

Letters to the Editor

To APSA Members:

The purpose of this letter is to introduce you to the Institute of North American Studies (Instituto de Estudios Norteamericanos) of Barcelona, Spain, and to inquire as to the possibility of having specialists in the field of political science lecture at our center.

The Institute of North American Studies is a bi-national, non-profit cultural center founded in 1952 by a group of prominent Catalans, which receives moral and occasional financial support from the U.S. government. The Institute's purpose is to promote better understanding between Spanish (Catalan in particular) and U.S. culture. For this purpose, we run a number of programs in a fully owned seven-story building: drama productions, concerts, and films in a 280-seat theater; exhibits by U.S. and local painters, photographers, and video artists in a very attractive exhibit area. We also have a 10,000-volume Resource Center/Library, one of two American collections in Spain and certainly the most important foreign library in Barcelona, and an English program for about 20,000 Spaniards a year.

The Institute also has a modern conference room completely equipped with simultaneous translation where prominent North Americans (including John Kenneth Galbraith, James Michener, Robert Shriver, etc.) have lectured. It is in this area and specifically that of American studies where we would like to expand.

We are aware that every year American professors and specialists on sabbatical leave travel to Europe with the intention of doing research and/or giving lectures in their specific fields. A working/lecturing knowledge of Spanish is useful but not essential, as we do have an excellent system of simultaneous translation. We

would be interested in organizing seminars or even a series of lectures in different fields directly related to culture in the United States.

I might add that the Board of Directors of the Institute is composed of prominent Americans and Spaniards in our community including the U.S. Consul General in Barcelona and the Branch Public Affairs Officer of USIS, Barcelona.

Thanking you for your attention and cooperation, I look forward to hearing from interested persons.

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Annual Meeting Appraisal

(Editor's Note: APSA Executive Director Thomas Mann received the following letter from Council member Philip Williams. The letter has been edited for PS and is reprinted here with Williams' permission.)

Dear Tom:

I thought it might be useful to let you have a note of my impressions of the two annual meetings in Denver and Chicago.

On the favorable side, I think the quality of many of the papers is pretty high. I have bought a large number, and only after looking through fairly carefully; I would have got more but for shortage of money, space, and time to read them. I have also found the theme panels and discussion sessions useful (e.g., those on Ralph Huitt and the Senate, or on federalism), essentially because they were real discussions in which people, whether on the platform or in the audience were talk-

ing about a common subject, and to one another rather than past one another. On the other hand, of course, both these sessions and many others like them feature well-known and established scholars (no doubt one reason why they are good) and don't take a chance on the younger and less famous who consequently get excluded.

The trouble with the average panel, where these less-known people get their chance to participate, is basically that there is a succession of monologues and no discussion at all. There are several reasons for that. First, people write papers on subjects chosen by themselves and from the angle of approach they prefer; a valiant effort is made to group them under a common heading, but more often than not it is quite artificial and the connection between the different papers is quite tenuous, so that they remain a series of separate topics rather than contributions to a common theme.

This problem gets worse as the number of papers expands, which is the second difficulty. A panel with three or four paper-givers, two discussants, a talkative chairman and then three or four replies from the platform rapidly exhausts the time available and the patience of the audience, who may or may not be offered five minutes for questions at the end. (I consciously selected panels to attend according to, first, my interest in the topic, and, second, the number of platform speakers: fewest won.)

Third, there is very little effort to discuss the ostensible subject, but instead a series of separate analyses of each paper taken in isolation; even when discussants or chairmen do their best to avoid doing this, they are constrained by the fact that the papers really have little in common with one another.

Fourth, the discussants sometimes and the audience almost always have received the papers too late to absorb them properly, or have not received them at all, so that authors take time summarizing what they have said, and argument or discussion becomes even harder to achieve. Our little American politics group in Britain seems to me to generate much better discussions from its tiny membership than at most of the panels

I've attended in the U.S., though they too have endless trouble getting papers out in time.

Finally, a separate point: the number of panels has become so large that the attendance at many of them is tiny; I see there is to be an effort to cut down next year, but if only this drawback is to be tackled, I'm afraid the number of frustrated people may rise rather than fall.

I suppose the trouble arises—as with Congress—from the conflict between the needs and interests of individual members and those of the institution as a whole. There is a desperate struggle to give papers, either as evidence counting towards tenure or as a means to get one's expenses paid: with the result that the numbers become unmanageable and the spread of topics indigestible. Frankly, I don't feel that the high proportion of participants among those registering is an encouraging sign—on the contrary, I think the low proportion of *non-participants* is a discouraging one.

After this long bleat, can I suggest anything constructive? Fewer paper-givers, fewer other participants, earlier circulation, more emphasis on writing on a genuine common theme, would all, I have no doubt, improve the meetings themselves a great deal; but I've little doubt that they would run into intense resistance arising from the same familiar and understandable pressures which have produced the present situation. I suppose the only change which might realistically be possible might be to encourage chairmen to be tougher with paper-givers (after all, if participation is so highly prized, it should be possible to put more pressure on aspirants). My impression has been that the better panel discussions are very often those where the chairman takes his role most seriously from an early stage, and plays an active part throughout.

And in any case, I suppose most people always have regarded the convention, and always will, as an opportunity for meeting old friends and making new contacts rather than for attending meetings, so perhaps it doesn't matter so much after all.

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