

September 19, 2021

Subject: MSA 21 Chicago Conference Cancellation

Dear MSA Members:

Greetings from St. Louis. I'm writing with sad and difficult though perhaps not entirely unexpected news. Last week, it became fully clear to the MSA Board that we will need to postpone the 2021 MSA conference, scheduled for this November in Chicago, and shift it instead to 2024 in the same city. The 2022 MSA conference is already set for Portland, and an early wave of COVID caused the 2020 Brooklyn conference to leapfrog to 2023, so 2024 is the first free year available. I regret, for both personal and professional reasons, that we are again forced to cancel for this fall. But I'm also convinced that it is the only step available to save the Association financially and to live to meet another day. All paid registration fees for the November event will be refunded on request; hotel reservations at the Drake can still be canceled without charge; and the MSA plans to offer a slate of conference-related online sessions this spring. Still, the disappointment is genuine and will be with us all for some time.

Over 80 percent of the MSA membership, polled in May, remained interested in attending a live conference as long as it was safe to do so. Prospective participants submitted exciting seminar proposals and paper abstracts, the numbers of which were among the highest the MSA has seen. Program Chair Elizabeth Evans, the local Chicago conference organizers, and the rest of a hard-working Program Committee arranged a highly promising program on the theme of migration. Thanks to all of you who took the time and the thought to propose papers, panels, roundtables, exhibits, and seminars, and to all of you who evaluated them.

As November approaches, however, with the Delta variant still undefeated, many of our members—especially those located outside the U.S. and those with young children who cannot yet be vaccinated—find themselves simply unable to get to Chicago. Others have seen university travel funds withdrawn for another year. Though we planned for mask and vaccine requirements at the Drake, other members are sanely uncertain about the safety of flights, hotels, and long sessions in indoor spaces, followed by returns to vulnerable friends and family—and are telling us so.

The local Chicago organizing committee and the MSA's "presidential chain"—me, First Vice President Janine Utell, Second Vice President Amy Clukey, Past President Matt Hart, with Treasurer Lisa Mendelman offering sound financial advice—are now convinced that room sales at the Drake would not have been enough to meet our contractual obligations, cemented in pre-pandemic 2018. Registration fees would have been insufficient to offset the costs of the conference. The evolving public health situation might have put our members at risk, and the restrictions on international travel and the dwindling of institutional funding—leading dozens of presenters to withdraw over the last few weeks alone—would have meant holding a live conference that many members would be unable or unwilling to attend.

Why did we wait until now to make the call to cancel, undoubtedly frustrating and inconveniencing some of our membership? First, please accept our apologies for that frustration and inconvenience. While some specialists might have seen a resurgence of COVID in the works late this spring, we then predicted, heartened by the initial, pre-Delta success of the U.S. vaccination campaign, that it was full speed ahead. (I was particularly in favor of holding an in-person conference after our forced Brooklyn cancellation last year: a mea culpa's in order.) In any case, the city of Chicago's official reopening for business in June made any legal claim to a liability-free, "force majeure" cancellation for reasons of public health practically impossible. It still does: in the city's mind, and that of the Drake Hotel, there remains no pandemic emergency. All this to say that both Delta's late arrival and our desire to preserve the MSA from financial catastrophe encouraged us to continue to hope that a live event would be safely possible.

The MSA will stay solvent despite the conference postponement, but we've had to tap the Association's rainy-day fund and have learned a sobering lesson about contract law. As Delta worsened, we took advice from an expert on the law pertaining to U.S. nonprofits, one who also provided valuable legal counsel during Brooklyn conference negotiations. Our lawyer advised that declaring a force majeure cancellation on our own, without an arranged settlement with the Drake, had no better than a 20 percent chance of success in arbitration. Failure would have meant owing the hotel over \$200,000 in fees, which almost certainly would have bankrupted the Association. A difficult and time-consuming negotiation with the Drake to postpone the conference thus became necessary. This negotiation concluded just last Thursday.

I sincerely regret that we've had to cancel and throw a late wrench into your plans. And I wish we could repay the work of so many to build the conference, from all of you who crafted and submitted papers and panels, to Elizabeth Evans and the rest of the Program Committee, to Erin Kappeler and Nikolaus Wasmoen and everyone else on the MSA Board, to the Chicago organizing team of Maud Ellmann, Christine Froula, Pamela Caughie, and especially the remarkable Jennifer Ashton.

A few weeks down the road, we'll be holding an open Zoom meeting for all MSA members to discuss, as transparently as we can, why the conference was canceled and rescheduled, and to hear your concerns and answer your questions. And, as mentioned above, we'll also be sponsoring a number of online conference sessions in the spring of 2022, supervised by Janine Utell, the MSA's incoming president. These may include full slates taken from what would have been the November conference in Chicago. Whatever the final form, our members will then have the chance to enjoy some of the intellectual exchange a live conference would have offered. (To be clear: a sudden shift to a virtual conference to be held this November is not financially, technically, or humanly possible for our all-volunteer Association.)

In the very near future, those who have paid their conference registration fees will be sent a short Google Form survey asking if they would like to request a refund, to donate these fees, or to apply them to participation in the spring online program. Rescheduling both the Brooklyn and Chicago conferences due to COVID has cost the Association dearly, so while the MSA Board realizes that many members will want and need their money returned, we would very much appreciate donations of fees from members with the means and desire to do so.

In sadness, but confident that the MSA survives in your good hands, and will see itself again, on and off Zoom, this spring and in Portland—and in Chicago in 2024.

William J. Maxwell
2021 MSA President

P.S. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any pressing questions stemming from the postponement. I can be reached directly at wmaxwell@wustl.edu.