

## 6

# The International Critical Geography Group: Forbidden Optimism?

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1999. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18, 379-382.<sup>1</sup>

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At the end of the fulcrum year of 1989 Casper W. Weinberger, Reagan's ex-secretary of Defence, rejoiced over the “enormously heartening, daily rejection of Communism” in Eastern Europe and issued an appeal (Weinberger, 1989). As publisher of the business magazine *Forbes*, which subtitles itself “Capitalist Tool,” Weinberger admonished his readers that the United States could “profit in every sense of the word” from these events, but that it all “starts with geography” (Weinberger, 1989). Less than a decade later, 1997 proved to be as pivotal as 1989 – this time economically more than politically – as the neo-liberal globalization from which Weinberger eagerly sought to profit showed the first signs of fatal weakness. Overproduction in Asia after an extraordinary 30-year industrial revolution transformed with lightening efficiency into a global stock market meltdown. But in geographical circles, 1997 may turn out to be significant for other reasons: it was also the year in which a very different vision of global geography was launched, one which puts a radical twist on Weinberger’s assertion of the importance of geography.

In August 1997 approximately 300 geographers, activists and academics from 30 different countries and five continents came together in Vancouver for the Inaugural International Conference on Critical Geography organized by faculty and graduate students at Simon Fraser and the University of British Columbia. Many countries already have a long tradition of organized critical geography – including Japan, the Nordic countries, South Korea, and more recently the United Kingdom – whereas others also claim significant contingents of critical geographers – Mexico, Canada, Italy, Brazil, Spain, the USA, Australia, France, India, South Africa, and

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many others. If there was a single galvanizing optimism at the polyglot and eclectic Vancouver conference it was that the time is ripe to build on these many national political seeds and to fashion an international grouping of geographers committed to a critical and geographical response to the global and local events that are now reshaping our worlds.

This is a political optimism quite different from that of contemporary globalization discourses. Establishment visions of globalization generally herald “the end of geography” as an economic variable; theirs is a world “beyond” geography rather than a world in which geography is again and again manifested in new and changing forms. Local economies and cultures are to be bound into global networks in such a way that particularisms can and should be overcome to facilitate the efficient flow of capital. Whether benign or malignant, these particularisms are always subject to cultural, political, economic, and ultimately even military flattening. Where geographical difference is increasingly catered in pre-packaged form, the message is that the spatial configurations of race and gender, sexuality and class, nationality and religion are either irrelevant or inimical to global oneness, as are the social theory and political activism that have brought them to the forefront. And yet the defense and assertion of local difference is at times equally violent and reactionary: Serb genocide in the 1990s and the NATO response in Kosovo play out both sides of this dynamic. Globalization is not beyond geography but is instead an intensely geographical project.

Our ambition for an International Critical Geography (ICG) is to express an alternative social dialectic of global and local, while affirming the importance of scale in our attempts to connect and organize politically. The need and desire to reach across separated contexts should not deflect our attention from the fact that geographical difference is expressed at all levels, from the interpersonal to the institutional, from the national to the international, and everywhere in between. If poststructuralism and identity politics have highlighted and acted upon smaller geographies through which subjects are made and individual perspectives take shape, our task is to develop a political practice that is rooted in these separate locations and yet remains relational and wide-ranging. We understand that geography determines the possibilities *as well as* the limitations of an international critical movement; our aspirations are for a grounded approach to political change, therefore our critical practice is also a self-reflexive one. It addresses the world’s geographical expression at its core, that is, in the various situated perspectives that we bring to our global, geographical ambition. Our purpose is to develop new theoretical tools and revivify the political activism that makes such an ambition a reality.

The Vancouver conference was an inspiring beginning toward these goals. It kindled numerous new connections between people, ideas and movements and opened up a dialogue that has grown in different directions. Much of the enthusiasm about the conference was expressed in a lively series of editorials, letters and responses published in this journal [*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*], which documented ways in which the event touched, engaged and at times frustrated some

participants (Katz, 1998). Despite the breadth of representation, most attendees came from a few countries in Europe and North America. This and other shortcomings raised crucial questions and concerns. How do we each speak from our particular, situated places while seeking to build a collective political vision? How do we include the struggles of people not yet represented in the ICG but that we deem vital for success? How do we bridge the gap between academia and activism when most of us dwell in the former but aspire to the latter? Is academic activism enough? What forms does it take through teaching? As for the linguistic difficulties of communicating in many languages, do we accept English as the linguistic default? More prosaically, how do we eschew the academic professionalism of conference programming, organization building, and personal contacts that is often internalized as a sine qua non of a 1990s academic career? What do the imaginative alternatives look like? Furthermore, how do we do this while at the same time pursuing the thoroughly professional sources of travel funding and conference support that will allow unfunded critical geographers to participate in a more egalitarian way? Can we expand our ranks not just among geographers and academics but also among activists?

An ICG steering committee of 16 people was formed at the Vancouver conference in order to build around these issues and continue the work already started. We have drafted an ICG Statement of Purpose and, in addition to e-mail deliberations, the steering committee has held meetings in Honolulu, Mexico City and Venice. Byung-Doo Choi and other South Korean colleagues and comrades organized a very successful regional conference – [the East Asian Regional Conference on Alternative Geography in Kjongju and Taegu in January 1999](#) – and plans are underway for a Second International Critical Geography Conference in South Korea in August 2000, to be held before the International Geographical Congress in Seoul. Fujio Mizuoka has established an e-mail list ([icgg-ml@econgeog.misc.hit-u.ac.jp](mailto:icgg-ml@econgeog.misc.hit-u.ac.jp)) for the purpose of organizing conferences, political events, and other relevant forms of action, as well as to discuss more general issues regarding an international critical geography.

Following these steps, one immediate task seems to be imposing itself. Most of us have so far resisted trying to outline what a “critical” geography might stand for, but the benefits of nondefinition can also have debilitating effects that flow from a lack of focus. It seems vital now to have that discussion. We append the ICG statement of purpose here in order to help stimulate a political and intellectual discussion about critical geography, and we will post this editorial to the [International Critical Geography Group](#) (ICGG) list simultaneously with its paper publication.<sup>2</sup> This document represents the collective effort of the steering committee; it is a work in progress and should be used as a sounding board to start shaping our approach, at the same time as we reflect on it. As a result of the Mexico City steering-committee meeting, Latin American colleagues are already revising the text.

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<sup>2</sup> Editors’ Note: The ICGG’s website features translations of the ICG Statement of Purpose in [French](#), [German](#) and [Japanese](#).

The statement of purpose is a deliberately polemical call to action and it is perhaps appropriate to preface it with a few more general comments. As we see it, the purpose of the ICGG is to encourage research and activism that supports, reports on, and contributes to political struggles seeking egalitarian social transformation and justice. This should not be interpreted as an indiscriminate endorsement of all political struggles but rather an attachment to those movements and struggles which are capable in victory, or even in defeat, of expanding political consciousness and organization toward the goal of social transformation. These struggles may be based on movements definitively rooted in gender or class, race or sexuality, but always make the connections across social and spatial differences. Or they may have a broader focus as in anti-imperialist, antirepression or environmental justice movements. What unites them is the political demand for and commitment to egalitarian social change, globally and locally. If we have learned anew in the last decades of the 20th century that political activism is often the font of theory, the latter is equally a vital part of these struggles, an indispensable basis for political organizing. We understand that social theory cannot be divorced from prescription, nor critique from political action, and seek to reconfirm how the two necessarily overlap in the same realm.

Finally, existing national geographical societies are increasingly captured by a corporate notion of the discipline's future that aligns with rather than challenges a global neoliberalism. Consequential as they may be for academic careers, these national societies are less and less amenable to the kind of oppositional organizing implied by an international critical geography; an ICG group, network or organization provides a parallel as well as an alternative. The building of an international critical geography and the political movements with which it allies itself is not a short term project, but it is a necessary one. This is the most ambitious of geographies; it rests on the belief that the changing realities we call 'globalization' can also brace a political vision of peace, equality and justice. Such a project is clearly adverse to Weinberger's appeal to "bring back geography," and to the rash optimism that accompanies it. Yet, much as his geo-strategic view of the world expresses the very power we oppose, Weinberger was dead right that geography matters to politics. What remains to develop and assert within the ICGG is our own vision of an 'applied' geography.

## **References**

- Katz, Cindi. 1998. Lost and found in the posts: Addressing critical human geography. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16, 257-78.
- Weinberger, Caspar. 1989. Bring back Geography, *Forbes*, 25 December, p. 31.

## Statement of Purpose

### *A World to Win!*

The International Critical Geography Group (ICGG) is comprised of geographers and non-geographers committed to developing the theory and practice necessary for combating social exploitation and oppression. We have formed this international association to provide an alternative to the increasingly institutionalised and corporate culture of universities. We believe that a ‘critical’ practice of our discipline can be a political tool for the remaking of local and global geographies into a more equal world.

- We are CRITICAL because we demand and fight for social change aimed at dismantling prevalent systems of capitalist exploitation; oppression on the basis of gender, race and sexual preference; imperialism, neo-liberalism, national aggression and environmental destruction.
- We are CRITICAL because we refuse the self-imposed isolation of much academic research, believing that social science belongs to the people and not the increasingly corporate universities.
- We are CRITICAL because we seek to build a society that exalts differences, and yet does not limit social and economic prospects on the basis of them.
- We are CRITICAL because in opposing existing systems that defy human rights, we join with existing social movements outside the academy that are aimed at social change.
- We are INTERNATIONAL because oppression obeys no national boundaries; indeed, the hasty celebration of transnationalism and globalisation often serves to protect privilege and expand dominant systems of exploitation.
- We are INTERNATIONAL because we are differently located in terms of geography, race, class, gender, sexuality. Our privilege and access to various resources is unequal. We are committed to taking responsibility for these inequalities, and facilitating the inclusion of all voices in our debates and actions.
- We are INTERNATIONAL because we want the world.
- We are critical and internationalist as geographers because the discipline has long served colonial, imperial and nationalist ends, generating the ideological discourses that help to naturalise social inequality. We recognise the ties between knowledge and power and are committed to unmasking them. We work as geographers because we believe that knowing the world in its detail and its geographical

differences, from the local to the global scale, is a vital key to confronting political power.

The ICGG seeks to include – in a non-hierarchical way – theorists, activists and researchers throughout the world who identify with this broad commitment to socio-geographical change. We will meet regularly at rotating venues which are envisioned less as academic conferences than as workshops using widely varied formats. We strongly encourage regional and local organisation of workshops, conferences and groups affiliated with the ICGG as vital building blocks of an international agenda. Inreach of members toward their own academic and activist community is as important as outreach toward the larger ICGG forum.

Therefore, our slogan, “A world to win,” has a triple meaning. It expresses our political ambition in geographical terms; it indicates the ‘critical’ yet global breadth of that ambition; and it makes clear that changing the world requires a lot of work, but that victory is there for the winning.