

Tracing historical geography in the Windy City

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The Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting has been traditionally one of the biggest geographical events. It was not different this year, when geographers from the whole world met in the city of Chicago, Illinois. It would be foolish to try and summarize the conference that lasted the full five days and in some of them, it took place in almost 100 conference rooms. This is why this report will rather focus on my personal experience of the conference from the position of a historical geographer.

Chicago itself is a tempting attraction perhaps for all geographers, not only those from Czechia. From the European perspective, the city full of vibrating vitality has a short, but very rich, history. One can come across a geographic problem or topic on every corner. In addition, the Windy City welcomed us at the time of a transition between two seasons, the winter and a reconstruction, as a local joke says. As a result, even in a fleeting walk through the city, a number of local problems, topics and historical traces were literally exposed and excavated. Thanks to this, a geographer's sensitive eye could watch the ongoing dynamic changes. From the Czech footprint in the history of the city, just some traces have remained, but they are still visible and worth further discoveries, examination and reminding.

But let's return to the Hyatt Regency hotel where most of the program of recent Meeting was held. Though it did not seem to be so at the first look at the program of the conference, it included a great deal of sessions and papers directly or indirectly associated with historiography and historical geography. Most of the contributions were scattered in various specialized sessions. They were exemplified by the interesting lecture by Phillip Gordon Mackintosh, from the Canadian Brock University, delivered in the session on decision-making processes in politics. In his paper "Toronto's Messy Democracy of Pavements, 1880s-1900s," Phillip Mackintosh examined the development of the discourse as well as power and economic struggles and ideologization of technologies when the surface of Toronto streets was paved at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. In the ensuing discussion, he deftly connected the topic with the current situation in many cities, not only in North America. Hence the question of how much the so-called "Western" society really advanced over the past 100 years.

It was beyond a single participant's capabilities to embrace the whole historical geography offer of the conference. This is why I will only focus on selected sessions and papers (in)directly addressing historical geography with a major importance and inspiration. First, I would like to point out the session "Remnants of No Man's Land: History, theory and excess." The name is based on the allegorical name of the death zone between trenches in World War One. However, the allegorical name must not be restricted to a narrow definition of the battleground of a single war.

As the session organizers, Noam Leshem (Durham University) and Alasdair Pinkerton (University of London), mentioned, No Man's Land has an impact on the soldiers' bodies, the contaminated environment and a radically altered post-war intellectual landscape. Above all, it does not mean an absolute emptiness, but the excess that can never be fully contained. When it comes to the primarily theoretical papers and search for the forms of No Man's Land in present-day (modern) conflicts, the biggest response was gained by the paper by Derek Gregory (University of British Columbia) called "Journeys from 'No Man's Land', 1914–1918." Derek Gregory presented a comprehensive story of logistics associated with extraction of the wounded soldiers' bodies from the World War One battlefield that can eventually be as strong as to be able to win the war itself. The paper is a part of Gregory's general interest in the topic of wounded soldiers cutting across the conflicts of "modern civilization." True to his acting skills, Derek Gregory was also able to jokingly comment on the current situation in the creeping commoditization of our discipline in his lecture. The prefix "geo-" was the catchword of the conference this year. It arises from the main topic of the conference itself: GeoHumanities. The construction was reflected in the form of such words as GeoAnything – Geocup with Geocoffee, Geoprojector, Geoslides etc.

Out of the other topics, I would like to highlight the session devoted to local names, called "Identity, Memory, and the Politics of Place Naming." As suggested by the title, the current course of geographical interest in local names largely occurs within the context of the paradigm of "critical toponymy." However, the topic was only represented at this year's meeting in a very limited way. All the three papers were delivered in the spirit of critical toponymy. In the first, by the collective of authors from University of Hawaii at Manoa, linguist Catherine E. Lee examined the relationship between ethnic identity and pronunciation of Hawaiian place names. In this case, the right or wrong pronunciation can mean not only the efforts to express ethnic or colonial identity, but it also may and should be a sign of respect to the local population of the islands and their history. The remaining two papers (by Michelle Marie Metro-Roland, Western Michigan University, and Eri Kitada, University of Tokyo) explored the topic of transformation of local names as a part of a political process. At the same time, it is a process perceived by local residents and general public. Name-change is a process often influenced by collective amnesia and nostalgic recollections, and provokes a strong symbolic implication that may even divide society in extreme cases. The session was ended by a summary paper drafted by the discussant Reuben S. Rose-Redwood (University of Victoria). He pointed out that renaming policy can be quite obscure, especially on the level of semantic implications of a name. Using a hyperbole in this connection, Reuben Rose-Redwood highlighted the process of renaming of the organizing AAG itself to AAG¹. As a result, if ideologically abused by demagogues, local names and names in general (and their renaming) may become a "very dangerous and creeping instrument" of a struggle for the domination of a space.

The session organized by Garrett Dash Nelson (University of Wisconsin – Madison) was one of the few ones openly devoted to historical geography. It was called "Region, Landscape, and Time: Geographic Construction in Cultural and Historical Context." Four very interesting papers were presented in the session. In the first, Michael W. Longan (Valparaiso University) and Mark J. Bouman (The Field Museum) presented results of the applied research project on the opportunities of community partnership when administering the Calumet Region, a national heritage site. In the specific environment of the USA, this project has been still quite unique. In the border region, there is an encounter not only of two states, but also of a unique natural environment with industrial history and the pressure of a rather suburban settlement. Despite this, the users of the area agree on the need to preserve and manage the local heritage area with a national importance. The second paper, by Jeffery E. Roth (Stephen F. Austin State University), provided a look into the opportunity to study the often much neglected topic of the Afro-American population in Texas and the life stories

¹ In this year's election referendum of the whole Association, there was also the question of whether AAG members were in favor for the renaming of the current Association of American Geographers to the American Association of Geographers as it describes better the substance of the membership of the organisation. Some 85 % of the voters were for the change. Hence the assumption that the first steps towards the renaming of the Association will be taken soon.

of individual Afro-Americans through diverse, but so far rarely used sources. Above all, Jeffery Roth pointed out the fact that in the official presentation of the history of the state of Texas and its “heroes”, the omnipresent fates of the black people were absolutely ignored and their work and fates are being ascribed to their white slavers. The third paper was delivered by Michal Semian (Charles University in Prague). Using the example of Local Action Groups in Czechia, he contemplated the ways in which history and various historical features can be reinterpreted for the needs of creation of regional identity and support for inhabitants’ sense of belonging to an area. His paper stressed that history is a mere subjective interpretation of circumstantial evidence. In a targeted modified form it can be not only used for the building of the sense of common identity within a certain community, but also abused in an ideological struggle for power. In another paper, the organizer of the session presented a research into political discourse of the creation of the Greater Boston. According to Garrett Nelson, the singleness of the place is created by a plurality of ontological and socio-political dimensions. The session was ended by a summary drafted by the session discussant, Anssi Paasi (University of Oulu), who emphasized the need of history brought in one’s own mind and its influence in geographical research, and the need of the research combining historical and geographical approaches.

We must not forget the session dedicated to “Visual Methodologies” that turned out to have a strongly historical-geographic character. Though this may have been surprising for some. The papers from this session have revealed that there are a tremendous number of trends, materials and methods that can be used in historical geography research. Let us mention on behalf of the four papers the one that was presented by Amber Hickey (University of California – Santa Cruz). In her study, she critically unveiled the Operation Crossroads as a major turning point in the use of visual technologies as an organic part of military and also state operations with the aim of manipulating the public opinion and as a tool to justify “neocolonial” practices; in this case towards the original inhabitants of the Bikini atoll.

The latest trends in Anglophone historical geography cannot be described in a few sentences. The plurality of the topics examined by historical geographers seems to be without any limits. Historical geographic approaches enrich the research and discussion in almost any partial geographic discipline, providing important implications of current problems. Not only the topics, but also approaches and research methods of historical geographers seem to be without any bounds. From the viewpoint of the scale, there may be a certain inclination of the subject focus towards the problem oriented research, as exemplified by specific case studies. However, it would be daring, to say the least, to arrive at such a conclusion based on the papers of a single conference. In Czech historical geography, too, we are witnesses of constant enrichment of the topics and examined problems, as well as research approaches and used methods. However, based on my experience, one can state that Czech historical geography still has a lot to learn and to be inspired by.

To conclude, I would like to point out the paper by David Havlick (University of Colorado – Colorado Springs). Based on his field research, he presented various ways of land use in the “Green Belt of Iron Curtain in Central Europe,” with a focus on the region between Bratislava and the Baltic Sea. Special attention was paid to the way the legacy of the Iron Curtain is worked with and how it is represented in space. The main idea wants to highlight the fact that the green belt area is comprised not only of nature, but that it is also an area full of history and stories. I would like to end my report by the rhetorical question: “How far has one to travel to hear a reinterpreted history of the region in which one lives?” For me personally, this AAG annual conference was highly beneficial not only in terms of academic knowledge, but also when it comes to the establishment and upgrading of contacts with colleagues (although the overwhelming majority of the most interesting papers and contacts are from outside the USA). This is why I would like to use this opportunity to thank all those who took the trip to place, in particular those who mediated the above experiences and knowledge and many others to me.

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