Each EPC member read between 8-10 proposals and had access to the full set for reference purposes.

4. Inspired by some innovative sessions and events in previous years, we created a new category of event, the “innovent”, adjudicated by the EPC. In doing so we sought to blur the boundaries of anthropology and of traditional spaces for production of anthropological knowledge. We sought in this way to bring into the meetings site people and events that are not often present there, as well as in getting people off site to encounter other people and to do different kinds of things. We aimed at going both local and global, and in adding sight, sound, taste and smell to our usual fare of text and talk. A special category was required so as to disambiguate these events from the “special events” which are business-related (section assemblies, workshops, etc.), and in addition we hoped to draw attention to the possibilities for creativity by so doing. We received 11 proposals, of which 9 were accepted, one with conditions regarding the ethical collection of information. The remaining two were recategorized as tours, since they required paid registration. One, which was to focus on labour issues relating to the AAA meetings, was withdrawn in early September. Given the small number of submissions, each EPC member evaluated the full set.

4. New Orleans-based anthropologists approached us with a number of interesting and innovative ideas. We are particularly grateful to Jeffrey Ehrenreich (UNO), Steve Striffler (UNO), and the team of Rachel Breunlin (UNO), Helen Regis (LSU) and Matt Sakakeeny (Tulane). Breunlin, Regis and Sakakeeny put together a series of three interlinked sessions under the rubric of “Engaging New Orleans”, bringing together a
variety of stakeholders to talk about issues related to housing, culture and activism. This was adjudicated by the EPC, and will benefit from highlighting in the programme.

Some things that worked well

1. Having the CFP ready 15 months in advance of the meeting, and an EPC briefed and ready to go. This allowed us to publicize the theme in time for people to get together at the meetings to discuss plans for the next ones; there is synergy and energy (and possibilities for face-to-face discussion) at the meetings which it is worth building on.

2. Having the call for executive sessions available at the same time; this is crucial because of the mid-January deadline.

3. Meeting face-to-face at the 2009 meetings with the Meetings Director, Jason Watkins, the Meetings Coordinator, Carla Fernandez, as well as Bill Davis and Virginia Dominguez. This has been Jason’s first year, and often a trying one (see “concerns” below), but I have found communications to be excellent and have really enjoyed working with AAA staff.

4. Working with Section Convener Mary Gray and section editors. It was particularly helpful to standardize and publicize the same submission date for invited session proposals for all sections (this year, March 1, 2010).

5. Using the monthly column in the AN. This took a while for me to understand, but Dinah Winnick was very helpful, and once we got on the same page, this turned out to be an excellent way to get information out. It would be useful to plan out early the year’s columns with the AAA staff member responsible.

6. Visiting New Orleans, and in particular the conference venue, in advance of putting the programme schedule together. This allows for a better sense of room size and layout. It is important that the Meetings Director also be able to make such a trip (this year, Jason was unable to get there until July, a month after we had done the scheduling).

Some things to discuss

1. Guidelines for submissions. This year, I found myself having to substantially revise the guidelines, which were confusing and often redundant, at the last minute. As the shape of the meetings does change somewhat every year, I encourage the Program Chair and Meetings staff to set aside time to review all documentation early in the process (say September or October, 13 or 14 months before the meetings).

2. Submission of Executive Sessions. Related to the email issue, executive session proposals are submitted to the chair via email, rather than through the online portal. This means that the chair has to manage submissions and distribute them to the EPC using email, rather than simply having EPC members log on to the website to review proposals. This seems somewhat cumbersome, and more importantly, causes confusion, as accepted
sessions must be re-submitted using the online process. It may be worth considering having the EPC work more like a section with respect to the online system as a way to streamline the process.

3. Communications with section editors. Ideally, the program chair should meet with the section convenor and section editors (a confusing label, by the way – why not section program chairs?) at the meetings the year before. However, often section editors start their term after or as of the meetings, and so do not necessarily attend the meeting during the conference. Certainly the program chair needs to have access to the section editors’ list serve, but perhaps some kind of asynchronous on-line meeting could happen some time in January or February. The Program Chair and the section editors need to share an understanding of who is responsible for what, and of how the procedures are going to work. At the moment, section editors, I believe, are only asked to rank panels, but I found it incredibly helpful when section editors made suggestions about which days to schedule their panels on; this did a lot to help us avoid double-booking individuals or scheduling thematically related panels in the same slots, at least for those coming from the same section. The more contextualization and information the section editors pass on, the easier the job of putting the final program together is, and the more likely that things will work the way sections would like them to. Section editors are also, I believe, asked to vet the draft program, which is another moment when problems could be caught. Unfortunately, this happens over the summer, when many anthropologists are in the field. It would be good nonetheless to find a better way to have that vetting happen.

4. The single major cause of complaint year after year is double-booking, followed by thematic clumping (e.g. why are all the sessions on food on the same afternoon?); the current antediluvian system makes it difficult to address either of these.

5. Managing the Program Chair’s email. At my request, the AAA staff set up a gmail account for me, so that my personal email would not get flooded. It makes sense to think about having the same email address on a permanent basis, shifting access to it year by year. At the same time, much email came to me that really should have gone to the AAA staff, and so I and my assistant spent more time than we should have forwarding emails. This multiplies the chances that things will fall through the cracks. One reason for having to forward emails is that people don’t follow instructions; it might be necessary to repeat in a number of places and on a number of occasions what should go to the staff and what should go to the chair. This should also be more visible than it currently is; there are places on the website where my email is provided before the staff email. The flood of misdirected emails tends to be the worst right after notifications of acceptance and rejection, which go out under the program chair’s signature, are sent out, although in fact she cannot answer 99% of the questions that letter generates.

6. A significant proportion of those queries are in fact about notification; the reason for this is that only panel organizers are notified, and not individual presenters – panel organizers are asked to notify their participants. I am not sure why this is the case, but it causes a lot of problems – organizers forget, or are in the field when notifications arrive, while their panelists hear from others that their letters have arrived and wonder why
theirs hasn’t. To compound problems, letters are sent out before the program is put up on the website, so people cannot check the program on-line. This year was a particularly bad one; the vendor took an unconscionably long time both to generate the notifications and to put the program on line. In fact, AAA staff had to take over. In addition, it seems that many individual presenters failed to receive notifications altogether. I understand that this is the last year that this vendor will be used, but I do want to go on record as reporting that they caused numerous problems through delays and lack of communication.

7. Support for the Program Chair. I would not have been able to do my job without Lindsay Bell, my graduate assistant. In addition, Lauren Anaya, Virginia Dominguez’ assistant, was able to help us out with the innovents process. Not everyone is able to mobilize graduate student or administrative staff support, but it is crucial, and anyone considering acting as Program Chair needs to think about what resources are available. This does raise an issue about whether the AAA should be providing at least some funds towards that end.

8. Publicity and information dissemination. It might be worth having tighter communications among the various staff members and the program chair; things worked well with the AN, but everyone seemed conscious that there was more we could do, and more innovatively. Some program chairs might want to be involved in (or at least informed about) efforts to publicize the meetings via various forms of media. It is particularly important to make sure that off-site events are publicized, and that people know how to get to them. I will also flag here that it is not too early to think about connections to the francophone media in Quebec for 2011. It is also worth thinking about virtual access, what that would mean, and what it would entail.

9. Labour issues. The matter of hotel unionization was a concern in the choice of New Orleans. One attempt to provide a space for debate was withdrawn. I am not aware of other initiatives, although there may be some. I do think it is important to make sure this conversation goes forward in productive ways.

10. Connecting to place. This year we were fortunate that so many local anthropologists came forward on their own initiative to make suggestions as to how to connect to Louisiana in general, and New Orleans in particular, in ways ranging from the ENO events, to suggestions for connecting on-site and off-site to local culture, to innovents, to AN columns on what to do, see, eat and drink. We were also fortunate that the hotel seems open to creativity in this area. I could have done a better job of ensuring this happened; I should have had at least one Louisiana anthropologist on the EPC, and could have done more to invite participation. This is certainly an area where we can be more pro-active.

11. Funding for scholars without access to institutional or personal resources. One roadblock we have consistently encountered in trying to open up the meetings is that many of the scholars and other interlocutors we would like to attract simply cannot afford to attend. The Wenner-Gren Foundation has been helpful, and the Commission on World
Anthropologies has also taken on this problem, but as yet we have no adequate policy or strategy.

Some closing thoughts

I would like here to re-visit my initial goals. I think we have done a good job of casting the net farther and wider than we have in the past, and creating interest in the meetings on the part of people who have not considered them an appropriate place to participate in, in particular, people who might have been concerned by the dominance of English and of US interests. There is more work to do on that front, but I think progress has been made. The excellent work done in recent years to open the meetings to anthropologists working in varied contexts, and not just universities, is clearly bearing fruit in many different (and possibly unpredicted!) ways, including the initiatives taken under the innovent rubric. While we would have liked even more proposals than we received, innovents as a concept seem to be well-received, and we think the ones on the programme are exciting. This is an envelope which can certainly be pushed in coming years. On the whole, my sense is that people are excited about coming to New Orleans, and New Orleans is happy to have us.