

Valuing the History of our Discipline

The history of our discipline is fascinating but receives too little attention. Departments struggle to enliven our history in such a way that students will not rebel if required to take a course, or part of a course, on the topic. Even graduate students object (at least they do in my department) to spending time learning about their intellectual heritage. Perhaps I am a little unusual in that my passion for digging around in our past has not abated since I was a student, but I am ever more convinced of the need for historical scholarship, not simply to document facts about the discipline, but because those ideas matter a great deal. Lately I have seen a significant amount of creeping environmentalism in conference presentations, for example, that could do with some critical interpretation based on the debates that took place early in the 20th century and paved the way for anti-essentialist ideas that transformed geography later in the century. Similarly, increasing interest among social and political geographers in new social movements are strongly reminiscent of some of the developments that occurred among geographical activists of the 1970s. So I am delighted to follow some of the recent critical history of the discipline, which grounds our thinking not only in the concepts but the social contexts of the past.

Some of the most provocative pieces on the history of the discipline will shortly appear in the *Annals*. Claudio Minca and Trevor Barnes' "Nazi Spatial Theory: The Dark Geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller" (forthcoming, 2013) shows that Schmitt developed a political-judicial justification for the spatial expansion of the Third Reich at the time of the incursion into Poland. Walter Christaller's geometrical spatial imaginary, widely practised throughout the discipline in the form of central place theory, was based on a plan to reterritorialize the "empty space"

of Eastern Germany after the Jews and other "undesirable" populations had been removed. After reading this article, I did some digging in the AAG archives to investigate the circumstances under which Christaller was later given an AAG Lifetime Achievement Award on the basis of his theoretical contribution to what was considered perhaps the most important concept in urban and economic geography during the 1960s and 1970s. Central place theory may no longer be widely practiced, or even taught, by most geographers, but the theoretical influence remains strong, and should lead to questions about how we connect our theories to their application in the world. Can we separate the thought from the thinker?

Another paper, by Gavin Bowd and Dan Clayton, "Geographical Warfare in the Tropics: Yves Lacoste and the Vietnam War" (forthcoming, 2013) weaves a complex story of the influences of French geographer Yves Lacoste's 1972 exposé of the American bombing of the Red River Delta of North Vietnam, and of the public reactions and political debates over "geographical warfare" that resulted. Lacoste used field observation and mapping to explore the relationships between law, war, and environment. Again, I did some additional archival digging to place Lacoste within the context of the War Crimes Tribunal organized by philosophers Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre. This 28-member panel of international leaders, academics, and activists brought little known information about the horrific events in Vietnam to the public and profoundly influenced a whole generation of peace activists. Geography has its place in their history.

These two articles refer to countervailing intellectual and political tendencies

in the discipline of geography during the 1970s. It was the time of the so-called "relevance debates" when our discipline searched sincerely for answers concerning the role of overarching theories and their ethical application. Some of us were marching in the streets and others of us were defending the status quo. There has been plenty of discussion, indeed rapprochement, since, but the pages of our journals are rich with these discussions and deserve to be dusted off more often for their insight on geographical problems that are still with us today. But it takes articles such as the two I have cited to make sense of our historical search for ways to make a better world geographically.

This will be my eleventh and last column as President of the AAG. I look forward to the next year and reading Eric Sheppard's similar efforts to contain his thoughts within 800-word segments. Good luck, Eric! I wish to thank all those who have made the past year so challenging and enjoyable: members of AAG Council, the great staff at Meridian Place in Washington DC, all the regional members who organized wonderful conferences across the continent, all the members of the association who have contributed to our meetings, publications, and other activities and who have been a source of inspiration and support, and my students and colleagues at Queen's who have put up with my frequent absences. My very best wishes to all geographers everywhere. ■

Audrey Kobayashi
kobayasi@queenssu.ca

Note: The two forthcoming papers mentioned above are both currently available online to AAG members and other subscribers to the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.



Kobayashi

AAG Annual Meeting Call for Papers to be Released on July 1. See www.aag.org.