

Report on the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

Tampa, April 8–12, 2014

Although the Association of American Geographers (AAG) is a US-based organisation, some of its events have global significance among which the Annual Meeting is probably the most important. This year the conference was hosted by Tampa and most events took place in three sites, among which the most important was the Tampa Convention Centre (TCC). The Convention Centre is a 600,000 square-foot event facility located at the heart of Tampa, along the attractive Riverwalk of the city. It features a 200,000 square-foot exhibit hall, a 36,000 square-foot ballroom and 36 additional meeting rooms, providing excellent infrastructure for such occasions. However, as we were informed by American colleagues, the centre is considered as only a medium-sized congress venue in the US (!). The other two conference places were the Marriott Waterside Hotel and Marina and The Westin Harbour Island Hotel, not far away from the TCC.



Registration board in Tampa Convention Centre (Photo: Lajos Boros)



The exhibition hall in the Convention Centre (Photo: LAJOS BOROS)



The Convention Centre from Franklin Street (Photo: SZABOLCS FABULA)

According to the organisers, altogether more than 6,000 participants registered for the meeting, involving geographers, GIS specialists, environmental scientists and representatives of several other disciplines. As AAG emphasised, the group of the attendees was truly international since its members were coming from 78 countries. It is concurring with the recent trend of increasing foreign participation at the Annual Meetings. For example, approximately 30 percent of all participants represented other countries than the US, while this figure was about 20 percent in 2006 in Chicago and only 2.8 percent (59 international attendees) at the 1982 meeting in San Antonio.

Thanks to its interdisciplinary character, the conference was very colourful by the topics of the presentations as well. A large proportion of the sessions concentrated on human geography but several others focused on physical geography, environment, climatology, meteorology or teaching. Among the panels, theoretical as well as methodological ones could also be found while some of them were organised around ethical or practical questions (e.g. publishing). Some of the main themes might be familiar from the previous years, among which climate change had remained one of the most central. This topic was addressed by several sessions over the five days of the conference – for example by the Presidential Plenary – examining different aspects of this extremely complex phenomenon: impacts on health or indigenous populations, paleoclimatology, modelling, risk management and planning.

Health-related topics were also relatively popular among the lecturers. For example, in the session 'Difference, space and the uneven geographies of health' lectures showed a lot of innovative potentials. One of them investigated the gender differences in physical activity in Canada demonstrating the importance of scale as the gender gap proved to be the most conspicuous at the metropolitan level. Another one highlighted some connections between fast-food exposure (at home, during journey to work and at workplace) and body weight. It suggested that higher exposure caused higher BMI, and that significant inequalities existed by socio-economic status since lower-income groups consume more fast-food even at lower levels of exposure. The third lecture introduced the so called photovoice method, a community-based participatory research technique which combined photos taken by local residents and the narratives those people made.

There were several sessions dealing with other dimension of social difference and inequalities. Some of these focused on the promotion of meaningful encounters between different cultures. One lecture, for instance, showed how small actions could result in meaningful encounters and foster tolerance between Muslim and non-Muslim people in Warsaw. There were also lectures concentrating on mental health. As one of them suggested, social enterprises as alternative (in contrast with most for-profit firms) economic spaces could provide enabling spaces of encounter for people with mental illness by addressing the needs of these people and enhancing their social capacities. The above mentioned examples consist only a little part of the conference lectures but perhaps highlight the diversity even in a particular session. Besides these topics, significant emphasis was also paid to GIS science, sustainability and several different environmental questions.

It is worthy to note that, similarly to the previous years, several Hungarian lecturers contributed to the meeting with thought-provoking presentations. Ágnes Erőss (Geographical Institute, RCAES Hungarian Academy of Sciences), for example, investigated the connections between ethnicity and violence analysing Serb and Hungarian students' mental maps in Temerin. Lajos Boros (University of Szeged) assessed regulations on public space in Hungarian cities, with special attention to homelessness and begging. György Csomós (University of Debrecen) participated as a discussant in a panel organised (primarily) for non-native English speakers, where attendees could share their ideas about academic



The interior of the Convention Centre (Photo: SZABOLCS FABULA)



Tampa Convention Centre, channel entrance (Photo: SZABOLCS FABULA)

publishing. Zoltán GÁL (Centre for Economic & Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy) analysed the FDI development path of CEE countries in the post-transitional period and the unequal power relations between home and host country institutions in the banking sector. As he stated, foreign investors' parent-subsidiary networks maintained the dependency of CEE countries and also caused regional economic disturbances at the same time. Ferenc GYURIS (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest) examined the role that Richard FLORIDA's concept of creativity and the creative city had played in the practices of urban developers and other local actors in Budapest. Last but not least, Zoltán Kovács (University of Szeged) analysed national census data and highlighted some features of socio-economic segregation in Budapest, for instance the growing separation of the rich in the quarters of Buda.

Besides sessions and workshops, the Meeting regularly offers other programs for the attendees. This year, for instance, the schedule contained exhibitions for different actors connecting to geosciences, like federal governmental agencies, NGOs or private companies. AAG presents different awards annually in order to celebrate exceptional achievements. The most prestigious of these acknowledgements is the AAG Atlas Award which 'recognizes outstanding accomplishments that advance world understanding'. This year the award was given to professor emeritus Julian BOND, a social activist and a leader of the American civil rights movement. During the conference, attendees could also join field trips to Tampa and the Tampa Bay Area. These excursions touched several topics like natural ecosystems of the region (e.g. wetlands, swamp forests, marine habitats) or the past and present of Tampa (e.g. brewing industry, cigar manufacturing, landmarks, urban renewal).

We can make the conclusion that the 2014 Annual Meeting followed the traditions of the event and the AAG. Thousands of lecturers gave the state-of-the-art in a very wide range of topics and the conference provided exciting scientific as well as non-scientific programs, in- and outdoor. The city of Tampa also did its best hosting the conference. In 2015 the meeting will take place in Chicago and hopefully it will be similarly successful with even more attendees from Hungary.

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