

Respatializing the World: the Geographer's Challenge

We live in interesting but in many ways difficult times. As a social/cultural/political geographer, it seems to me that the spatial manifestations of changes in the relationship between the state and civil society in many parts of the world have undergone some dramatic shifts. Most dramatic are the various spatializations involved in the "Arab Spring," where the passion of citizens to redefine that relationship continues to develop and change. Last month, I suggested that the Occupy movement also deserves geographical interest. My students tell me that the Facebook support for Occupy is lagging because the Occupiers are seen as privileged, directionless, and lacking the gravitas of those in countries for whom citizens' very lives are at stake. Such may well be the case, but I am reminded that the same was said during the 1960s of those who joined the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and other struggles. Of course the "Revolution" is not complete, but most of the issues around which young people mobilized a half century ago saw some (if insufficient) improvement. Many of those issues—affirmative action, for example—have seen support increase and wane, generally (as many geographers have shown) in conjunction with the neoliberalization of the state/citizen relationship. A review of opinion polls and recent legislation suggests that while political positions are extremely polarized, in the U.S. and elsewhere, much as they were a half century ago, support for civil rights and a range of equity issues is once more on the increase.

Of course I cannot begin to provide an in-depth analysis in the short space here, but I took the issue to the recent meeting of the AAG Council. It is a tradition on Council that the President sets some questions to the councillors, initiating broad discussion of research, professional, or administrative issues that we face as a discipline. Next month, I will relay the discussion of the question, "What is regional about the AAG regions?" Here I will relay results of a discussion of how recent events in the world indicate a respatialization

of the relationship between the state and civil society, and whether there any patterns that reflect significant changes upon which geographers have an especially helpful perspective, identifying and predicting those items on our disciplinary research agenda that would assist us in making a contribution to a better world. I have summarized that conversation, without attributing comments to particular individuals. The discussion necessarily raised more questions than it could begin to answer, but I found the discussion stimulating.

The first topic to emerge was the challenge to understand how our models, theories, and assumptions address recent social movements, including Arab Spring and Occupy movements, and those on the other side of the political spectrum such as the Tea Party. What are the advantages and limitations of spatial thinking to analyze relationships between social movements and new or deepening economic formations? To what extent have our established concepts such as locality, regionalism, globalization, and sustainability, lost their relevance or become buzz words? How can we connect locally based knowledge with a range of international theoretical developments? What are the connections, for example, between the current financial crisis and the Occupy movement, and how can geographers cut through media hype to illustrate those connections in a systematic manner? Can we do a better job of positioning ourselves as public intellectuals, and of engaging in interdisciplinary projects? Are we doing enough to integrate these issues into national AAG meetings? Are our methodologies sufficient? What ethical issues arise, particularly with respect to the role of the geographer in addressing struggles of social groups? And in the classroom, how do we relate to students who are themselves struggling to understand changes in the world around them?



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The second set of questions revolves around the relationship between physical geography and the state. The difficult contours of that relationship are established in debates over climate change and other environmental issues relative to state protocols such as the Kyoto Accord. Many geographers have entered such debates as well as advanced the basic science, but there is a need to expand the geographical footprint to make our research more relevant in mapping the consequences of environmental change. How much scope do geographers

have to act as environmental stewards, and what are the methodological, communication, and ethical challenges of doing so? Can our scientific expertise be better marshalled at local, national, and international scales to revolutionize understanding of not only climate, but water resources, soil conditions, and the relationship between social organization and such things as watersheds, which are of major importance in the creation of political territory. We need to push the boundaries of geographical and interdisciplinary analysis, and to promote our findings in international fora such as the upcoming Rio+20 Earth Summit in June 2012.

Many of these questions have life and death significance. People are dying every day for lack of health care or clean water, because of the luck of their positioning on one side of a border or another, or because they are too distant from the obligations, or the material and scientific resources, that would make a difference. Members of your Council all felt strongly that geography as a discipline should continue to devote attention to scholarship that will help change the world, both in our doing and in our understanding. ■

Audrey Kobayashi
kobayasi@queensu.ca