

To the 10th Semiotics Congress Organisers,
Coruna, 22nd-26th September
Professor Jose Maria Paz Gago
Professor Francisco Gutierrez Carbajo
Professor Eero Tarasti
and to the IASS members

From Angela Lacerda Nobre
lacerda.nobre@gmail.com
30th September 2009

Subject: My gratitude and some considerations on Semio2009

Dear all,

I would like to manifest my gratitude for the hard work and effort that was visible throughout the congress. And I want also to call attention to some aspects that are not so easy to point out. I was impressed with the dedication of some of the organisation members though there were numerous aspects that I think that are not only negative but that call for our reflection, as a group or collectivity, no matter the weakness of the links that tie us together. These negative aspects do not refer to anyone in particular but rather to the general idea of "the way things are done around here".

I will speak in my name only. Forgive me for my inaptitude and please consider my comments in the light of constructive criticism and the promotion of semiotics - "all for semiotics", as a group of participants kept repeating.

In general, knowledge creation and sharing crucially depends on our capacity to disclose and to express different views, in an open way, even if they may be controversial and polemical. I assume this risk, taking for granted the semiotics community capacity to improve itself in an open way.

Regarding the congress as a whole, it was extremely positive that there were participants from different continents, and also of different age groups, and that many different languages were used. This showed a true and wide spread passion for Semiotics!

However, different groups seemed to remain closed onto themselves, with the congress offering reduced opportunities for exchange among different scientific areas or countries. The social events were positive, the opera was excellent, though the gala dinner was too expensive, thus not contributing to further the exchange of ideas and the promotion of social interaction.

I do believe that Social Science can help human beings to live better. And part of that potential is realised by the creation of effective knowledge communities. Peirce made it perfectly clear: the scientific communities and the active debate that they host, represent the ultimate quest for knowledge creation. Semiotics is a privileged arena for such development.

Taking seriously semiotics' potential to further human development, at all levels, implies that everything that we accomplish in the name of "semiotics" fulfils, or aims at fulfilling, such potential. Social practices, in particular, reflect and reify implicit values. Now, considering the social practices that occurred at this congress, they leave much room for debate.

It is not my role here to bring up moralistic considerations but rather to exercise the "take your own medicine" challenge (i.e. to practice what I preach and to express my own analysis of a specific situation, whenever possible). Even if at a very small scale, my intention is to contribute to open up new possibilities for the future development of semiotics and of its scientific community.

I attended every full day of the Congress, from 9 a.m. to the end of each day's sessions, and so I have a first hand idea of the whole event.

At the "Call for Abstracts", I sent three full papers, as I prefer to be perfectly clear about what I have to offer and a short abstract was not long enough for that purpose. The three papers were accepted and I was requested to pay for three registrations in order to be able to present the three papers. However, one paper was assigned to a Session that was not at all related to my presentation, as has happened to several other presentations throughout the congress. In my case, this was a privilege, but it occurred merely by chance, and it only worked out thanks for the support from the chairman Professor Kull. The other two presentations were assigned to one single session, on Saturday at 9 a.m., making it a tiresome exercise. Once again, I had the full support from the chairman, Professor Guliciuc, who was kind enough to introduce each presenter in his session in a personal way, after having searched on the net for each presenter's profile. Independently from the chairmen support, I do not think that it is fair to pay tripled registration for the presentation of three papers, in particular taking into account how such presentations were assigned.

But my particular case is just one among several examples of mismanagement and of lack of respect for other's work. Worse still, there were evident signs of abuse of power, on behalf of some members of the organisation and of session chairmen. This abuse of power tended to be, or was, in fact, legitimatised and naturalised - as if all deviances could be accepted under the motto of the "difficulties of organising such a large event". However, there are many examples of highly effective - and rewarding - scientific congresses that are much larger than this one.

Taken as a whole, at this congress there was a severe democratic deficit, with lack of transparency, where neither the financial aspects nor the scientific ones were disclosed. Participants ignored, for instance, how was the referee process operated - was there one? Was it blind, double blind? And considering the width and heterogeneity of areas, wouldn't it have been more effective to have had a call for full papers and not just for short abstracts? It implies a lot of extra work but that may be easily handled through delegation (expert teams in each area responsible for managing the whole process, from selection and revising to chairing the sessions).

Participants did not have access to any printed material apart from the programme - the book of abstracts, for instance – apart from the electronic version (flash-stick on the

pen). The website did not have all abstracts and when some participant-authors complained about it they were told that their abstracts had "not been sent" - so how had they been selected in the first place?

There was also reduced opportunity for social interaction as that often occurs at coffee-breaks that were non-existent at this congress. Having the physical space for a coffee-break, actually having a snack and being able to interact is an essential aspect of every scientific gathering. It seemed here that there was simply an assembly line for very short paper presentations and a sort of a 'vanity fair' for some privileged class of scholars and their students. Academic institutional politics should be left out of congresses such as this one, if one is serious about the value of semiotics as a scientific discipline and millenary knowledge area - we are all losers when such games occur.

I will list several examples of what contributed to the sense of chaos, frustration and indignation on my behalf and on that of others:

- at some sessions, some people did not have the chance to present their work because the assigned time had been consumed by the first presentations, which were from the chairman's research students, who had had unlimited time to present their own work (!); sometimes the order of the presentations would be openly altered so that the first presentations would be from the students research group

- some sessions were cut short of the assigned time with the excuse that "the bus was leaving" (at 7.30 p.m. instead of at 8.30 p.m.), thus leaving papers to be presented (again, only some specially selected papers had the chance to be presented after which the session would be cut short or postponed for the "next day")

- some sessions started late plus with a two hour Round Table that included debate with the audience (!), after which the presentations were supposed to happen; some of these sessions were supposed to have as many as 35 papers (!) – at one session with 35 papers 9 presenters did not show up, which is also shocking (at one international conference that I know of, they have a black list for such occasions, so that if someone fails to present without noticing the organisation, never again may they submit to that conference in the future)

- as an example, I attended one of such long Round Table plus presentations session that went on from 3 p.m. to 10 p.m. with no break - Professor Magarinos was highly respectfully and did not want to cut-short anyone who was presenting; on the contrary, at other sessions, time pressure was expressed in such a way that people would simply read the title and say that they would prefer not to present than to have their presentation broken in half; others would simply offer to read the conclusions; and others still, did not present at all because time was over

- there was the strong impression that the participants were there to fill the role of the 'audience' and that their own presentations could be neglected; the Round Tables and the debate could have been organised to occur after the papers presentations, offering comments on the contributions from the different papers and a 'rap-up' with key insights from each area (as often occurs in scientific gatherings) but, on the contrary, they occurred at the beginning and they consisted on formal and long presentations (often over half an hour each participant and often four participants), followed by debate, after

which the Round Table participants would feel free to leave the room, in total disrespect for the papers' presenters who would be left with less than ten minutes each and with no chance for debate

- on Saturday, at 11 a.m., the organisation assistants came knocking at the Law's rooms, with great rush, saying that they had orders to tell us that the organisation required us to go immediately to the Sociology Conference Hall - we thought that there had been some change in the programme but no, it was simply to "fill the room" as there was one Round Table with reduced audience (!); this implied that the sessions in Law (from 11 to 12.30) were shortened or cancelled (and the people who wanted to attend them were surprised to find a closed door)

- the "apartheid" effect was felt at other occasions, such as not having access to the Law's restaurant as it was for 'ponentes' and not for 'comunicators', or having different buses, etc.

One of the congress presentations described the success of a mobile phone company campaign that contrasted the "old ways of doing things" with the new ways: the first one showing a boss constantly yelling for the worker "Garcia!" and then the very stressed Garcia; the new one showed a worker that was relaxed and in charge of his own work. I do believe that we also need new ways of doing things within the worldwide semiotic scientific community.

With my best regards,
Angela Lacerda Nobre