



PROJECT MUSE®

Dr. Karl W. Butzer: Recipient of 2002 Preston E. James
Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award

Karl H. Offen

Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 2, Number 1, 2003, pp.
125-127 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2004.0011>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/174025>

Dr. Karl W. Butzer: Recipient of 2002 Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award

Karl Offen



In 1984, when Karl Butzer left the University of Chicago to take an endowed Chair position at the University of Texas at Austin, he was one of the world's pre-eminent historical cultural ecologists working in the Old World. The academic move facilitated a new research agenda: the study of the impact of Spain on Mexico. Traveling to Mexico for the first time in the Fall of 1985, Karl could see that he had made an exciting decision. Word has it that by the time Karl saw the Cathedral and plaza in Querétaro he was completely hooked. The rest is history and, of course, a whole lot of geography that runs the gamut from Holocene climatic change, landscape reconstruction and biological transfer, to cultural adaptation, religious syncretism and cross-cultural cartographies. Without question Karl's research in Mexico over the last 18 years has and continues to influence renowned stalwarts and fledgling students alike.

By now most geographers are familiar

with the life and career of Professor Butzer.² The rise of Nazism coincided with Karl's birth in Rhineland, Germany in 1934, and inspired his Catholic family to flee the country. The trauma of migration, family separation, persecution in England, incidents of prejudice in Canada, and an uncertain fate of family members left behind, are all experiences that have influenced Karl's outlook on life as well as his contemporary teaching and research agenda. After finishing his Master's degree in Meteorology at McGill University, Karl returned to Germany and completed a doctorate in Physical Geography at the University of Bonn in 1957. As if finishing a doctorate by the age of 23 was not enough, Karl celebrated his graduation by publishing six articles in that same year. The pace of research has hardly slowed since, as some 12 monographs and 240 odd articles and book chapters surely attest.

The multidisciplinary influence of Karl's work can be gauged by the honors he has accrued over the last four decades. These include accolades from the Royal Geographical Society, the Society for American Archaeology, the Geological Society of America, the Archaeological Institute of America, and many others. Karl is also a Fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation (1976), American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1984), the American Geographical Society (1985), and the National Academy of Sciences (1996). In 1997, Karl won CLAG's Carl O. Sauer award and, in 1999, the Cultural Ecology Specialty Group gave Karl its Robert McC. Netting award.

Karl's field and multidisciplinary research experiences outside the Americas underscore his contributions to the geography of Latin America. Before turning his attention to the New World, Karl carried out major field projects in Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Kenya, South Africa, Spain, and Ethiopia—where he was the early director of the team that discovered “Lucy.” To be sure Karl does not consider himself exclusively “a Latin Americanist,” but sees his work there as part of an ongoing project to examine human-environmental relations, particularly in arid and semi-arid environments. Most recently, Karl has also been working in Australia, Turkey and Nova Scotia, and he has been lately recalled to Egypt by scholars seeking his expertise.

Thirty years of research experience in the Old World gave Karl's work in Latin America a unique scholarly and personal temperament. These dispositions would include Karl's insistence on ignoring disciplinary boundaries; a passion for field work; a penchant for synthesis; astute observational skills; a constant dialogue with comparative places and experiences; a preference for local knowledge; attention to inter and intra-regional differences; and finally, a preference for nuanced arguments that raise new questions rather than rush to closure. Still, if I am not mistaken, it is Karl's research in the Sierra de Espadán of Valencia, Spain from 1980 to 1987, and the intellectual contributions of his life-long partner and most important collaborator, Elisabeth Butzer, that solidified the ethnographic-field-archival nexus that would become the Butzer hallmark in Latin America.

Karl's collected works on Latin America have built upon but significantly modified several research traditions within Latin American geography. These include concerns with diffusion, material culture, demography, and environmental change. But Karl has never been one to accept authority at face value, and in this sense one could view his entire work in Mexico as a challenge to conventional wisdom.

Karl has been involved in two major research projects in Mexico and innumerable smaller ones throughout Hispanic America. The smaller projects, some of which are known only as lectures or as manuscripts accompanying CLAG field trip guide books, include the bi-cultural artistry and spatial-temporal narratives embedded in the maps of the *Relaciones Geográficas*, and the diffusion of church architectural styles—particularly how churches embody old and new belief systems that serve as expressions of ethnic identity.

Karl's primary research, on the other hand, has sought to track the introduction and cultural adaptation of Iberian agrosystems to unfamiliar environments on the frontiers of colonial New Spain, and to see how these systems interacted with indigenous land uses in ways that led to environmental change. By chasing down the origin of Spanish immigrants and hence the agrosystems they brought with them, Karl offered a fresh perspective on how people managed livestock in the Americas. By choosing to examine areas outside the Mesoamerican agricultural sphere and marginal to the colonial enterprise, Karl was better able to reconstruct the regional environment before and after the conquest. Working closely with Elisabeth in the Bajío region of central Mexico, the Butzers parsed 40,000 manuscript pages of Spanish land grants and compared them with field reconnaissance to map out and reconstruct the who, what and where of natural and cultural landscapes of Central Mexico in the 16th century. This monumental achievement in both style and method profoundly influenced several Geography Ph.D.s completed at the University of Texas during the 1990s.

The vibrancy of Karl's research requires perpetual movement and change. Just as Karl established himself as a cultural and environmental historian of central Mexico, he promptly directed his research toward examining environmental change in the late Quaternary near the border of the Durango and Coahuila states in north-central Mexico. If

memory serves, departmental field trips introduced Karl to wetland deposits in La Laguna de Mayran, and a visit to a family friend in Bustamante, Nuevo León, sparked Elisabeth's interest in the 17th century settlement of Tlaxcala Indians in the region. The subsequent Laguna Project involved four of Karl's former doctoral students and set out to examine if past environments were as dry and bleak as they are today. Research involved reconstructing the alluvial record in the Rio Nazas watershed, as well as pollen sequences and ostracod analyses from several playa environments. Much of this work remains to be published, but preliminary findings spelled out at our last CLAG meeting in Austin and a subsequent CLAG field trip to the region, suggest that the last 10,000 years have witnessed much greater extremes of wet and dry conditions than one sees today, and that characteristic gullies of the contemporary landscapes were created in the pre-Hispanic period and unrelated to human activity. Combined, the corpus of the Butzers's research in Mexico forces us to view environmental change and contemporary landscapes in a much longer perspective. Overall, their work suggests a re-evaluation of the orthodoxy of environmental devastation associated with the Columbian Exchange.

Perhaps Karl's greatest influence on Latin American geography has been accomplished in the classroom. Always packed to capacity, and perpetually reworked, Karl's seminars are cerebral marathons of inspiring breadth and complexity that challenge students to understand cultural adaptation and change as a quintessentially social process of negotiation. Despite his own proclivities toward physical geography, Karl is well versed in the ebbs and flows of social theory debates. Once, after giving an impassioned account of Aztec community life, a student claimed "that Foucault had said exactly the same thing." Barely raising an eyebrow, Karl said something to the effect of "why are you surprised?" His intellectual influences have touched a wide range of

students, from geomorphologists and archaeologists to those of art and history. Six of the 11 Ph.D.s that Karl has supervised since coming to the University of Texas have been on Latin American topics, and he has had a weighty influence on numerous Latin Americanist graduate students supervised by other UT faculty. There is little question that those of us who took Karl's seminars teach our courses on Latin America differently than we would have otherwise.

For all these reasons and many more, I am proud to announce that the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers has awarded Karl W. Butzer, Raymond C. Dickson Centennial Professor of Liberal Arts in the Department of Geography at The University of Texas at Austin, the 2002 Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award. Felicidades!