



Less is More. Radical Scholars Confer in the Aegean

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For more than a quarter century, architects, radical geographers, critical planners, political economists, and sociologists have been gathering on various Aegean islands (including Kriti, Lemnos, Milos, Paros, Samos and Syros) every two or three years under the aegis of the international ‘Seminars of the Aegean’. The most recent incarnation of these international gatherings of critical scholars occurred in late August and early September of 2007 in the city of Chania on the Aegean island of Kriti, and it was organised by colleagues from the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the National Technical University of Athens, the School of Architecture at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the Department of Geography at Harokopio University of Athens, and the Centre of Architecture of the Mediterranean (CAM), Chania. As I write this report, I am also preparing to attend the upcoming Association of American Geographers (AAG) meetings in Las Vegas, USA and I am struck by the significantly different cultural geographies of conferencing represented by the AAG and Aegean meetings. Indeed, it is because I am so interested in these socio-spatial differences that they form the focus of this conference report. In doing so, what I want to highlight are some of the links that can be made between the neoliberalization of academic life and transformations in cultural geographies of academic conferences, as well as possible lessons that might be learned from the ‘Aegean model’ about how to contest neoliberalization of some aspects of our academic lives. In this regard, then, this conference report is an analysis — albeit a schematic one — of some of the embodied differences in cultural geographies of academic performance.



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The overall theme for the 2007 seminars was ‘Changing European spaces: winners and losers’. Conference presentations were organized into five sub-themes: ‘neo-liberal urban restructuring’, ‘relocating capitalist success’, ‘identity/otherness’, ‘contested borders, new mobilities and power geometries’, and ‘limits of radical spatial thinking’. There were a range of presentations on important ‘European issues’, most with wider global implications. Authors drew on critical theoretical approaches that included feminism, Marxism, post-Marxism, poststructuralism, socialism, and feminist- and Marxist-informed theories of practice. Interestingly, the quality of the presentations was quite even, with most presentations of excellent quality and each generating much discussion. My objective here is not to provide a detailed summary of the content of these presentations; rather, I want to focus my discussion on the structural nature of the conference, the venue, the pace of the seminar, and how it thereby differs from the types of conference (like the AAG meetings) that I am used to attending in the USA and the UK.

There were 26 scheduled presentations over five days of the seminar, and with the exception of a community event in a refugee and migrant centre, they all took place in the Centre of Mediterranean Architecture, located in a large refurbished Venetian boathouse on the Chania harbour (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Chania Harbour with Venetian boathouses (centre-left) and the Centre of Mediterranean Architecture (red tile-roofed building, centre-right). Source: L. Berg.

Of key importance is the fact that presentations began at 10:00 o'clock each morning and rarely finished later than 3:00 o'clock each afternoon. Equally

important is the fact that the conference ran solely as a plenary session, with no parallel and competing sessions (see Fig. 2). An average day of the seminar would involve participation of anywhere from 40 – 50 seminar delegates in a series of no less than four and no more than six plenary presentations. The presentations were also divided into two sessions with a significant break between for coffee, tea and other refreshments (including some pretty amazing local pastries). All presentations were scheduled for 30 minutes, leaving ample time for both presentation and in-depth discussion. At the end of each formal ‘day’ of the seminars, participants were encouraged to continue the discussions over late lunches at local cafes and restaurants and most people took advantage of these opportunities to continue lively critical discussions about a wide range of issues raised in the formal seminar settings. Finally, the end of each day usually had some further scheduled, but clearly informal, social gatherings, where seminar delegates continued to learn from each other about a range of European cultural, economic and social geographies.



Figure 2. Plenary sessions in the Centre of Mediterranean Architecture (note large window on left of picture, which looks onto Chania Harbour and the Aegean Sea). Source: L. Berg.

Contrast this with the schedule for the upcoming AAG meetings in Las Vegas, which runs from March 22 – 27, 2009. Conference paper sessions start at 8:00 am each morning and run in five time slots through the day — each having

up to 59 concurrent sessions! Conference presentation sessions then end for the day at 7:00 pm, with business meetings, board meetings, and other special sessions scheduled for both the lunch hour and for the 7:00 to 9:00 pm period each night. A truly unfortunate geographer could find themselves starting their day with an informal business breakfast at 7 am, followed by two conference sessions of four to five papers each, a business lunch meeting, followed by three conference sessions of four to five papers, followed by a two-hour business meeting ending at 9:00 pm. Surely, this form of self-exploitation is unsustainable.

I attended my first AAG meetings at Boston in 1997. That conference was, we were told at the time, a record-breaking AAG meeting with upwards of 5,000 conference delegates, and it heralded the (ostensibly temporary) start of the wonderful 8:00 am conference session starts. Since then, the 8:00 am start seems to have become institutionalized as standard practice, as more and more geographers continue to attend the annual meetings of the AAG. In recent years, the meetings have attracted upwards of 8,000 delegates, apparently necessitating the standardization of both the 8:00 am start and the 9:00 pm finish, as well as the massive numbers of concurrent sessions (55 – 60).

Other ‘major’ conferences mimic this American model. The self-consciously (if not self-reflexively) named ‘International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers’ for example, uses the multiple concurrent sessions model similar to that of the AAG, albeit not as extensively (nor as intensively). The Annual Conference of the CAG is much less grand than the AAG meetings, but it operates with a similarly packed schedule. Interestingly, every second year the CAG meetings are part of the Congress of the Canadian Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences, which brings together in a single university setting, up to 15,000 delegates meeting in separate disciplinary conferences but scheduled as part of the larger Congress. In this way, even small players on the academic scene like Canada can have huge corporate conferences (and we get to have our own version of corporate keynote speakers too). Last year the corporate (as opposed to the local) organizers for Congress treated delegates to Richard Florida as keynote speaker.

I want to argue that this drive to mass (and massive) corporate conferences is not merely a coincidence, but instead it must be seen as part of the wider neoliberalization of academic life. The implications of neoliberalizing academic knowledge production processes have been well-rehearsed elsewhere (e.g., ACME Editorial Collective, 2007; Berg, 2004, 2006; Berg and Roche, 1997; Castree and Sparke, 2000; Paasi, 2005; Sheppard, 2006) so I won’t re-state them here. Suffice it to say that under neoliberalizing academic governance structures, there is a growing emphasis on measuring ‘outputs’; two key types of outputs that receive attention under neoliberalization fall under the rubrics of *research* and *internationalization*. The kinds of things that matter in these measuring exercises,

however, often get performatively constituted simply because they are easy to count. In other words, what counts are things that can be counted (or boxes that can be ticked). Conferences can count in two ways: 1. A presentation at a conference can be counted as a research output; and, 2. Attendance at an ‘international’ conference can be counted as a form of internationalization.

I want to suggest that neoliberal academic audit processes that focus on counting research and internationalization ‘outputs’ are partly responsible for the rise of *uber*-conferences like the AAG meetings. We can see hints of these tendencies in other places. The relatively new name for the IBG conference — the *International* Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers — for example, suggests the growing importance of being seen to be international. The necessity for becoming more ‘research active’ is signaled by a host of processes: the outgoing Research Assessment Exercise and the incoming Research Excellence Framework in the UK, the Performance Based Research Funding Exercise in New Zealand, and a host of internal merit pay systems in North American universities, to name but a few of the structural aspects of academic life that result in the counting of outputs.² Such forces, clearly put pressure on faculty members to transform the way we work. This can be seen in the dramatic growth in the number of geographers attending events like the AAG annual conference. In the early 1990s, usual attendance at the AAG meetings was between 3,000 and 4,000 delegates depending on the location of the conference. By the late 2000s this has stabilized around 7,000 delegates. This more than doubling in the attendance at the AAG has — I argue — resulted in part from increasing pressure on US (and Canadian) academics to be seen to be ‘research active’. The growth can also be partly attributed to the increasing numbers of foreign delegates, many of who now attend the AAG meetings because of pressure to be seen as ‘international’ scholars. It seems that the last few AAG conferences have become the largest gatherings of UK Geographers outside the UK, now challenging the RGS-IBG conference itself for preeminence among academics’ choice of conferences to attend with limited travel budgets. In Canada that choice appears to have been made by most geographers some time ago, as very clearly more Canadian geographers attend the AAG meetings each year than do the CAG meetings.

My objective here is not to suggest that major international conferences like the AAG are necessarily bad. Indeed, large (and somewhat anonymous) conferences can provide safe spaces for those whose bodies don’t fit well within the white supremacy of Anglo-American Geography. Thus for scholars of colour, queer people and Aboriginal people, the very size of *uber*-conferences might be a good thing. At the same time, however, I want to note the fact that huge

² *The Guardian Online* has an excellent web-section with a range of articles that explain some of the arcane features of the UK RAE: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/rae>.

conferences may not automatically be ‘good’ just because of their size and the number of international delegates that they attract. I also want to suggest that there are some underlying structural reasons for the growth in large conferences like the AAG meetings (as opposed to something intrinsically attractive about such conferences in and of themselves).

Notwithstanding my reticence to say outright that such large conferences are bad things, my own aging body is starting to tell me that getting up at 7:00 am each day, conferencing for 12 hours straight, and then socializing for a few more, is no longer good for me; I suspect it is the same for other geographers of my vintage. Similarly, there are good embodied reasons not to pack our days so full of work — especially if we are jetlagged, and already exhausted from the stress of preparing a conference paper at the last minute (not an uncommon scenario given our ever-increasing workloads).

My recent experiences at the Chania Seminar of the Aegean also lead me to believe that there are other ways of imagining geographies of international conferences. As my earlier comments suggest, these ways tend not to emphasize outputs, but instead emphasize processes of knowledge formation that involve time to interact with peers, spaces to relax and think, and time to formulate complex ideas and theories, and then time to debate them with colleagues. Not to sound too tongue-in-cheek, here, but sitting at a seaside café sipping coffee with people that have become friends over the space of a week-long conference can also be understood as a means of contesting the neoliberalization of academic life. The fact that it is both refreshing and enjoyable certainly doesn’t hurt. There is definitely something to be said for the idea that less is more.

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