

**A SYMPOSIUM ABOUT THE EARLY FORMATION OF  
THE ALLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATIONS**

**History and Significance of the Allied Social  
Science Associations (ASSA-II)**

*A Symposium*

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BY MANY COUNTS, the annual meeting of the Allied Social Science Associations (ASSA), held each year in January in one of the larger cities in the United States, is the most important conference in the world for economists. It draws the largest number of economists at any meeting, it has come to be crucial for the global labor market for economists, and it is where the most broadly based, if not the most profound, substantial discussions on economic topics are to be had. The luminaries of the discipline are hailed there, and as scholars, publishers, colleagues, and friends gather, relations are built, maintained, and, possibly, break down. Many a project starts, culminates, or is salvaged at these meetings.

Beginning in the 1930s, formally it has remained somewhat amorphous, as Coats (1985: 1718) has put it, without constitution and bylaws, run mostly by the American Economic Association (AEA). The

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associations that have gathered underneath the umbrella that ASSA provides have changed substantially over the years, which lends credit to the belief that the lack of formal status may have given it a degree of flexibility that might not have been possible otherwise. Jane Clary in her contribution to this symposium makes the point that this flexibility allows, at least to some extent, the inclusion in the meetings of many different points of view regarding economic theory and policy. Although relations between the representatives of the different associations are largely collegial, they have, at times, also been strenuous.

It is interesting to see how an earlier ASSA—the American Social Science Association, “ASSA-I,” in existence between 1865 and 1909 (Dimand 2000; Haskell 1977)—has seen a plethora of disciplines come into being in the United States: sociology (ASA), history (AHA), political science (APSA), and statistics (ASS), as well as economics (AEA) (see also Ross 1991). Academic economics has its roots in the earlier ASSA, and economics, as a discipline, came into its own in the late period of this first ASSA, as shown in Barber (1993). The topic of this symposium, ASSA(II), evolved around AEA in the late 1930s as the distinct associations began to have meetings particular to their disciplines. Developments such as these, as Michael Bernstein argues in his contribution to this symposium, as well as in his 2004 book, may be seen as attempts to professionalize the discipline, as much as Haskell (1977) and Furner (1975) have argued for earlier periods of time. Much of the success economists have had at this is in no small part due to the institution of the ASSA(II) (see Backhouse 2008). John Siegfried, executive secretary of AEA, in his piece gives some intriguing insights into the workings of this organization. The transparency with which he does so is remarkable and should give critics of the way ASSA(II) is organized cause to think.

As the economy globalizes, the economics profession does also. Cooperation between individuals and organizations the world across grows (Goyal et al. 2006), and so the importance of meeting occasionally at a single location once in a while to touch base grows. ASSA has evolved into the focal point, and declining transportation costs have helped people come from afar to the United States for these meetings. A piece of wisdom that Marshall ([1890] 1982: X, IV, §4) has offered thus comes true:

Every cheapening of the means of communication, every new facility for the free interchange of ideas between distant places alters the action of the forces which tend to localize industries . . . and thus . . . to concentrate particular industries in special localities.

How those who run ASSA will face the international dimension may be one of its bigger challenges ahead. As the three papers in this symposium move from a discussion of the early times of economics as a separate discipline in the United States, emerging as it did from ASSA-I, to the role that the AEA has played in more recent times, and finally to a clear focus on the current significance of ASSA as exemplified in the way it is run, a significant contribution to the understanding of the role of AEA and ASSA in the development of the economics discipline become clearer.

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