

Can Geography Overcome Racism?

During the New York meetings, AAG Council created the Harold M. Rose Award for Anti-Racist Scholarship and Practice in Geography, named for a scholar who has contributed immensely to our discipline. This column addresses two questions: 1) Why Harold Rose? and 2) Why anti-racist?

Harold Rose was President of the AAG in 1976–77, and awarded AAG Lifetime Achievement Honors in 1996. After completing a PhD in Geography at the Ohio State University in 1960, he spent most of his career in the Department of Geography at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Rose has been a consistent proponent of research that addresses discrimination and segregation.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Harold Rose was one of a very small number of scholars who addressed geographies of racism. In 1969, Donald Deskins reviewed the literature on African Americans and racial issues to show that of the total of 58 articles ever written in geography journals, virtually all were historically or cartographically descriptive. He cites one exception, Richard Morrill's (1965) "The negro ghetto: Problems and alternatives," as "tacitly addressed to an American social problem." At that time, urban geography had reached a high level of quantitative sophistication and Morrill, like many contemporaries, used a diffusion model to describe ghetto expansion, but also posed heretofore ignored questions about process.

During the 1970s, geography was influenced by the civil rights movement and in the context of the "relevance debate" a few geographers began to address racial issues. Most refined and advanced the quantitative tradition, mapping and modelling residential segregation and diffusion to chart the growth and decline of African-American communities (other communities of color received scant attention at that time). Radical geography was also emerging, and several scholars addressed racial segregation along color lines in relation to theories of class.

But it was Harold Rose who, in 1970, shifted direction with an *Annals* article on "The development of an urban subsystem: The case of the Negro ghetto." Using techniques from the then rapidly developing field of behavioral geography, Rose depicted the ghetto as an ideological configuration resulting from social relations in which the assignment of territory played a role. He claimed that ghettos result in part because whites refuse to live with blacks, and blacks develop compensatory housing search strategies. Rose's detailed empirical findings constitute not only the first analysis of the social process of spatial segregation, but also a strong contribution to advancing urban geography as a process-based sub-discipline.

Turning to the second question, why anti-racism rather than a more positive focus on, for example, celebrating diversity? I believe that where diversity exists, or where geographers have made a significant contribution to towards achieving diversity, we should celebrate it. But Harold Rose made another contribution in 1978 when, in his past-presidential address to the AAG, he chose to discuss lethal violence involving black males as the "Geography of despair." He explained the importance of addressing real and urgent social problems, even on the happy occasion of a past-presidential address. Similarly, even on the happy occasion of endowing future recipients of this award, it will be important to recognize that before we can celebrate diversity we need to address the ongoing, real, and socially damaging effects of racism.

Many studies have shown that it is easier to celebrate diversity than to address racism, but that the result of the former is often to make non-racialized people feel virtuous without necessarily understanding or developing ways to combat the effects of racialization. The concept of diversity is therefore easily co-opted by neoliberal

regimes that market and commodify ethnic difference, celebrate self-help and entrepreneurial projects, and distance the state or institution from responsibility to effect social change. A focus on racism, in contrast, allows us to carry on the project pioneered by Rose and a small number of other geographers determined to understand the spatiality of a social process that produces difference, differentiation, segregation, violence, and oppression. There have been a few points along that road since the 1970s that call for celebration, but we have a long way to go. The Harold Rose Award, therefore, will acknowledge those who have contributed to overcoming racism, in scholarship and practice.

Harold Rose's legacy is that racism is a spatial process, enacted out of social choices over who belongs where. It took courage on the part of a small number of geographers in the 1970s to name racism and its effects. Now there are many more who would do so, but progress is slow and reticence strong. I hope that his award will be part of the shift toward greater understanding of a spatial process whose geography is long past its time. ■

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