

Report on the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

21–25 April 2015, Chicago

The Association of American Geographers was founded in 1904 and since then its annual meeting has been held in one of the cities of the US. The latest annual meeting was held in Chicago, Illinois (before that the city hosted the AAG meeting in 2006 last time). Although it was April, the weather was rather cold and windy as usual for the city, even some sleet also occurred. Besides the official conference venue (Hyatt Regency Hotel) some sessions were organised in the neighbouring hotel (Swissôtel). Both of them are located in the downtown of Chicago, which is the third largest city in the United States after New York and Los Angeles. Its metropolitan area called Chicagoland has more than 9.9 million inhabitants. In spite of that, the number of participants did not reach 5,000, which is substantially less than in the previous years.

The annual meetings of the AAG have a great tradition and they are very popular. Because of the

large number of participants, these meetings can be considered the largest in the world for geographers, though more and more non-geographers (e.g. GIS specialists, environmental scientists, researchers from other fields) attend. It is also worthy to mention that the number of foreign participants has also been increasing. Their share was approximately one third in the “Windy City”, Chicago. This means that the annual meetings of American geographers are very attractive for the geography community of the whole world. For first-time attendees there was a special meeting in order to maximise their experience and explore the AAG diverse presentation, event and field trip options. Veterans shared their tips and tricks with newcomers to make the most out of the meeting.

In this short report the emphasis will be put on the introduction of the main themes of the conference since each year the AAG defines a few themes for its annual meeting in order to provide a fresh and engag-



The Conference Hall filled with international audience

ing structure to the conference programme. Attendees also have a possibility to organise a special session on different themes (e.g. which are related to the meeting's location; which are important from political aspect or which demonstrates the major intellectual trends within geography.) Balázs FORMAN (Corvinus University), one of the most active Hungarian participants has also organised some sessions with the following titles:

- Geography of Financial Markets, Institutions and Centers,
- Political and Regional Disparities in Central Europe I–II,
- Regional Development and Planning in International Comparison,
- Transitional Energy Markets after 1990,
- Transport Markets in Core and Periphery after Deregulation.

The main themes of the Chicago Meeting were the following:

1. *Radical Intra-Disciplinarity*. Its aim was to call the attention for the diversity of geography as under the banner of “geography” we do quite different things (e.g. collect soil samples, analyze climate change or socio-economic inequalities, conduct in-depth interviews) and use different methods. The term of “radical” means our discipline's un-disciplined nature.

Several posters and paper sessions were organised to highlight the possibilities and suggest the limitations of our discipline's intra-disciplinarity. The AAG Presidential Plenary organised by the AAG president, Mona DOMOSH also dealt with this topic and brought together physical, human, environmental and geospatial geographers to highlight the creative and radical possibilities that exist in the geography discipline.

2. *Symposium on Physical Geography: Environmental Reconstruction – A Nexus of Biogeography, Climatology and Geomorphology*. The goal of the all-day symposium was to facilitate and enhance the dialog among physical geographers on the challenges, new trends and approaches related to physical geography. The symposium started with two morning sessions of invited presenters around the theme involving – in a broader sense – “the study of past climates, landscapes, and biological systems along with the reclamation of altered environments”. In the afternoon there was a poster session (as part of the symposium) with about 100 posters on all aspects of physical geography. “The Conversation on the Future of Physical Geography” was the second main goal of the symposium and it was held on 24th April. This was the continuation of the dialog from the earlier session on how to enhance physical geography within the AAG, because the majority of sessions focused on human geography.



Book exhibition desks of leading publishers attracted many visitors all the day

One of the most essential themes within physical geography is climate change which is directly and indirectly affects every sector of society. Lately each annual meeting pays a special attention to this theme. In Chicago Julie WINKLER the Past President of AAG delivered a lecture on it entitled “Embracing the Complexity and Uncertainty of Climate Change”. She has emphasized that the complexity of the climate system and the extremely complicated linkages between natural and human systems makes the planning for future change difficult. To change the communication of climate change in a manner that inspires action but also leads to robust decision-making is also a great challenge.

3. *Symposium on International Geospatial Health Research: Creating Synergies*. The main goals of this event were to reveal the new research frontiers in geospatial health research and to foster international networks. Participants could choose from several (25) topics. Of which the most important ones were:

- infectious diseases and their relation to climate change,
- geographic and environmental dimensions of chronic diseases,
- gene-environment interactions,
- disease ecologies,
- mobility and health,
- cancer: genes, epigenetics, and physical and social environment,

- social environment and mental health,
- global health research and public health initiatives.

Otherwise the interest in health-related topics is continuously increasing and many (almost 50) sessions were organised around this theme in Chicago too. Kristian LARSEN and his colleagues tried to answer the question: “Does where you live matter?” According to their research the response is: yes. They have experienced that air pollution influences the development of respiratory diseases in Toronto. Scott SHERIDIAN spoke about his research on heat-related mortality, how hot days have changed over time and whether heat is still as deadly as it once was. Not only the natural environment, but also the social environment can have a great impact on health status. Zachary CHRISTMAN demonstrated the influence of neighborhood factors on obesity among older residents in New Jersey.

4. *GeoHumanities*. The discipline of geography has a long and close relationship with the humanities in both academic and public circles. By now many humanities scholars, artists and writers have integrated geographic concepts, technologies and methods in their work while geographers have also gained new ideas and insights from humanities. Nowadays, the core concepts of geography such as place, space, landscape, scale and mapping permeate literature, the arts, philosophy etc. As a consequence, more attention has to be paid to the study of increasing interactions



Poster sessions were really popular with all the participants (Photos by Gábor MICHALKÓ)

between Geography and the Humanities. This will be served by a new interdisciplinary scholarly journal “GeoHumanities” which was launched by the AAG as the culmination of a decade-long AAG Initiative on Geography and the Humanities. The journal was introduced by the editors during the meeting and it will first appear in fall 2015.

5. *Geography and Online Education.* Teaching geography on different levels is always a central theme of the annual meetings. Online education is an old-new challenge to geographers, therefore, several (49) sessions were organised in order to explore the multifaceted dimensions of geography and online education. Part of them were paper sessions on research topics related to online education while the other part of the sessions were practice-oriented illustrated paper sessions. The background of this theme is that the report of the National Research Council on “Learning to think spatially” has urged the improvements of spatial thinking in the 21st century. The speakers emphasized that the special circumstances of online learning pose special opportunities for “geo-enabled education” including location-aware social media, place-based learning, education administration and research, the future of maps in next-generation textbooks. Garret SMITH described the development and initial marketing of a fully online B.A. in Geography at a large state university. He said that the introduction of the online degree programme was well-received, however, further efforts need to be taken to enlarge the programme. Brian TOMASZEWSKI shared his experiences and lessons learned from a spatial thinking and geospatial technology education innovation programme in Rwanda. According to his opinion it is very important that the developing world is included in online geography education discussions, because developing world also has to face several spatially-oriented issues and because a full, worldwide access to the growing field of online geographic education has to be also established.

6. *Chicago and the Great Lakes Region.* The geography of Chicago is closely intertwined with that of the Great Lakes. The city plays a very important role in the transportation through the Great Lakes and into the Mississippi River watershed. The fact that Chicago is the major transportation and logistical hub for the Great Lakes Region brings several opportunities and challenges. Eight sessions were organized around this theme dealing – on one hand – with resource management, pollution, recreational and industrial usage of the Lakes; and on the other hand, with the income inequality, racism, housing segregation, neo-liberal urban policy, sustainable urban development and the changing agricultural landscapes of the Great Lakes Region. Marisol BECCERA shared her view that Chicago is a good place to study the relationship between brownfield redevelopment and gentrification. She demonstrated how former industrial sites have been redeveloped since 1990. Paul MACKUN focused

on the changes in population between 1980 and 2010 in coastal areas of the Great Lakes. He also identified the most and least populous coastal counties and tried to explain the reasons too.

Besides the main themes many sessions were organised on different topics covering the whole of geography. One of the most interesting presentations was the lecture of Ron BOSCHMA (University of Utrecht) who dealt with the aims and scope of evolutionary economic geography. This is a new direction or a new segment of economic geography which is getting more and more popular among economic geographers. He stressed that the main goal is not only “to explain how economic landscape changes over historical time, but also to reveal how situating the economy in space adds to our understanding of the processes that drive economic evolution”. In other words: “to demonstrate how geography matters in determining the nature and trajectory of evolution of the economic system”. Professor BOSCHMA (as one of the editors) has also called the attention of the audience to “The Handbook of Evolutionary Economic Geography”, which will be published soon.

Year by year there are some Hungarian geographers who can take part at the annual meeting of the AAG. Zoltán Kovács spoke about the political representation and electoral patterns in Hungary after 2010. Lajos BOROS dealt with the identity, commemoration and the production of public space in Budapest. Szabolcs FABULA demonstrated the urban diversity as an asset on the case of Budapest. The title of the presentation of Balázs FORMAN was “Centralized State – Centralized Energy? Comparative Studies of Austria and Hungary”. Judit TIMÁR presented her latest results regarding the economically backward, rural regions of Hungary. The objective of her presentation was to reveal the view of rurality in the migration decision of young women and men. Based on a survey Tamara RÁTZ, Réka KESZEG and Gábor MICHALKÓ analysed the role of memorable travel (school trips’) experiences in national identity building, whereas the presentation of Éva KISS focused on the major changes and new trends in the Hungarian industry after the latest economic crisis.

Taken as a whole, the annual meeting in Chicago was very well-organised, interesting and thought-provoking. The next meeting will take place in San Francisco, California in 2016. Let’s meet there!

ÉVA KISS