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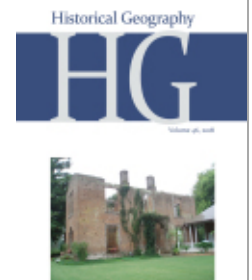
17th International Conference of Historical Geographers:
July 15–20, 2018, Warsaw, Poland

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Historical Geography, Volume 46, 2018, pp. 285-291 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hgo.2018.0034>



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17TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHERS

July 15–20, 2018, Warsaw, Poland

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Every three years, historical geographers from around the world gather to share their research, discuss the latest trends and debates in the discipline, and develop new and existing networks. Over the years, the International Conference of Historical Geographers (ICHG) has been hosted by countries around the world, including Canada, Australia, Israel, Japan, and most recently the UK in 2015. The 2018 conference took place in Warsaw, Poland, and was attended by four hundred delegates. Over five days, delegates took part in more than one hundred sessions, complemented by four keynote speakers, four mid-conference field trips, and a gala dinner. I left the conference feeling enthused and confident in the vibrancy and diversity of historical geography.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS: CELEBRATING THE BREADTH OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

The 17th International Conference of Historical Geographers began with delegates gathering at the Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences, in Warsaw's historic Old Town to listen to Professor Felix Driver's (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK) keynote titled "Biography and Geography: From the Margins to the Centre." Admitting an original sense of disdain for biography, Professor Driver went on to explain that he has since been won over by the approach, arguing that it allows us to ask new questions of topics originally thought to be well understood. Driver used the approach to shine a new light on the *Geographical Magazine*, the popular geography magazine, by tracing the biographies of

lesser-known individuals involved in the magazine's production during the 1930s and 1940s. He spoke convincingly about the need to understand the trajectories of individuals who contribute to institutions such as the *Geographical Magazine*.

For the rest of the conference, the venue moved to the Old Library at the University of Warsaw. The grand building, used in many guidebook photographs to represent the university, felt like a fitting venue for the celebration of historical geography. There were three other keynote speakers during the ICHG. Professor Karen M. Morin (Bucknell University, USA) gave a thought-provoking talk titled "Prisoners and Animals: An Historical Carceral Geography." Professor Morin's argument that the historical geographies of animals and the more-than-human have received limited scholarly attention raised some eyebrows in the audience; *Historical Animal Geographies* (2018), edited by Sharon Wilcox and Stephanie Rutherford, is just one recent example of an extensive body of work. However, Morin then went on to draw convincing connections between the treatment of prisoners and the treatment of animals through points of comparison such as death row/the slaughterhouse, the research testing laboratory, and solitary confinement/zoo cages. Her exploration of how and why the overlaps between human and animal incarceration are so numerous were both clear and provocative; it was the topic of many lunchtime discussions during the rest of the week.

Professor Humphrey Southall's (University of Portsmouth, UK) talk on "Spaces, Places, Features and Units: Web-enabling Historical Geography" explored a rapidly expanding field within historical geography: geosemantics and geographic information systems (GIS). On the basis that most historical data is textual rather than cartographic, and that GIS-based websites are generally impenetrable to search engines, he argued for a geosemantic rather than a geospatial approach to web-enabled historical geography. Using examples from his own practice—including the Vision of Britain web resource and the Changing Industrial Structure of Britain's Localities project—he explored the contributions that might be made by research teams, volunteers, and undergraduate students. His discussion of the UK impact agenda in relation to this topic was particularly thoughtful. As UK-based academics will be all too aware, impact—usually seen as a combination of the number of people affected by a piece of work or project and the significance of that effect—is now

a key element of the way the research within universities is assessed and valued. But as Southall argued, the former is easier to both achieve and prove than the latter, even when we know that web-based historical geography is engaging people. Impact is one of the key buzzwords in UK academia at the moment, yet Southall's talk demonstrated the need to avoid being so preoccupied with proving impact that we neglect to reflect on what it actually involves.

The final keynote of the week was given by Professor Diogo de Carvalho Cabral, from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. Cabral gave an engaging talk titled "Overwriting the Land: Alphabetic Literacy and Socio-Environmental Change in Early Brazil." The story of European imperialism is a familiar one to most historical geographers; the mechanisms of colonization and empire between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries have been extensively studied within the discipline. Cabral approached the topic from a new angle, however, exploring the role of literacy in the Portuguese "discovery" and colonization of Brazil. The talk covered multiple aspects of the colonization process, from the first moment land was spotted, through interactions with indigenous people and the claiming of land ownership, to colonial administration.

At the last ICHG in London, all of the keynote speakers were historians who acknowledged the influence of geography on their work. This time, all four of the keynotes were given by geographers. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the numerous connections and links between history and historical geography, it was nice to see some of the most prominent historical geographers celebrated as keynote speakers. In addition, the keynotes represented a range of national traditions in historical geography, namely, British, American, and Brazilian, as well as reflecting some of the key strands of the subdiscipline, including historical cultural geography; digital geographies, "big data," and GIS; and environmental history.

PAPERS AND POSTERS: CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

The conference sessions also embraced the diverse traditions of historical geography. The papers showcased some of the most recent research being conducted within historical geography, and there are a number of projects that I look forward to observing how they develop. As ever,

some papers coalesced into coherent sessions better than others. However, the conference organizers did a good job of curating sessions from individual papers, as well as facilitating sessions organized by delegates. Personal highlights included sessions on “Mobility and the Archive,” “(In)visible Architectures: Tracing Institutional Geographies,” “The Historical Geographies of Protest and Dissent,” and “Medieval Heritage: New Perspectives, New Actualisations.”

Some papers were particularly enjoyable: Katrina Navickas (University of Hertfordshire, UK) explored opposition to the construction of the UK Super Grid in the 1950s to examine how different groups and classes value different landscapes; Briony McDonagh (University of Hull, UK) gave an engaging paper on the relationship between gender and conflict over common land in the sixteenth century, which demonstrated just how much can be gained from the close analysis of underutilized archival sources; and Benjamin Thorpe’s (University of Nottingham, UK) fascinating paper on “trophy archives” spoke to wider concerns about the history and materiality of archives themselves (the archives of the Pan-European Union having been moved around Europe several times during World War II before coming to rest in Russia). Finally, Carolyn Gibbeson (Sheffield Hallam University, UK) explored the different ways that property developers engage with the history of former asylums when redeveloping the sites for housing, raising some interesting questions about how the past is used—or ignored—for contemporary economic gain.

Alongside the paper sessions were more than fifty posters that also showcased the diversity within the discipline. There were two poster competitions, one judged by Routledge and one voted for by the conference delegates. Both competitions were won by Patricia Aranha (Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil) and her poster titled “Feminine Geographies: Social Adequacy and Gender Role on the Production of Brazilian Geographical Knowledge.” Many of the posters were well designed, however, and conveyed their contents clearly and succinctly.

FIELD TRIPS: GETTING TO KNOW PLACES AND PEOPLE

It is traditional within the ICHG for organizers to leave the middle day of the conference free of scheduled sessions and instead arrange a number of field trips designed to help delegates explore historical geogra-

phies in and around the host city. In Warsaw there were four such field trips: Warsaw's urban development; the Łódź textile district; the eastern boundary of Latin Europe; and Warsaw's Jewish history. I attended the eastern boundary of Latin Europe trip, a 15-hour epic that looked at minority religious groups in Poland's eastern border regions. We visited a synagogue in Tykocin, which survived World War II as a weapons store and is now being restored as a museum; a Polish Orthodox monastery in Supraśl, which was destroyed during the war but is now being rebuilt; and a Tartar mosque and cemetery in Kruszyniany, where there has been a Tartar Muslim community since the sixteenth century. It was a long day, but really enjoyable; it was nice to get out of the city and learn more about the history of Poland's diverse religious communities.

Every delegate I spoke to who went on a field trip thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The field trips are an essential part of what makes the ICHG such a friendly, engaging conference. They give delegates the chance to get away from the seminar rooms and formal conference sessions for a while and explore the host city; very often when attending an academic conference all you see is the train station or airport, your hotel room, and the university campus. As a general rule, geographers are interested in getting to know different places a bit better than that, and the field trips provide a unique opportunity to learn from local experts. They also provide the opportunity to get to know other delegates outside of the formal academic settings, which many people find intimidating. The field trips encourage delegates to get to know each other, as well as the local geography.

THE HIDDEN VOICES OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

There were several themes that recurred throughout the conference. The most significant was giving prominence to "hidden" voices and minority groups, both within the subjects we study and how we practice and (re)produce historical geography as a subdiscipline. There has been a focus on researching "hidden histories" in the archives within historical geography for at least a decade; the Hidden Histories of Exploration project, which worked with the collections of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) in 2009, is perhaps the best-known example of such an endeavor. In his keynote in Warsaw, Professor Driver argued that the voices and experiences of groups such as indigenous people, women,

and other minorities are “partially hidden” in the archive rather than being completely untraceable. With creativity and patience, it is possible to access their stories. There was plenty of evidence at the ICHG that this kind of creative, patient work is being done, with papers on women, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous people, the mentally ill, and LGBTQ+ communities.

The second way in which historical geography is striving to be more inclusive is through the ways we practice the discipline itself. The ICHG is an international conference, and although dominated by Anglo-American scholars, other national traditions of historical geography were represented, including Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Brazilian, and Chinese. There were two sessions on the “Global Histories of Geography, 1930–1990,” which argued for the need to understand how geography has been studied and performed around the world, not just in a few of the most prominent countries. Most of the papers in these sessions were about European geographical practices, but the acknowledgment that historical geography needs to broaden its outlook is a step in the right direction.

As always, the host of the next ICHG is decided—or approved, depending on the number of cities who put themselves forward—by the current conference delegates. Scholars in Rio de Janeiro have offered to host the 18th ICHG, in 2021, and the offer was accepted by delegates in Warsaw. During the discussion of their proposal, the issue of language was discussed in the context of making the ICHG accessible to non-Anglo-American scholars. The ICHG has always been conducted in English, but a number of possible alternatives were discussed, including real-time translators for keynote speakers and multilingual papers with English slides. Whilst it is unlikely that the power imbalances stemming from English being the language of choice for international academia will ever be fully resolved, it is important to mitigate them as far as possible.

CONCLUSION: SEE YOU IN RIO!

The International Conference of Historical Geographers combines many of the strengths of large, international conferences and smaller, more specific conferences and symposiums. It brings together different academic cultures and approaches, but is also friendly and personal.

Every three years, the conference acts as a thermometer for historical geography, allowing us to assess the general health of the subdiscipline by providing an overview of what topics are being researched, which methods are being used, and what historical geographers consider to be important. After the conference in Warsaw, it is hard to deny that historical geography is in fine health. It is a vibrant, broad, and expanding field that I am confident will continue to develop. I am sure that when we next take the temperature of historical geography in Rio de Janeiro in 2021, it will only have gotten stronger.