

Geography and Social Justice: An Invitation

It is nearly four decades since David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City*¹ rocked our discipline. Its trenchant call for recognition that people's life situations, and the places they inhabit, are socially, spatially produced in a systemic manner marked a seachange for geographers away from earlier, heavily Kantian, notions of moral and spatial fixity, opening a frontier of new theoretical trails in the process. Harvey would later go on to analyze the systemic conditions of the contemporary world in terms of the historical development of capitalism and its most recent manifestation as neoliberalism. This column is not the place for a discussion of the intense scholarly debates over social justice that have fueled and challenged much of human geography over the past four decades. Rather, I hope to use this as one of a series of columns to open up discussion about how to achieve social justice within the discipline.

Debates about social justice have continued unabated as some of the trails Harvey blazed have petered out while others have become major thoroughfares of geographic thought and practice. A consensus has emerged, however, on a number of things. Social justice is a contingent process, both rooted in concrete historical conditions and subject to re-imagination in the future. Social justice is produced systemically. Social justice is increasingly a matter of intersecting global conditions that for geographers include everything from the spatial form of cities, to politico-economic systems, to climate change. The state, or governing body, has a significant role to play in creating the defining conditions for and enabling the achievement (or not) of social justice; so do the citizens whose everyday practices form the contours of social justice as lived experience.

Iris Marion Young, taking a perspective that has much—but not everything—in common with Harvey's, exhorted citizens

to participate in a deliberative process of forging democracy. Such participation, she claimed, would allow citizens and states to recognize *injustice*, or oppression, and to imagine new directions leading to social justice based on recognition of the varieties and contingencies of people's life situations.² Many, many geographers, influenced by Young's work, have placed sociospatial justice at the heart of their own work.

The AAG is a governing body of sorts and its members deliberative citizens. The organization and many of its members are engaged in a great range of social-justice-seeking projects across the discipline, many of which will be highlighted at the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting in New York. My concern here, however, is with our collective deliberation over social justice within our ranks—students, staff, and faculty—and about the progress we are making to achieve social justice—through representation of a diversity of backgrounds, the development of fair, effective, and equitable systemic practices, and the encouragement of research that contributes to social justice globally. I hope to follow up on some of these specific projects, as well as to report more substantively on how well we are doing, in future columns. For now, I would like to initiate some discussion to facilitate progress.

About a decade ago, Joe Darden, Michigan State University, took the lead in circulating a manifesto on overcoming discrimination in geography. He proposed one simple action: that all graduate departments deliberately—and, we might add, deliberately—admit at least one student of minority background to its program annually, and take steps to ensure support and mentorship of those students. He sent his proposition to all graduate departments

in the U.S. and Canada, some of which already met this minimum threshold, a few of which responded positively, and many of which did not respond.

I would like to take up Joe's project, and perhaps raise the bar a little, by inviting members of the AAG to raise questions of social justice in their departments, asking what is each department prepared to do *this year*—and the next, and the next—to ensure that some measure of social justice is advanced, whether by becoming more inclusive, by changing practices around equity, or by engaging in some form of outreach to achieve justice. I would like to put this item on the agenda for the Departmental Chairs' meeting in New York in February, so that departments can share their strategies, and consider them in light of some of the programs we already have in place at national and international levels, such as the Advancing Diversity, ALIGNED, or Healthy Departments programs, among others. Meanwhile, I would be most happy to hear from members about their ideas, achievements, and hopes for the future.

Harvey suggested that "concepts of social justice relate to and stem from human practice rather than with arguments about ... eternal truths." We are situated before our contingencies. Through deliberative interchange, the imagination of social justice knows no boundaries. Achieving it requires effective practice. Please accept this invitation. ■

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¹Harvey, David. 1973. *Social Justice and the City*. London: Edward Arnold, p.15.

²Young, Iris M. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

To register for the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting visit www.aag.org/annualmeeting.