

CHRONICLE

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Report on the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting

Washington D.C., April 14–18. 2010

Although the Association of American Geographers is a US-based organization, its activities are of worldwide reach. The annual meetings of AAG are one of the greatest and most colorful events among the geographical conferences with thousands of presenters from all over the World. The 2010 Meeting was held in Washington D.C. The relative closeness of the venue to Europe had attracted a lot of researchers from Europe. More than 5,000 participants attended the event, which took place in the Marriott Wardman Park and Omni Shoreham hotels.

Partly because of the great number of the participants, the meeting was very diverse thematically and a wide range of approaches were present – which provoked interesting discussions and debates. The majority of presentations were from the field of human geography, although some sessions dealt with topics related to anthropologic geomorphology or to the climate change, too.



Conference break at Marriot Wardman Hotel

A number of sessions concentrated on the theoretical questions and main concepts of geography. For example, three sessions were focusing on space and spatiality with wide range of approaches. The last of them was a concluding one where some of the most prominent theorists (e.g. YI-FU TUAN, Nigel THRIFT) exchanged their interpretations of space. These presentations – and the debates about the ontological and epistemological issues related to space – demonstrated the far-reaching philosophical roots of geographical knowledge.

Several sessions dealt with the causes and the consequences of the global economic crisis. One of the most anticipated lectures was about the crisis, too: David HARVEY (City University of New York) interpreted the crisis as the logical consequence of the practices of the late capitalism – which he calls as “merchant capitalism”. In his Marxian analysis he emphasized the role of the “accumulation by dispossession” – a term which he developed and used in his later works. According to HARVEY the solution to the inevitable crises is to change the capitalism itself – although HARVEY himself admits that it is a utopian idea.

The number of sessions dealing with China and India reflected the growing economic and political role of these countries. For example the developing green turn of the Chinese economy was presented through the case of the automotive industry, in which the government invests heavily to develop new, more ecologically friendly engines and vehicles. The problems of rapid urbanization of China were also discussed in a separate session.

The “Geographies of postfordism” sessions have dealt with some theoretical questions of geography regarding the current crisis and spatial processes. For example, one of these sessions dealt with the relevance of the Marxian categories in the analysis of the crisis and usability of the concept of class. Richard PEET and Neil SMITH both emphasized that there is still a class society and the lower classes are the main losers of the economic downfall. Similar to David HARVEY the participants of these sessions agreed that a change is necessary in the capitalism. In another session the panelists discussed how the social construction/production of scale is changing in the postfordist era.

The Nobel Prize recipient economist, Paul KRUGMAN spoke about the “new economic geography”, and how it has influenced the economists’ approach. In his opinion the main result was that economists started to use the concepts of space and scale in their research. However, as the discussant of KRUGMAN’s lecture, Michael STORPER from London School of Economics pointed out that it is not always the case: a lot of analysis from the mainstream economy uses a simplified view of the space, e.g. seeing the countries as a homogeneous entity rather than a spatially differentiated unit.

The Lefebvrian idea of “Right to the city” emerged in a lot of papers: presenters from various parts of the world analyzed the spatial exclusion in the cities and the transformations of urban governance. E.g. the “Diversity of neoliberal urbanization” sessions demonstrated that despite the economic crisis the neoliberal urban governance is still in its bloom – moreover, in some places it was intensified because of the growing competition for investments and jobs.

The problems and specific development path of the post-socialist countries were also often mentioned topics. The “Critical geographies of post-communist cities” sessions were focusing on the changing housing conditions in and around the Eastern European cities, e.g. how the gated communities were formed in Bulgaria, how the former socialist summer homes were transformed in Estonia or what kinds of conflicts related to urban rehabilitation have emerged in Budapest.

The „Author meets critics” sessions were memorable parts of the conference: in these events the writer of a recent book and a few critics/reviewers discussed that volume.



Conference break in the park of Omni Shoreham Hotel

At one of these occasions the book in question was Edward Soja's "Seeking spatial justice", which was criticized for example because of the normative nature of the term "justice" or because of the author's alleged "Los Angeles exceptionalism" i.e. that the processes and phenomena he addresses only apply to Los Angeles. At the same time the contestants underlined that Soja's book is a valuable contribution to the philosophical/sociological debates related to justice and points out the role of geography in these debates.

The scientific programme of the conference was extended by a book exhibition and numerous guided tours in Washington and its surroundings and social events like the International Reception or the meetings of various specialty groups. As a highlight of the conference, Jane GOODALL was awarded with the AAG Atlas Award for her work for environment and humanity.

At the end of the conference nature demonstrated its power and the relevance of geography regarding the globalized transportation and communication systems: because of the eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano and the cancellation of flights, several European attendees of the AAG meeting faced difficulties to get back to Europe. The next Meeting will take place in Seattle (WA) in 2011. Hopefully the more distant location will not affect negatively the number of European participants and it will be a colorful and exciting conference as well – and hopefully without travelling difficulties.

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