

Postcard From the IR Zone

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, APR 5 2012

Vain is the search for respite from the infernal babble of International Relations (IR) in this place, the annual IR-zone staged by International Studies Association (ISA). This year's ISA Convention – where this dispatch was penned in the last morning of the four-day event – was held in sunny San Diego, and (so my name-badge announced) this was the 53rd in history.

The conference program runs to a tidy 400-pages; a four-day bible to guide the faithful. This year's program had a fine-looking photograph of Spanish architecture. Seemingly, this was taken in some hidden corner of San Diego – certainly miles away from the fine contemporary design of the hotel in which the conference was held and the even better architecture of the smiling city about us.

But, it was the conference theme on the cover – Power, Principles and Participation in the Global Information Age – that flummoxed me and, perhaps, others besides me. Is this statement post-modern or Old Testament? Still, it did manage to cover the interest of the 5369-IR junkies who pitch in San Diego here from (seemingly) every corner of the world.

It is not surprising, then, that they're all in the Zone this week, the IR names both great and small: earnest in debate, polite in conversation...even funny at the bar: well, let's not take this too far.

So given both the quality and quantity at hand, it is difficult to decide what to hear and, better still, who to see in action.

This is perhaps the tenth ISA Convention that I've attended and it may well be the last.

Certainly the adrenaline rush of the first one has long gone but, jaded and jet-lagged as I undoubtedly am, I enjoyed the luxuriant panel which honored Columbia's Saskia Sassen's life-time work. The thoughtful comments on her oeuvre from Michael Shapiro, Rob Walker, Ritu Vij, Siba Grovogui, and Helouise Weber gave Sassen the intellectual space to reflect on method, intent, the writer's challenge and the purpose of scholarship, IR and other.

For me, this was the highlight of these four days and, probably, of this year, intellectually-speaking.

But what lurks deep in the IR-zone is what matters most and in the thrall of the place is seldom thought about.

Maybe the best way to try to understand it is to approach it as if Sassen might by looking into its shadows, peering under its curtains, considering the off-beat side of things. In other words, this means looking beyond the over-determined outcomes which the ISA sets out in the annual invitation.

The ISA is a market-place for manuscripts, books and – perhaps, most importantly – jobs. The first two are to be found in the (always impressive) book display with every publisher that matters in this lucrative field – and for the infernal journals which, an old friend tells me, keeps book-publishing in business.

Then, the ISA is a meeting-place for professionals, across continents and countries, and cultures all deliberating,

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discussing in a language that most – well, almost all – have in common. It is important to insert this cautionary note because one cannot say with confidence that the CIA and US military-groupies knocking around the Zone have much understanding (let alone appreciation) for Saskia Sassen's take on the international.

But, mostly, the ISA Convention is about America's long obsession with exercising its place and power in the world. The geography of its location confirms this. The gathering is always, and only ever, organised in North America. (Annually, there are ISA side-shows in other countries, but these are organised in conjunction with local IR folk) But, the mother-ship is (and will presumably remain) American.

Recognizing this is undoubtedly the deepest quandary facing the discipline and the faithful who'll gather in San Francisco in 12 months time. Can IR be something that is not American? Can it find a life-world which is outside of the embrace of the country that has made the world in its image, and uses its hold on formal knowledge (through the ISA Convention) to perpetuate this?

Will the IR-Zone always be, as Stanley Hoffman first told us four decades ago, an American discipline?

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