

## The ASC 2009 in Philadelphia: Reflections from a First-Timer

Neil Chakraborti

University of Leicester

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*For a variety of reasons* - timing and cost chiefly among them - I had never previously attended an ASC conference and I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from this year's annual meeting in Philadelphia. 'Papers showing an unhealthy obsession with numbers' proffered one colleague. 'Examples of 'proper' research studies with 'proper' methodologies', suggested another. Some BSC conference regulars warned of a typically more reserved, almost muted atmosphere at ASC events while others spoke reverentially of the socialising that goes on. Spurred on by these mixed messages I had been curious for some time to experience an ASC conference for myself, and the invitation to participate in an Authors Meet Critics session – coupled with a semester's study leave – gave me the ideal opportunity to do just that.

Having now just returned from Philadelphia, I can better appreciate why the conference has the capacity to divide opinion. As criminology conferences go it is without question a vast, non-stop and slickly run operation, and with my organiser's hat on for next year's BSC conference in Leicester I have nothing but admiration for those responsible for administrating the American equivalent. Leafing through the enormous conference handbook (note for fellow ASC novices - think Oxford Handbook and you're almost there), one cannot fail to be impressed by the sheer number of sessions, events, activities and divisional meetings that take place, nor the diversity of themes covered within the programme, all of which bodes well for the continued growth of, and innovation within, the discipline. However, an obvious downside with such a high acceptance rate of papers is a lack of quality, or rather consistency in quality, and for me this was a key area in which the conference fell short. With as many as 740 sessions over the space of three and a half days, I felt that the crowded programme gave delegates few opportunities to fully digest and reflect upon what they had learnt before needing to rush off to another session: maybe it's me, but I think there are occasions where we can gain almost as much from conversations during a post-session coffee break than we can from a session itself. What's more, with there often being four, and sometimes five papers in a session I felt that it was undoubtedly a case of more equating to less, with there being little time for (or inclination among) many speakers to present anything like a full analysis of their findings. Rushed papers were commonplace, as were papers which were poorly planned and delivered; indeed, in one session that I attended three of the four speakers used in excess of 30 PowerPoint slides for their 15 minute presentations and two of the four failed to yield to the Chair's pleas to finish on time, meaning that no opportunity was left for questions. This, coupled with what all too often felt like a scholarly preoccupation with discussing only methods and not implications, was a common frustration and one which reinforced the need for some kind of quality control mechanism in the scheduling and streaming process. That said, there were some excellent sessions at this year's conference, and I'm sure I wasn't alone in feeling inspired not just by the ideas of the various 'big hitters' in attendance but also by the exciting contributions from less high profile names helping to shape contemporary and future directions in criminology. So all in all, a mixed bag as far as my experience of papers was concerned, which is arguably no different to any academic conference and particularly one of this scale.

Even the most diligent of session attenders will have taken time out from the conference to see the sights, and if they didn't then they really should have done. The conference took place in the heart of downtown Philadelphia, and whilst public transport strikes may have deterred people from getting out and about, those willing to use their legs to walk off their week's build up of burger belly would have gotten full value from their explorations. I completely fell for Philadelphia – not so much for its main tourist attractions although trips to the Liberty Bell, the Philadelphia Art Museum (admittedly for the infamous 'Rocky steps') and in particular the Eastern State Penitentiary were well worth the visit – but more for the charm and vibrancy of some of the neighbourhoods (South Street in particular) and warmth of the locals.

On reflection then, my first experience of an ASC conference will, I sincerely hope, not be my last as there were numerous experiences which will live long in the memory. Certainly, some of the papers were memorable for perhaps the wrong reasons, as was the fondue dinner that I and a number of other BSC members had the 'pleasure' of feasting upon one evening (blame Brunton), but these experiences are overwhelmingly overshadowed by the positives – be it the chance to engage with American scholarship, the networking opportunities, or simply the inspiration that can come from exchanging ideas with fresh faces in a fresh environment – that will lure me back to the US for future ASC conferences.

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