
Commentary

In-between sessions at the AAG

“Not only has the Strip [the main street of casinos and hotels in Las Vegas] become capable of near instantaneous autogenesis, it now hosts, simultaneously, multiple incarnations of itself, creating the illusion of something for everyone.”

Douglass and Raento (2004, page 17)

We are both human geographers who take an interest in the wide span of critical issues in political economy, cultural studies, and politics. One of us is a Taiwanese geographer who was trained in an American public university and started teaching in his home country in 1998. The other is English and completed his PhD in London and has since been employed in British universities (with the exception of four years based at the National University of Singapore and a year at a Spanish university) and has been a regular delegate at Association of American Geographers (AAG) meetings since his days as a graduate student in the early 1990s. Over the last decade we have both been to most Annual Meetings of AAG and often spent several thousand dollars and taken as long as twenty hours of flights for each meeting. The reason behind the investment and time-consuming trips is that for us both AAG has become the most important venue of knowledge interchange. This is not to say that we do not greatly value and participate in other rather different conferences. Last year, for example, we both attended the East Asian Conference in Alternative Geography in Seoul (for details see Glassman, 2009). One of us also participated in a cultural geography conference in Portugal and we attend many other events (such as the Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers meeting in the UK, the Geographical Society of China meeting in Taiwan, and Cross-Taiwan Strait Economic Geography meetings in Beijing and Taipei) as well as some other ‘national’ conferences (such as the Conference of Irish Geographers) and some meetings of the International Critical Geography Group.⁽¹⁾

Yet the AAG looms large in our respective agendas and requires an extra resource and time commitment. For us both, the AAG meeting has plural meanings: it is a place of new ideas, a cultural event, and a place of politics, scholarship, and performance. The AAG meeting is also a key site for informal networking, the renewal of friendships and brokering of new ones, and cross-fertilization of divergent ideas. Some of this takes place in sessions, but much in between them, in cafés, corridors, and just outside sessions.⁽²⁾ Now we realize that there are many important questions about the environmental and social impacts of such meetings and how they reinforce certain disciplinary exclusions and hierarchies. We also realize that they can be disorientating and sometimes disheartening. For these reasons, we welcome the recent commentary by Matthew Kurtz and Sarah de Leeuw (2008) raising concerns about the ways that dialogue and collegiality are sometimes hindered by the way that the AAG is so vast and how excessive jumping of (movement between) sessions can undermine both. This was followed by another commentary by James McCarthy (2008) helpfully suggesting ways in which the balance between openness, diversity, and scale might be managed.

⁽¹⁾ On the last, see Desbiens and Smith (1999).

⁽²⁾ The peculiarity of Las Vegas, where the AAG was held in 2009 above a casino, made it even harder than usual to find sessions and travel between them. We overheard other delegates remarking that they had given up trying to find a particular session and were instead trying to find a place to talk or drink a coffee.

We agree with much in these commentaries. The AAG is vast, sometimes daunting, and internalizes the weaknesses and strengths of a relatively diverse (at least in subject matter and methods) discipline. The AAG has become so massive in part because of the policy of open access (all delegates may present one paper on payment of the registration—and most do). Has it therefore exceeded an optimum size? Certainly with regard to the ease of finding sessions and the size of hotel convention centers needed to accommodate the meeting it often feels that way. Many people do tell us that other smaller conferences now look more attractive as a better use of their limited travel resources, although the AAG Council has since discussed McCarthy's (2008) commentary and has passed a resolution adopting many of his suggestions for limits on papers and presentations.

Moreover, both of us do keep coming and we both frequently move between sessions during the AAG and this relates to other functions that the meeting fulfills for us. This arises from our intellectual interests and the sociology of the discipline as it is enacted at the conference. One of us has a particular interest in the history, sociology, and philosophy of human geography. How better then to get a sense of the range and style of debates and methods than sample a very wide variety of sessions? As a Taiwanese economic geographer one of us will try his best to come across a number of divergent issues in the meeting: from industrial districts and regional development, through cultural economy, transnational corporations, and agrofood chains to political ecology. As someone who specializes in the cross-border investments in China, one of us also has to take part in the sessions relevant to China, as well as other 'latecomer' industrializing countries. The other will sample sessions on European integration and anything related to his fascination with geopolitics. But on the way, cultural geographies, feminist and postcolonial work will also appeal (and is frequently directed at this interest). The movement between different sessions helps us update our ideas in these subfields.

Both of us also teach in countries whose practice of geography has been profoundly shaped by American geography and geographers since the middle of the 20th century. In the British case, this relationship has occasionally formed the subject of published analysis (Johnston and Sidaway, 2004; Whitehand and Edmondson, 1977). There are some observations on the impacts of American geography in other countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Russia, plus the former communist East and Central European countries in a special issue of *GeoJournal* that coincided with the centenary of the AAG in which the Johnston and Sidaway (2004) paper was published. It is however difficult to find any materials (either in Chinese⁽³⁾ or English) related to the impacts of American geography in Taiwan, even though the American influence is very evident. Indeed, Americanization is perhaps naturalized and the taken-for-granted path.

In Taipei, where one of us teaches, there are only five human geographers in the department, and faculty members take charge of training graduate students who might have interests in a wide range of issues and subfields. In other words, most geographers in Taiwan do not enjoy the luxury of focusing on a small specialized area and have to develop research interests as broadly as possible. Under such circumstances, the AAG meeting becomes a key site to catch up on and scan the development of each subfield. Moreover, all of the five human geographers in the department at National Taiwan University (NTU) received their PhD degrees in Anglo-American universities.

⁽³⁾ However, there is some literature reflecting on the phenomena of American influences/hegemony in the wider social sciences, edited by academics across the disciplines reflecting on *Globalization and the Production of Knowledge: Reflecting on Academic Evaluation* (in Chinese) edited by a group of academic workers across different disciplines in social science (Taishe Group, 2005).

For Taipei, internationalization means, in large part, Americanization. The AAG meeting usually becomes *the* key international academic conference for the group of Taiwanese geographers who speak English (this is usually the only foreign language learnt by Taiwanese geographers). In Taiwan most courses have a strong Anglo-American flavor. Topics such as flexible specialization, post-Fordism, neoliberalism, and entrepreneurial governance prevail in teaching and research.

Moreover both of us are subject to changing research evaluation systems in our universities in which the *where* of our publications and extent of 'international recognition' matter. In Taiwan a controversial evaluation system which favorably rewarded publication in SSCI (Social Science Citation Index)-listed journals was developed by the National Science Council (NSC) to enhance the internationalization effects of Taiwanese academic researchers.⁽⁴⁾ Budget allocation was set by this criterion. For better or worse, the new institutional arrangement significantly changed the 'ecology' of faculty recruitment and promotion, which led to the redirection of international participation on the part of Taiwanese geographers. Submitting papers to the international (Anglophone) journals and attending English-language international conferences to present papers became key mandates for junior human geographers, particularly those at the NTU. Candidates are not considered for jobs at the department without at least one (first-authored) SSCI paper. The department also expects graduate students to submit SSCI papers before their PhDs are awarded. SSCI papers became the indispensable ticket for an academic career in Taiwan. Accordingly, it is hard to imagine that the discipline of geography can hold its place in the wider academy without this interface with the dominant theories in the Anglophone academic community. For the other of us, the relationship between geography as practised at home and American influences and norms has a longer trajectory. This is mediated through the Janus-faced nature of the UK as on the one hand a postcolonial European island, embedded in the nascent European Research Area (promoted by the European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index.en.html>) and on the other hand, a country with a shared dominant language with the USA and an enduring set of transatlantic scientific, cultural, and geopolitical bonds.

Now all this raises important critical issues, about how the international is configured in particular contexts, its relationship to the hegemony of English, and the centrality of the United States within the reconfiguration of knowledge production and dissemination as well as who and what counts as such knowledge—on which there are already lively debates in geography (for primers, see Short, et al, 2001; Rodríguez-Pose, 2006). Many geographies and geographers are excluded, by economic, linguistic, and political constraints.

And yet, just as capitalism and globalization are not solely products of American power or solely defined by its norms, so the AAG embodies contradictory process of decentering. Thus at the same time as the AAG becomes larger and more influential, in so doing it is also more international, less distinctively and uniquely American, and becomes more of a hybrid (in-between) space. It has long been a key site—a mobile location—where geography is remade. Work on the trajectory of the discipline (and wider work on

⁽⁴⁾ The policy was severely criticized by many in the academic community, both progressive and conservative, after it was proposed by the NSC. The progressive scholars contended that such a measure would result in social scientists preferring dialogue with the 'international' (in fact, just English) mainstreams to local contexts. Moreover, to use 'SSCI', just an index used by librarians, as a standard to judge the quality of social research would arguably undermine other local academic and intellectual measures. See Castree et al (2006) on the wider relationships between such research audit and the production of geographical knowledge—although it contains no details on the Taiwan case per se.

the geographies of science) encourages us to trace the evolution of disciplines through combinations of fixed sites, artifacts and networks, (such a departments and labs), and objects of circulation (such as texts), as well as the fieldwork sites (Barnes, 2004; Livingstone, 2003). Amidst these many geographies of geography, the complex in-between place(s) of the AAG meetings perform significant global roles, to some extent supplanting the IGU (International Geographical Union) conferences. Whilst the mobile locations and accommodation of papers in both English and French may render them more inclusive than the AAG's meetings, the IGU's conferences—which are held every four years in different locations—are usually smaller than AAG meetings now and many delegates describe them as even more expensive (in terms of registration fees) whilst being less well organized and less 'cutting edge' than AAG meetings.

Reflecting on the roles of the AAG and thinking about how the meetings might be more inclusive must also be part of the process of deeper and enhanced scholarly exchange that Kurtz and de Leeuw (2008) and McCarthy (2008) have advocated. AAG 'outreach' activities have been evident and made an enhanced impact in recent years. There are also international receptions at the AAG meeting, a developing regions membership program (offering discounted rates on membership benefits) and formal cooperation and reciprocal membership agreements with foreign geographical societies. But we have no systematic evidence on how many people take in a wide range of sessions at AAGs and what determines the sessions that people attend (indeed the scale and openness of the conference militate against such evidence being readily available). The AAG office has not compiled a detailed *historical* record of foreign attendance over the long term (though it is clear that it has increased from just a few per cent of delegates in the early 1980s—mostly then from Canada and the UK to nearly 25% now from a much broader range of countries). More historical data could certainly be compiled from the meeting abstract books which are archived by the AAG, but this would be a laborious task and misses those who registered but failed to attend and is complicated by other factors like people registering from an overseas address, whilst also being based in the USA (as a graduate student for example). The percentage of international participation at AAG meetings has increased and the range of places from which delegates come has expanded. But the uneven geography of geography—and the role of conferences within this—merits more data and critical reflections.

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