

## Paradoxes of Our Time

I am honored, humbled, and absolutely delighted to be writing my first column as President of the AAG. I want to begin by thanking AAG members for your support, and thanking Ken Foote, Past President, Carol Harden, outgoing Past President, and all of the AAG Council members with whom I have served over the past three years. Heartfelt thanks also go to Doug Richardson and all the staff at the AAG office. We are fortunate to have such a professional group who manage our association by putting scholarship first. I sincerely believe we have one of the best-run organizations anywhere.

A recent socio-legal text entitled *The Paradox of Professionalism* (Cummings 2011) explores the paradoxical burden carried by legal professionals: Their graduate degrees and credentials allow for the expansion of self-interest—and often substantial monetary rewards—while simultaneously their expertise places them in the public eye, where expectations require that they justify themselves in light of the social capital they have been afforded, and where by simply doing their jobs they position themselves as political actors. The most personal actions have public implications. The same paradox applies to all scholars. The privilege of creating and holding knowledge increases our capacity, our freedom, to act, but enhances the responsibility of action. The paradox of professionalism is therefore a burden, but also an opportunity.

Academic freedom must be defended vigorously as both a personal privilege that allows us to express our ideas creatively and unfettered by convention or reprisal, and as a platform for the social responsibility to contribute our best work for the benefit of society. Social responsibility poses paradoxical questions: How far are we willing/expected/obliged to go in making specific the political and social implications of our research? Is there, was there ever, such a thing as just plain knowledge? Who benefits by our knowledge and who is harmed?

What paradoxes, contradictions, counter-tendencies, are built into our knowledge, its basic assumptions, or its applications?

In recent decades our discipline has swung overwhelmingly away from the idea that there is any just plain knowledge, whether of climate change or social groups and institutions. The challenge of linking intellectual freedom and responsibility in this context is widely acknowledged. But never has it been more important to think about the trajectories of our knowledge, imagining to what ends our intellectual labors might lead, and how our knowledge can open up what David Harvey has called "spaces of hope" in a society where the paradox of professionalism is nested within a larger series of paradoxes, including the many paradoxes of neoliberalism, that regulate how the world runs.

Geographers have been at the forefront of identifying neoliberal paradoxes linked to knowledge produced by professionals: a global economic system that polarizes wealth and poverty; unfettered business activity juxtaposed with greater regulation and surveillance of citizens; liberalization of labor markets alongside the hardening of attitudes towards migrant laborers; a rhetoric of public accountability while the burden of reporting systems threatens the existence of many institutions and grassroots organizations; marketing of concepts such as "diversity" while the marginalization of oppressed groups continues in new forms, etc.

My point is not to make simplistic judgments on the state of the world, but rather to highlight the tremendous challenges we face in trying to understand and unravel these paradoxes when we operate from within the very neoliberal university system that created us. The counter-tendencies of neoliberalism are

built right into the contemporary knowledge economy.

As a case in point, the May issue of the AAG *Newsletter* published the "AAG Resolution in Support of Professor William Cronon," decrying intimidation by the Wisconsin Republican Party in its demand that the university provide access to Professor Cronon's email: a clear challenge to the principle of academic freedom. But the paradoxes of this situation are developed by Cronon himself, in his BLOG, "Scholar as Citizen" (<http://scholarcitizen.williamcronon.net/2011/04/01/uw-madison-balancing-test/>). Cronon acknowledges the role of the university, and



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the fine line between "how best to balance the genuine public interest represented by freedom of information and open records laws on the one hand, and privacy, academic freedom, and First Amendment rights on the other." Those requesting the information wish to know whether Professor Cronon made political comments in his university-based email. A similar request for the records of a political party would seem ludicrous. Is not the creation of any kind of public knowledge political? Rather than deny the political, we need to ask about the motives of the Wisconsin Republican Party, and towards what ends they plan to use the information they seek. Whose interests are served by sacrificing academic freedom for open records? This situation poses another paradox where accountability and surveillance are perilously conflicted. Yet the generous response of William Cronon, his university, and scholars and public officials across the political spectrum, creates space for hope.

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Abstracts are now being accepted for the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting. [www.aag.org/annualmeeting](http://www.aag.org/annualmeeting).