

## Optimism and Progress Marks New York Annual Meeting

Let me begin by expressing my deepest thanks to all of those who helped to make the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting in New York a tremendous success: the wonderful staff at Meridian place whose logistical and scholarly expertise make everything run smoothly, the volunteers, committee members, publishers, and of course the presenters. Many people have written or spoken to me to say that it was a great meeting, and not a few tell me that they have never enjoyed an AAG meeting more, nor found a meeting more intellectually stimulating. It was the biggest meeting ever with more than 8,600 attendees. Hopefully, that means more opportunity to meet and exchange ideas.

I heard strong enthusiasm for the quality of the presentations and for the new directions in the discipline. The opening plenary session on Friday night was packed—perhaps making it the largest gathering of AAG geographers ever in one room!—and the atmosphere electric. Frances Fox Piven opened the session by welcoming everyone to her city, then expressing her concerns about the lack of social justice in New York in the 21st Century. But then she began to tell us that she has hope. Attention was rapt. When she threw up her hands and declared, “Occupy!” there was a collective gasp. No doubt there was a mixture of scepticism, curiosity, and avowed support, but all were fascinated by her claim that the recent stirrings in civil society foretell a growing momentum for grassroots social movements that have the potential to change the world. Grace Lee Boggs followed, via video, with a message for the occupiers: that they must move to another stage, reinventing institutions, work, culture, and education, becoming part of the solution rather than only protestors. She called for revolution, not rebellion. Scott Kurashige, Boggs’ co-author of *The Next American Revolution*, followed with a discussion of some of

the changes taking place in Detroit. Next, Don Mitchell laid out the emergence of a human rights agenda in the labor movement with a focus on the International Workers of the World (IWW), and Ruth Wilson Gilmore brought the conversation to concerns of youth in American cities today. The five presentations could not have been scripted to line up more effectively to bring the message that *social justice from the grassroots is a powerful and necessary engine of social change*. But knowing what kinds of social change are possible is our challenge.

Boggs calls for revolution; Piven rejects the term because of its suggestion of rupture rather than continuity. Our understanding of the spatial implications of these terms has much to offer.

Saturday’s plenary provided another example. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, and former Secretary General of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, addressed the challenges of climate change. The Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice exists to bring solutions to those most affected by climate change, the poor and marginalized residing in the most vulnerable ecosystems. I have not heard a speaker from another discipline (she is a former professor of law) with such a strong sense of geographic perspective. She too held the audience in rapt attention and I could feel the welling of commitment on the part of geographers in the room to bring their passion to the complex set of issues she laid before us. We presented the 2012 AAG Atlas Award to Dr. Robinson, and this biennial honor could not have been given to a more appropriate individual.

These remarkable conversations tell me that—if the reaction in New York is

any indication—geographers care deeply about contributing to a better world. The theme of social justice and human rights was not only a topic of passing interest that marked this particular meeting. As a discipline we have had a long conversation, especially over the past four decades, about relevance, ethics, social policy, and social change, across the disciplinary spectrum. But caring about the world and changing it are not the same things. Understanding the ways in which complex respatialization of capital, governance, state–civil soci-



Kobayashi

ety relations, technology, environmental impacts, and cultural practices result in shifting geographies from the local to the global is the major mission of our discipline. Away from the limelight of the plenary sessions, that mission was being carried out in literally thousands of papers, all contributing in some way, a few of them making the conceptual breakthroughs that contribute new ideas and tools for research and educational advancement.

The AAG Annual Meeting is an opportunity for renewing scholarship, friendship, and disciplinary direction. I know that I am not alone in sensing the positive directions in our discipline at this time. I hope that the challenges, controversies, and conversations of New York will carry forward to Los Angeles; that the constant renewal of the discipline that the Annual Meeting represents will continue; and that beyond the impact of these powerful speakers and promoters of social justice, our research will continue to speak for our commitment to a better world. ■

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The 2013 AAG Annual Meeting will be held in Los Angeles, April 9-13.