

CHRONICLE

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Report on the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting

Los Angeles, April 9–13, 2013

The Annual Meeting of AAG is one of the greatest and most colourful events among the geographical conferences with a great number of attendees outside of the United States. In recent years the AAG meeting has become a global meeting place for geographers. The 2013 meeting was held in Los Angeles, California. More than 5,000 participants attended the event which was held in The Westin Bonaventure Hotel, The LA Hotel Downtown and The Biltmore Hotel in the downtown of Los Angeles.

It is hard to summarize a conference with an official program book which is over 400 pages (without the abstracts of the presentations). Partly because of the great number of the participants, the meeting was very diverse thematically and a wide range of approaches were present, which evoked interesting discussions and debates. The majority



The Westin Bonaventure Hotel, one of the three locations of the meeting



The exhibition hall



Conference break on the ground floor of Westin Bonaventure (photos by Lajos Boros)

of presentation were related to the field of human geography, but several sessions dealt with topics regarding geographical information systems, anthropologic geomorphology, and climate change, too. Because of the location of the conference, activism and research on Asian regions were particularly important. Los Angeles (and generally California) is known as a place of diverse social and activist groups with innovative ways of thinking and struggles around the issues of immigration, freedom, borders, etc. Moreover, being one of the most "Asian" metropolises in the United States, Los Angeles as a meeting place highlighted the changing geopolitical and economic role of Asia and the cultural diversity of the continent.

The Activist Geographies: Struggles for Social and Environmental Justice and Geographies of Hope Symposium with wide range of topics demonstrated the longstanding shared work of geographers and activists. Spatial and environmental justice, scale and class struggle, rationalisation of space, segregation and dispossession, the relations between universities and the public were among the most discussed topics.

As a part of the Activist Geographies series, several sessions were dedicated to Neil SMITH who passed away in the fall of 2013. During the sessions and discussions the theoretical legacy of Neil SMITH was arranged around the following topics: nature and development, geography and scale, cities, critical engagements, radical geography. The last session (Remembering Neil) of the so-called "Neilathon" focused on the personal loss: friends and colleagues shared their memories about Neil SMITH and a compost poem was written by some of his friends, too. (The genre of compost poem means that various authors contribute to the poem and their work is placed side by side forming a collaborative project.)

As it was mentioned earlier, sessions on Asia were among the key issues of the meeting. Maybe the most important contribution to the discussion was Eric Sheppard's presidential plenary session entitled "Emerging Asias". It addressed the most important aspects on contemporary Asia as a rapidly re-emerging centre of the world economy, emphasizing the diversity of the continent as a region and a geopolitical construct at the same time and the expanding differences in livelihood possibilities.

The "Author meets critics" sessions were exciting parts of the conference: during the events the author of a recent book and a few reviewers discussed the volume. For example, Michael DEAR presented his new book, entitled "Why Walls Won't Work: Repairing the US-Mexico Divide" tracing the cultural interaction in the border zone. He calls the spaces in the border zone as "third nation" claiming that it is characterized by shared identity, common history and traditions. Michael DEAR studied the effects of after 9/11 fortifications on the third nation; finding that although difficulties emerged as consequences of stricter border control, cross-border lives are undiminished. Third nation proved to be essential to the prosperity of both US and Mexico. The book presentation fitted well into the series of borders sessions which analysed the changing meaning and role of borders in the contemporary world.

In the special sessions entitled "Climate Change, Variability, Adaptation and Justice" more than 40 sessions focused on the social and spatial effects of global climate change. A lot of presentations analysed the connection between climate change and extreme events, the climate change-induced challenges of urban policy, the modelling of climate change and the future of Arctic regions.

Among the various GIS sessions, it is important to highlight the health-related ones in which the analysis of spatial inequalities of health conditions, spatial patterns of drug abuse, obesity and neighbourhood effects of health behaviours were discussed. On April 12 a closing plenary (Synthesis, Trends, and Directions for Geography, GIScience, and Health) summarised the topics analysing the future directions of GIS based geography of health.

The events of Jobs and Career Center were aimed to help geographers to facilitate their career development through offering seminars on job searching, possibilities of working in business, non-profit or academic sector and skills needed for a successful career building. The most important issues of geographic education were also discussed during the panels.

Following the tradition of recent meetings, several Hungarian attendees also presented their research at the conference. Zoltán Kovács (HAS, Institute of Geography and University of Szeged) spoke about the processes of peripheralisation in Budapest and the related social conflicts claiming that these processes on the city-region level are the outcome of the decentralised public administration system and the locational mechanisms of global investors. Tamara RÁTZ (Kodolanyi Janos University of Applied Sciences, Székesfehérvár) presented the so-called "invisible tourism" of Hungary; how is it possible to study the tourism behaviour of the visitors who are not visible to statistics? What are the main characteristics of their consumption, motivations, etc.? Balázs FORMAN'S (Corvinus University of Budapest) presentation focused on the value of money; how and why do cultural differences influence it? Lajos Boros (University of Szeged) presented the connections among peripheralisation, ethnicity and environmental injustice through the case of flood-hit gypsy communities.

The scientific programme of the conference was extended by a book exhibition and numerous guided tours in Los Angeles and California and social events like the International Reception or the meetings of various specialty groups. Most of the field trips focused on the diverse social environment of Los Angeles presenting various ethnic neighbourhoods, the locations of cultural industries and the constantly changing downtown. Physical geographers also had the opportunity to participate interesting field trips since guided tours were organised to visit Santa Monica Mountains, San Fernando Valley, Mojave Desert and San Andreas Fault as well.

The next meeting will take place in Tampa, Florida in 2014 while the 2015 meeting will be held in Chicago. Hopefully, Hungarian geographers will be able to present their work at the conferences as well, demonstrating the versatile nature of Hungarian geography and representing it in the global arena of geographical research.

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