

CHRONICLE

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Report on the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

New York, February 24–28, 2012

The Association of American Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting was the third outstanding conference I had the opportunity to attend within less than a year. The other two were the RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2011 in London and the VI. International Conference of Critical Geography in Frankfurt. Though this meeting was the third one in timeline, it came up to the first place in many respects. There were about 7,000 geographers and other social scientists (from the USA, Canada, Latin America, Europe and even from Eastern Europe, such as Hungary) taking part at that conference. One could choose from among 4,000 programmes which included presentations, plenary lectures, posters and panel sessions and field trips as well.

The short volume containing only the titles of the papers and the posters without their abstracts have 434 pages. In spite of the very high number of participants, the organizers did an excellent job starting from registration (where you had to wait for 2 or 3 minutes at the worst) to the end of the conference. The Annual Meeting was held in two



AAG's Information desk: always helpful, always well-prepared



„From the right
to the city to the
urban revolution:
Lefebvre
reconsidered”



Occupy Hilton
NY!: before, dur-
ing, after or in-
stead of sessions
chatting, reading,
planning, prepar-
ing or just relax
on the luxurious
floor carpet



‘Greetings from
AAG New York’

50-storeyed luxury hotels in Midtown Manhattan. This environment conveyed the conference the atmosphere of an international business meeting rather than a scientific one. The formal style most of the participants were wearing just enforced that feeling.

The topics discussed were of a really wide range: from political geography to environmental issues and high level philosophy of science analyses. There were physical geography sessions as well as others dealing with teaching geography or applied geography examining the possibilities of using geographical knowledge in practice (e.g. GIS). The plenary lectures were very varied: Saskia SASSEN, the AAG's 2012 Honorary Geographer, with her excellent humour, delivered a lecture entitled "Analytic tactics: Geography as obstacle". In her presentation she talked about globalisation, urbanisation as well as the "occupy" movement. She pointed out the importance of paying attention to interrelated topics and places in geographical researches. Jeffrey SACHS, director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University gave a lecture on sustainability stressing first of all the importance of the further development of technology.

Other paper and panel sessions analysed the geographical projections of various global economic processes (transformations and crises) like for example the "new economic policy" in India which is actually a connection of a series of theories, among others neo-liberalism, postcolonialism, network-society, structural adjustment and others. Outstanding researchers who work in India and the USA expounded their viewpoints on that problem. China's ever bigger role in the world was apparent in the programmes of the conference as several panel talks and lectures analysed China's growing presence in the world economy as well as its internal problems. There had been a serious shift in the topic of urban theories. Researchers and policymakers became more and more interested in urban theories based on case studies of megacities in the Global South instead of North American or European cities. This change was obvious at the session called "*Infrastructures of theory: rethinking megacity*", chaired by Ananya ROY (University of California, Berkeley). But even with fieldworks in developing countries, these theories come from top universities of the western world, without substantial contribution from the places they referred to.

The organisers of the conference put great emphasis on environmental topics as well. Global climate change was not so outstanding and dominant as usual at geographical conferences while other topics like waste, water supply management, resilient cities and sustainability made the range of topics more balanced. It was very profitable that some sessions were followed by discussion or panel talks. The former one highlighted some important issues not mentioned in lectures but related to the topics while the latter one provided possibilities for the participants to debate and that was very important because there were several specialists dealing with the same topic but with different background and experience coming from different parts of the world. At the session called "Unpacking the eco-city phenomenon" several new ideas and sometimes utopian visions (e.g. eco-city developments in China) were discussed but during the panel session academics criticised the elitist master plans and pointed out their unsustainability.

It is worth mentioning that several Hungarian lecturers took part at the conference. Ágnes ERŐSS (Geographical Institute, Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences, HAS) and Mónika VÁRADY (Research Centre for Economic and Regional Studies HAS) examined the so called "Yugosnostalgia" among immigrants of Hungarian nationality coming from the former Yugoslavia. Balázs FORMAN (Corvinus University of Budapest, Eötvös Loránd University) chaired a session called "Geography of Finance". Eszter GÁBRITY (University of Szeged) analysed the living conditions and daily experiences of Hungarian minority commuting from Serbia to Hungary while Ferenc GYURIS (Eötvös Loránd University, University of Heidelberg) talked about the political embeddedness

of the scientific discourse of spatial disparities. Éva KISS gave a paper on *“Industrial Parks and their Transport Connections in Hungary”* (Geographical Institute, Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences HAS) and finally, Gábor MICHALKÓ (Geographical Institute, Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences HAS, Kodolányi János University College) and Tamara RÁTZ (Kodolányi János University College) presented a paper on leisure mobility and well-being in Hungary.

Besides lecturers coming from Hungary, there were several others with Hungarian background who work as researchers abroad but still dealing with Hungarian topics (e.g. Zsuzsa GILLE from University of Illinois talked about waste ethics in an empirical case study of the industrial recycling in communist Hungary). Keeping in touch with these notable geographers would have a definitely positive effect on the Hungarian geographical research.

The trips organised during the conference were very diverse. One could choose according to his interest or time at disposal. There were opportunities to taste the wines of Slovenia or visit Chinatown, take a trip to the Hudson valley or the suburbs of New Jersey and several others. More participants visited the South Bronx, the once ill-famed district of New York. The objective of the trip was to show the changes of the landscape over time and to contextualize the disinvestment in the Bronx.

As a conclusion it can be said without exaggeration that this conference offered so many opportunities and so much diversity in topics that it came outstanding among the conferences of that type. There were so many world famous researchers that it was a real problem to decide what to leave out and what to attend. The next yearly conference of the AAG will be in Los Angeles in April 2013, a new opportunity to get an extensive view of the world.

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