



Academic Capitalism and Professional Reproduction at the Conference

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Abstract

Characteristics of the November 2006 *Race, Ethnicity, and Place* conference in San Marcos, Texas, are discussed in order to (a) interrogate the problematic nature of academic capitalism at academic meetings, where decisions about corporate sponsorship and key speakers often go unchallenged, and (b) analyze aspects of professional reproduction at the site of the conference. This commentary argues that academic capitalism often allows corporate interests to convey messages that are at odds with geography's critical tradition, and that benign acceptance of such messages by senior members *teaches* early-stage researchers to be uncritical of the corporatization of academia.

Introduction

Kitchin and Sidaway (2006, 485) argue that policy-oriented geography scholarship “should challenge rather than simply serve; it should not be afraid to diverge from popular opinion or to say things that politicians and bureaucrats may not particularly want to hear.” Bauder (2006a, 673) also challenges geographers to embrace a “collective will” towards a “self critical and self-reflective insight to resist and transform processes of reproduction” inherent to the power structures of

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academia and more specifically to geography. He calls especially on graduate students and early-career faculty to be “important potential agents in the transformation of the academic field” (Bauder 2006a, 677). Responding to such calls, this intervention examines events at the November 2006 *Race, Ethnicity, and Place Conference (REP III)*, co-sponsored by the Association of American Geographers in San Marcos, Texas.

The three-day *REP III* conference offered contemporary scholarship on place, ethnicity, race, and identity, as presented by a range of geographers and other social scientists. The conference’s mission was to foster “dialogue on a range of issues related to the racial and ethnic transformation of places... It encourage[s] interdisciplinary perspectives, philosophical and methodological diversity, and professional and student perspectives” (*REP III Conference website, 2006*). Although the meeting achieved its mission, two aspects of the conference raise larger questions about the critical scholarly integrity of conferences in general. First, the meeting’s premier sponsor was petroleum giant *bp* (formerly British Petroleum)², whose history of violating indigenous land rights is well documented. I argue that conference participants have a responsibility to challenge corporate participation, especially of companies with deep histories of human rights abuse; in this case there seemed to be no such questioning by those in attendance. Second, one of the keynote speakers—a venture capitalist and major political fund raiser—made controversial partisan remarks that went uncontested by any of those in attendance, despite the likelihood that much of the audience found them contentious, raising serious questions about geography’s ability or willingness to engage with those outside our own academic circles. I intend not to disparage the event or its organizers, but rather to use these aspects of the conference to illustrate the problematic nature of ‘academic capitalism,’ and analyze social and professional reproduction in the discipline of geography as it occurs at conferences.

Academic Capitalism at the Conference

Slaughter and Leslie (1997, 8) define academic capitalism as “any institutional and professional market or marketlike [sic] efforts to secure external moneys.” Past AAG Presidents have commented on both the perks and perils of private/public partnerships, and the issue has been examined at the scale of the department, the institution, and the discipline at large (AAG Diversity Task Force, 2006; Long Range Strategic Planning Committee, 2003; Pandit, 2007; Richardson, 2004). Recent debates in geography have also addressed the corporatization of the

² Throughout this intervention piece lower case letters *bp* are used to refer to the group of companies that merged with British Petroleum in 2000 to include Amoco, ARCO and Castrol. The company uses *bp* on all of its stationary, logos, signs, corporate apparel, and sponsorship materials, although it is listed on the British stock exchange as BP plc. I utilize the lower case version for two reasons. First, the lowercase logo represents a conscious choice by the company to represent itself to the public, and so this commentary ought to be consistent with that sentiment. Second, I follow the precedent set by Sharon Beder’s 2002 book chapter entitled *bp: Beyond Petroleum?*

university, arguing that the institution is being transformed from a place of critical thinking into a market-driven space of infotainment or, according to Smith, a “sausage factory worth fighting for” (Smith, 2000, 337; see also Castree and Sparke, 2000; Chatterton and Featherstone, 2007; Mitchell, 1999). Most are in agreement that “universities are behaving in more business-like ways [and] national states are hard-wiring universities more directly into wealth production” (Castree, 2006, 1190). Critical geographers attribute changes in social relations within the academy to increasingly neoliberalized forms of governance in North American and European (particularly British) institutions (Chatterton and Featherstone, 2007). Bauder (2006b) identifies market-like segmentation of academic labor in Canada and suggests a path towards combating the trend. Critical geographers also challenge the role of capitalism in forging and reinforcing asymmetries in academic publications (Paasi, 2005; Sheppard, 2006). Indeed, the controversy over publishing giant Elsevier’s connection to arms trade shows from 2005-2007 demonstrates that geographers (and other academics) can induce certain types of private sector companies to alter their business practices (Kitchin, 2007).

Another less examined arena where academic capitalism is gaining sway is at academic conferences. The most obvious form of corporatization at conferences is sponsorship, which helps offset costs and sometimes subsidizes special events. The premier sponsor at the *REP III* conference was *bp* (formerly British Petroleum). The company occupied a prominent location in the exhibit area, offered free gifts to participants and was publicly thanked by the conference organizers during the well-attended first lunch session. *bp* representatives responded by declaring the company’s commitment to diversity and announcing a plan to sponsor an unspecified number of scholarships for minority students. I was told by one of the conference organizers that *bp*’s participation at *REP III* was unsolicited and initiated entirely by the corporation. Despite the obvious instrumental benefits to the conference of allowing sponsorship, the example developed here suggests that there are good reasons for questioning the motives and unpacking the unspoken messages embedded in corporate sponsorship. Companies such as publishers and software firms that sell products and services to conference participants are motivated by the direct and transparent benefits of product sales, increased product recognition, and marketplace exposure. But the impetus for the participation of sponsors seeking to transmit a message, garner good will, or improve a corporate image is less clear and deserves critical analysis by conference organizers and participants.

Transnational corporations, including *bp*, often subsume local places with little regard for local or regional economic and ecological impacts (Beder, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 1998; Watts, 2005). South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that the Apartheid-era government depended on *bp* (among others) to circumvent the world oil ban throughout the 1980s (Beder, 2002; Tutu, 1998). In South America, *bp* collaborated with the Colombian military’s repressive tactics to protect the company’s exploitative efforts in the

Cusiana-Cupiagua oil fields (Human Rights Watch, 1998; Richani 2005). Amnesty International also reports that 550,000 local Ogoni farmers and fishermen of the Niger Delta region affected by *bp*'s and Shell's extractive activities received little or no compensation for loss of land and livelihood (Boele *et al.*, 2001; Saro-Wiwa, 1992).

As private-public partnerships become increasingly common in the academy, displays of gratitude, ceremonial announcements (of awards, partnerships, etc.), and even corporate logos appear more frequently and prominently in the academic environment (Readings, 1996). In fact, geography departments rely increasingly upon private gifts and donations (Pandit, 2007), which in turn affect the educational experience for students and may temper faculty members' activism (Silvey, 2002). Indeed, academics are encouraged to "strengthen support for the discipline by pursuing government agencies as well as private foundations" (Nellis, 2003, 3) as potential sources of funding. But where and when are these pursuits appropriate? Clearly, most of our conferences include varying degrees of commodification. Book publishers, software companies, and other for-profit entities routinely sponsor special events and advertise at the site of the 'the conference'. AAG presidents have successfully fostered private-sector relationships that financially benefit our discipline. Perhaps a company like *bp* is a legitimate sponsor for a multi-disciplinary national conference seeking to position, question, and unpack the dialectics of race, place, ethnicity and identity. But I think not.

I think that as active interpreters of the unarticulated messages assigned to corporate logos and images, we should self-consciously consider our role in accepting (and thereby constructing) the positive promotional significations embedded in corporate sponsorships. Particularly in the case of companies with questionable human rights records, geographers must carefully place mediascapes into their proper temporal and cultural contexts (Craine, 2007). To which message do we willingly grant our consent, then? To the message of an increasingly socially responsible TNC providing scholarships for minority students and working with the Akassa Development Foundation in Nigeria to improve food security (Oruwari, 2006), or to that of a neoliberal institution that, for years, has operated on principals of intimidation, expropriation, violence, and denials of global warming? Such a debate is important, and the inclusion of sponsors should not go uncontested. Derrida intimated that a gift reduces ultimately to a contractual (but often unspoken) agreement between the giver and recipient (Derrida and Caputo, 1997; Mauss, 1954). What is our contractual obligation in accepting a large 'gift' from a company like *bp*?

As geographers, we are acutely aware of the importance of place. Every day we talk about the core, the periphery, the Global North, the Global South, the MDC, and the LDC. In the classroom, we ask students to conceptualize globalization as an intentional project rather than as an inevitable outcome. But

when we are offered sponsorship money from a corporation that is directly implicated in some of the most negative aspects of neoliberal globalization, should we unquestioningly accept the financial benefits without questioning the motive?

In the spirit of contemporary critical geography, I think the answer is obvious. Trevor Barnes (2002, 14) posed the question, “Could you stop a tank with a piece of economic geography?” He and many others have since argued that although our forms of resistance may not remedy the world’s social ills, at least we can expose those forces that conspire to make them (Barnes, 2002). Richard Peet (2005, 938) (inspired by Jim Blaut) aptly labels the twenty-first century as a period of ‘Americentrism’, whereby “unless events are reported in the US media, they never happen.” Likewise, unless a corporation is American, it seems often to escape the scrutiny of American media attention—perhaps a subtle form of ‘Americentrism’ as well. Although *bp*’s global transgressions are widely reported by international organizations and media outside of the U.S., the stories receive little attention in the mainstream American press. As geographers we should know better. Academic conferences should be a forum for transparent sharing of ideas and for open and honest debate. If corporations (or other entities) with questionable human rights records wish to participate, then their input should be welcome, but conferences should not serve as sites of uncontested corporate public relations campaigns.

Professional Reproduction at the Conference

Blumen and Bar-Gal (2006, 351) characterize the conference as a relatively “unstudied arena of academic life” and suggest that it is a site of contestation that is negotiated through various sets of power relationships. One such negotiation involves inviting conference speakers. One of the invited speakers at the *REP III* conference was Fred Zeidman, Chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, founder of the Houston Venture Capital Association, Senior Director of Governmental Affairs at Greenberg Traurig LLP (a Washington lobbying firm), and Chairman of the Board of Seitel, Inc. (an investment firm). In a session entitled, “Jewish Leaders in Texas” Mr. Zeidman recounted his family’s migration history to the South, and then detailed his own philanthropic activities, citing checks written and charities supported. He discussed his lobbying efforts for military support of Israel³, his work with the Darfur crisis and the mission of the Holocaust Museum, and also pointed out that the owners of the most successful

³ Mr. Zeidman's support for Israeli attacks on Lebanon was accentuated in the Washington Post as follows: “Fred S. Zeidman, a Texas venture capitalist who is active in Jewish affairs and has been close to the president for years, said the current crisis shows the depth of the president's support for Israel. “He will not bow to international pressure to pressure Israel,” Zeidman said. “I have never seen a man more committed to Israel.” (Abramowitz, 2006, A01). While the international community called for Israel to halt the attacks, the U.S. did not. Human Rights Watch reported that the attacks constituted war crimes because of the intentional targeting of civilians (Bouckaert and Houry, 2006). Mr. Zeidman is also past vice president of a group called the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, which works to strengthen military ties and increase military aid between the U.S. and Israel (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006). The group issued a statement in 2001 to “revoke the Presidential Order banning assassinations” (JINSA press release, September 13, 2001).

clothing stores in Texas were all Jewish.⁴ Concluding his remarks, Mr. Zeidman disclosed to the audience that he was a “thirty-year drinking buddy of a guy named George Bush,” and openly acknowledged his appointment to Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council as a clear case of what can only be described as political cronyism (though he didn’t use those exact words).⁵

The luxury of unsolicited corporate gifts (or sponsorships) may allow conference organizers to add attractive amenities (prime rib instead of chicken, cinnamon rolls instead of bagels). Likewise the allure of inviting high-profile guests or speakers may also generate a certain buzz that would not otherwise exist. Both such decisions, however, can have corrosive effects upon our discipline’s ability to invoke change. While the benign acceptance of *bp*’s participation at the *REP III* exemplifies the numbing effect of academic capitalism, I believe that the way keynote speakers are selected by conference organizers and received by conference participants is also worthy of further scrutiny. Although conference paper abstracts are submitted and screened in advance, invited speakers are often given wide latitude to speak as they please. I think that a critical assessment of the role of invited speakers is important—particularly when the guest’s motives and agenda might be politically charged—because invited speakers enjoy a level of authority and power that perhaps is less likely to be challenged or questioned by others, as was the case with Mr. Zeidman’s controversial comments. If this critical assessment does not occur among organizers at the planning stage, it should occur among participants during the conference. The academic conference should represent a space for an inclusive and open exchange of ideas and not for political posturing. And yet, when the floor was opened for questions at the *REP III* conference, attendees missed the chance to engage with an influential political insider.

As I formulated my own question to Mr. Zeidman, I anxiously awaited responses from my more experienced counterparts, who I thought would surely pose engaging questions. Perhaps an appropriate question for the Chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council would focus on post-9-11 extraordinary

⁴ This is a summary of Mr. Zeidman’s words on the date of November 3, 2006, approximately 1:00pm. The summary comes from the hand-written notes I took while listening to him. I also conferred with others in attendance to confirm my rendition of his words. The conference proceedings were professionally recorded and videotaped by the organizing university, but the transcripts, audio, and video footage have not been made publicly available. Between December 2006 and November 2007 I requested transcripts from the conference organizers four times.

⁵ A paraphrase of Mr. Zeidman’s words on the date of November 3, 2006, approximately 1:00pm taken from the author’s handwritten notes and verified by others in attendance follow: “After Mr. Bush was elected President he called to meet me in Washington D.C. We sat in the Oval Office, just the two of us. He slid a blank piece of paper and a pen across the table to me and said, Fred what position do you want in my government. You can have anything. Just write it down.” The extent of nepotism in the current Presidential administration is well documented (Bellow, 2003; Klein, 2007; Noah, 2003; Tumulty *et al.*, 2005). Here, in the presence of a body of academic geographers, is a first-person account of cronyism at the highest level.

rendition or extraterritorial interrogation practices. Given the speaker's experience as a financier, another line of inquiry might involve the effect of speculative global venture capital upon local economies and livelihoods in the Global South. My question, I surmised, should be topical, respectful, and succinct. "Are there any questions?" asked the moderator. There were none. After an uncomfortable silence, two trivial questions were posed from in-state participants (one of these came from the representative of a local private elementary school seeking financial assistance). No more questions were asked, and within a few minutes the session finished. *Not a single member of the audience (including me) posed a challenging or meaningful question to our speaker.* How could this be? Perhaps something was going on behind the scenes that I didn't understand. Is his company also a corporate sponsor of the conference or a significant donor to the host institution? Do we not want to embarrass the conference organizer? Are there unwritten rules that govern the types of questions to be asked? Are junior investigators not supposed to pose challenging questions at conference events? If ever there was a moment to utilize the protection provided by academic freedom of speech, this was surely that moment. Instead, the crowd sat in silence, "socialized into particular practices...internalizing proper academic styles and conventions, accepting them as normal" (Bauder, 2006a, 673, 675).

My main purpose in offering these reflections about corporate sponsorship and conference speakers is to engage critically with the process of socialization and rethink existing academic practices (Bauder 2006a). Bauder suggests that part of the reason we embrace problematic academic conventions in geography is because complacency is socially and professionally reproduced and rewarded. The unwritten rules are set by those deeply entrenched in the system, but junior faculty and graduate students are important potential agents for change. When we stop questioning the rules, opting instead to accept them as the only proper path to personal career advancement, we miss an opportunity to create new potential futures for our discipline.

My experience at the *REP III* conference serves as an example of how graduate students and early academics in our discipline learn to perform a particular role and conform to a particular set of practices. In this case, I *learned* not to actively confront high-profile invited guests, and I *learned* not to question the presence of a prominent corporate sponsor. I have read many of the calls from those demanding a more relevant geography, and I think there are many among us who embrace the *principle*. We must also, however, embrace the *practice*. The practice I refer to is active engagement with those habits and conventions from within and outside of our academic field that serve to reward those who acquiesce and punish those who question accepted rules of order. In observing my senior colleagues' unwillingness to engage with a controversial conference speaker, I *learned* that, while we can debate serious and meaningful issues amongst ourselves, we should not discuss such things with invited guests. Civility remains a cornerstone of academic discourse, but I don't think this should prevent us from

questioning modes of power or challenging institutionalized behaviors, such as quiet deference, when the opportunity arises. In the months following the *REP III*, I spoke with several other attendees who shared my concerns about the circumstances I describe.

A sustained public examination of conferences as sites of professional reproduction would benefit our discipline. Blumen and Bar-Gal characterize the conference as “an arena where power relations represent themselves in various ways” (2006, 351). Are there rules of engagement that we as a community of geographers have made for ourselves? If so, do they need to be adjusted, abolished, or tweaked? I think that most would agree that conferences are valuable spaces of debate, discussion, and academic contestation, but the unwritten rules of conference participation are difficult to identify.

Each educational institution ‘instructs’ its own graduate students and junior faculty on proper behavior at conferences, either explicitly or, more often, by example. Most direct instruction is devoted to the presentation of conference papers: meeting the submission deadline, turning up at the right room, preparing the presentation before the session, and answering questions from the audience (see McAleer and Oxley, 2002). Socialization on how to act as a conference *participant*, however, occurs when inexperienced participants observe how those with more experience act. For early-career geographers, behavior is perhaps shaped by a state of ‘liminality’ (Menjivar, 2000); they have not yet been granted full citizenship into the ‘nation’ of geographers, and so much of their behavior is tempered by the understanding that their temporary ‘visa’ could be revoked at any time. Like other ‘guest workers’, they may be more cautious about defying social norms and customs. Graduate students, in particular, utilize the conference as a space for job seeking, networking, and learning.

Reflective Conclusion

I cannot offer reliable insight into why nobody else challenged the conference speaker or *bp*'s corporate sponsorship, but I will conclude by attempting to explain how the forces of professional reproduction tempered my own behavior. There are three reasons why I didn't challenge the conference speaker or question the corporate sponsor. First, I conformed to feelings of deference to senior colleagues, according to the logic that they are more likely to have deeper understandings of how and why particular speakers and conference sponsors are chosen. I thought they would be able to pose more well-formed and thoughtful questions. Secondly, I was unfamiliar with the rules of engagement. Is it appropriate to pose a difficult question to an invited speaker in an audience full of my peers? Can a question be preceded by comments, or should the question be succinct and direct? To whom should concerns about a conference sponsor be addressed? I was fearful of violating unwritten conventions with which I was unfamiliar. The third explanation is largely pragmatic. As a job seeker and author,

I was acutely aware that some audience members (journal editors, peer reviewers, grant committee members, department chairs, members of hiring committees) may have some influence over my own prospective career path. I worried about the prospect of submitting an application or proposal to someone who may remember me as the person who embarrassed a prominent speaker or complained too brashly about a corporate sponsor. Some might view such things positively, but others might judge me as too individualistic or unwilling to “play by the rules of the game” (Bauder, 2006a, 674). Weighing the risks between critical engagement and personal career development, I (like many) chose the latter.

While I didn’t understand the inaction of my colleagues, I inherently (at least temporarily) internalized this practice as part of the *habitus* of performing geography (Bourdieu, 2002; Castree, 2000; Bauder 2006a). In so doing, I simultaneously emulated and reinforced the unwritten practice of silence and deference. Many early career geographers are encouraged to use the conference as a site for career enhancement, for networking, and for presenting their research to their peers. Such purposes are clearly positive and necessary, but conferences also present rare opportunities for serious face-to-face contestation and critical engagement—opportunities that are sometimes squandered. My experience serves as an example to demonstrate how early career geographers learn to perform, or in some cases *not* to perform, geography.

I think we have a responsibility to question all forms of authority, including invited conference speakers and corporate sponsors whose neoliberal activities contrast with our own critical/theoretical positions. However, the influence of professional reproduction and institutional hierarchy can be overwhelming to early-career academics. As membership numbers and the status of the AAG have increased, we have witnessed participation by a larger number of guests, corporate sponsors, exhibitors, and prolific individuals from outside of our discipline. The AAG Meeting in Boston, for example, welcomed Jeffrey Sachs and Noam Chomsky as invited speakers. High profile guests generate more visibility and recognition for our discipline, but as this intervention demonstrates they may also affect the way in which we interact with, *learn from*, and socially produce one another. Likewise, our increasing numbers and status undoubtedly attract corporate sponsors seeking to influence more than just our individual buying decisions. As such, I assert that a debate about the roles of academic capitalism and professional reproduction at the site of academic conferences is essential to maintaining and furthering geography’s identity as a critical and active discipline.

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