



**REPORTS FROM THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL  
CONFERENCE OF CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY**

**The Many Wor(l)ds of Difference  
and Dissent**

**Luiza Bialasiewicz**

Department of Geography, University of Durham, Durham, UK;  
luiza.bialasiewicz@durham.ac.uk

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For five days in June 2002, the Centre for Regional Studies in the Hungarian town of Békéscsaba hosted the conference of the International Critical Geography Group (ICGG). The meeting in Hungary was the third conference of the ICGG, following the inaugural meeting in Vancouver, Canada in the summer of 1997 and the second conference held in 2000 in Taegu, South Korea. The meeting brought together almost 180 participants from over 40 different countries from across the world. In many ways, the Hungarian conference was the most “international” of the three International Conference of Critical Geography (ICCG) meetings held thus far, with the greatest number and variety of participants from outside of the Anglo-American world and its direct peripheries. The participation of scholars from across the world was facilitated by *Antipode* and Blackwell Publishers, who generously contributed to a scholarship fund that allowed us to fully cover the travel and conference costs of three participants: Huang Li, a research fellow at the Institute of Urban and Regional Studies, East China Normal University, People’s Republic of China; Jeronimo Montero, a postgraduate student at the Department of Geography, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina; and Ganna Gerasymenko, a postgraduate student at the National Academy of Sciences, Ukraine. The remainder of the funds, along with an endowment from the Social and Cultural Geography Research Group of the Royal Geography Society/Institute of British Geographers (RGS/IBG), allowed us to offer smaller grants to five other applicants from Brazil, India, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

One of the key aims of the ICGG since its inception has been to open up the boundaries of academic geography, an aim articulated within the group’s explicit focus on research and activism that contributes to and supports egalitarian social transformation and justice

around the world, but also in its commitment to the creation of a geographical community able to transcend the walls both *between* and *within* national geographical academies. Thus, “internationalisation” of the ICGG’s membership has been only part of its goal. Ever since the Vancouver meeting, there has been an ongoing debate within the group about how best to “open” up its organisational structure and, above all, how to allow for opportunities for critical interaction and debate that would go beyond the model of institutionalised national academic conferences—how to create truly inclusive meeting spaces (for a history of these debates, see Desbiens and Smith 1999; Katz 1998; Painter’s [2002] opening address at the Békéscsaba conference).

An important first step was to try to move away from the traditional conference format of formal read-paper sessions that, it was strongly felt, were not at all conducive to an open and “critical” debate and tended to reproduce the boundaries—and power dynamics—of national academies. The Hungarian conference was an experiment in this direction. With input from the group, the organising committee—composed of Claudio Minca, Joe Painter, Judit Timár and myself—identified eight key “themes” for discussion, each led by one or two convenors responsible for organising sessions in the theme. It was then up to the theme leaders to come up with creative ways of bringing participants together and finding new modes of debate and discussion. The sessions that were born of this attempt were of a surprising variety: from panel debates and roundtable discussions to workshops, reading groups and film screenings, as well as “traditional” paper sessions.<sup>1</sup>

Theme 1 (led by Lawrence Berg and Blanca Ramirez) focused on “Critical Geographical Praxis” and provided, in many ways, a running thread of discussions throughout the meeting about the varied meanings of being critical geographers across different national and academic contexts. The theme’s opening session was dedicated to a panel debate on “The Spaces of Critical Geography” that raised many of the questions that would shape debates throughout the five days of the meeting. The theme also featured two open workshops on “Alternative Spaces of Critical Geography”, with interventions from participants from different national and academic contexts, as well as two reading group discussions, one dedicated to “Anglo-American Hegemony and Writing the World” and the other to “The Spaces of Latin American Critical Geography”.

Theme 2 (led by Anke Struever and Uli Best) was devoted to “Borders, Migrations and Displacement”. Within a variety of session formats, this theme looked to the question of borders and border discourses in today’s world, from international migration questions and the policing of “restless populations” to national and European discourses of integration and exclusion. The question of regional geopolitics and the construction of new regional spaces was tackled in a

paper session featuring presentations focusing on borders and border discourses in South and East Asia; another session (co-organised with the “Geopolitics of Europe” theme) looked to the emergence of new regional geographies and regional(ist) ideologies in Europe. There were also workshops devoted to activism on border and migration issues, including a screening of a film on the campaign against the deportation of Kurds in Germany. A special panel session was dedicated to reactionary political constellations and new border rhetorics emergent after September 11.

Theme 3 (led by Scott Kirsch and Altha Cravey) looked to issues concerned with “Power, Territory and Transnationality”. Its focus lay with the changing geographies of transnationalism and globalisation and the new spaces of the global flows of power and capital. Alongside sessions dedicated to the changing face of cities in the globalising world were debates on the role of public space, urban resistance movements, and transformations in the meanings of urban democracy. Other discussions focused on the rhetorics of globalisation and neoliberalism around the world. A special roundtable discussion was dedicated to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s book, *Empire*.

Theme 4 (led by Caroline Desbiens and Neil Smith) was devoted to the “Geographies of Nature”. Paper sessions focused on questions of political ecology and green politics as well as representations of nature and landscape as practices of cultural production. Discussions were also devoted to environmental conflicts and hazards and the ways in which nature can be appropriated as a locus of resistance, looking to examples ranging from Japan to Italy. A special roundtable debate examined the role of social theory in addressing nature-society issues in geography.

Like the “Critical Geographical Praxis” workshops, Theme 5—devoted to “People’s Geographies” (led by Don Mitchell and Richard van Deusen)—provided a running thread of sessions throughout the meeting focusing on the ways in which critical geography could reach out beyond the academy in a variety of different contexts. The sessions aimed to continue some of the discussions begun at the Taegu conference and to build upon the work of the People’s Geography Project in the United States. Within a variety of workshop and paper sessions, participants discussed different ways of “telling” critical geographies within and outside the academy, as well as the ways in which radical geographies could be incorporated into school and university curricula. Several sessions looked to the problematic of developing “people’s geographies” around the world and new modes of transnational solidarity. A special panel session focused on the reactions to September 11 in the United States.

Theme 6 (led by Sue Ruddick) was devoted to “Spaces of Difference: Feminist, Postcolonial and Embodied Geographies”. Sessions within this theme addressed the geographies and politics of feminism

in a variety of national and academic contexts, from Japan to the Ukraine. A paper session was devoted to the spatialisation of difference, from the gendering of urban spaces to exclusivist constructions of rural landscapes. The theme was opened with a workshop on “Putting Post-colonialism into Practice within Critical Geography”.

Theme 7 (led by myself and Fujio Mizuoka) looked to the “Geopolitics of Europe”, focusing on emerging geopolitical divides in Europe and the politics and geopolitics of European integration. Several sessions were devoted to the question of European Union (EU) enlargement and the future of the European project, looking to the imaginary geographies of European belonging (both within and outside the EU15), as well as the new geopolitical confines being traced by the borders of EU and NATO membership. A paper session focused upon the new geographical narratives of Eastern and Central Europe, looking to the ways in which representations of the past are being mobilised to “place” the postsocialist states—from the Baltic republics to the Balkans—within the new Europe.

The “question of Europe” was also the focus of the conference’s plenary lecture given by Ash Amin, entitled “Multiethnicity and the Idea of Europe”. Amin’s provocative talk spoke of the need for a new imaginary for the European project, able to transcend the exclusivist ideal of a Christian Enlightenment Europe but, at the same time, to incorporate its ethos of empathy, acceptance and solidarity. Amin challenged prevailing definitions of “Europeanness” based within essentialised myths of belonging, tracing the contours of a possible European *demos* based within a fundamental acceptance and recognition of the Other, of her/his right to presence and right to belonging in the much-lauded “common European home”. The right to define the meaning of Europe—to define the boundaries of European belonging, to define what the European project is to become—is a critical issue driving political debates across the continent, within both the EU15 and the candidate countries slated for future admission into the EU, as discussions within many of the sessions at the conference confirmed. Indeed, Amin’s comments and the heated debate that followed spoke to the heavy political and emotional weight of this issue. Can Europe transcend its institutionalised/bureaucratized form and become a new locus for critical praxis? Can we even imagine other common European political spaces beyond those regimented within the structures of European Union? And, above all, can the European project move beyond the unabashedly neoliberal socioeconomic goals upon which the EU was founded to promote a new “transnational ideal of social justice, belonging and cultural tolerance” (Amin 2002:14)?

Sessions in the eighth and final theme (led by Byung-Doo Choi and Anders Lund Hansen) were devoted to “Critical Political Economies: Cities, Regions and the International Economy”. Presentations

focused on the varied geographies of globalisation across the world, looking to current processes of urban and regional change in connection with economic and cultural internationalisation and “transnational urbanism”. Discussions centred on the place of world-cities and the strategies and rhetorics of urban development around the globe, as well as emergent shifts in urban politics. A paper session was also devoted to the geographies of segregation and economic polarisation and the ways in which these find different expression in different national and regional contexts, drawing on presentations ranging from Brazil to South Korea to Romania. A series of sessions co-organised with the “Geopolitics of Europe” theme addressed the question of “transitions” from state socialism, with papers devoted to both “transition discourses”—specifying new roles for the local as well as national states—and the varying national and regional experiences of the road to free-market capitalism. A special panel discussion brought together participants from East Asia and Eastern and Central Europe to comment on the continuities and differences between “transition” experiences and rhetorics in the two regions.

### **Thematic Divides, Theoretical Walls?**

Judging from participants’ reactions, these thematic divisions seemed to work quite well. The different groupings gave space to a diversity of interests, while at the same time providing a minimum of continuity *within* the themes to allow for ongoing discussion and debate (indeed, some of the “communities” that formed around each theme initiated a dialogue long before the start of the conference, facilitated through email exchanges, online reading lists, and even joint travel plans to Békéscsaba in some cases). Although many participants tended to follow sessions in “their” theme, most people ended up attending sessions and discussions across all themes.

One of our worries before the start of the conference was that a “geographical clustering” of participants would occur within the sessions, as had happened to some extent in Vancouver and Taegu. The “federal” organisation structure put into place this time gave the theme coordinators (rather than session organisers) the task of putting together sessions, with explicit instructions to avoid sessions made up of all-Americans, Germans, Koreans, and so on or—worse yet—sessions made up of members of the same university department. Although the sessions ended up being much more heterogeneous this time around, the concern about “clustering” was not unjustified (although it was expressed in a slightly different fashion than at the two previous meetings). While we managed to avoid a concentration of same-country academics within the individual sessions, some of the themes ended up being highly “regionalised”. The “Geopolitics of Europe” and “Critical Political Economies” themes, in particular, were

overwhelmingly made up of participants from outside the Anglophone academic world. The great majority of the Eastern and Central European participants were also concentrated within these two themes.

To some extent, this “clustering” reflected differences in research interests: in Eastern and Central Europe, the progress of European integration and the new urban and regional geographies of the transition are certainly questions of prime political and economic and, therefore, academic importance. But it would be erroneous to attribute the “clustering” to such “practical” considerations alone. The focus on these issues—rather than postcolonial or identity politics or questions of radical ecology and feminism—calls for a reflection, above all, about the *context* of this conference. It speaks to the need for a deeper reflection on the meanings of a critical geographical praxis in postsocialist Hungary, as well as on the place of Central and Eastern European geographies and geographers in the post-1989 period more broadly. The importance of context formed a running emphasis throughout the conference, from Minca’s opening address, “Critical Peripheries”, to the introductory session of the “Critical Geographical Praxis” theme, at which panellists Maria Dolors Garcia-Ramon, Lawrence Berg, Kirsten Simonsen, Dina Vaiou, Blanca Ramirez, Sheila Hones, Saraswati Raju and our Hungarian host Judit Timár all made a plea for paying attention to the very varied contexts—national, political, institutional—that shape us as critical academics, contexts that determine not only our “realms of possibilities”, our realms of action as critical thinkers, but also the languages and strategies within which such critiques are articulated, as well as the “targets” of our critical praxis.

Timár’s opening address on the inaugural evening of the meeting (entitled “Lessons from Postsocialism: ‘What’s Left for Emerging Critical Geography To Do in Hungary?’”) spoke to just this issue, recalling both the persistent legacies of state socialism and the new “walls”—academic, economic, linguistic—that continue to shape interaction between the (ex) “East” and “West”. In her reflections, Timár reminded those present that although geographical research in post-1989 Eastern and Central Europe may have been freed of the restraints of state socialism, the “transition” has brought with it new dogmas and new ideological—and practical—requisites. In today’s Hungary, as across the region, any brand of “leftism” continues to be discredited by its association with state socialism—“experienced either as a failure or looked at as the ‘enemy’”—and the academic advocates of egalitarian social change continue to be “treated with suspicion” (Timár 2002:2). The emergence and consolidation of neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies across the region has also expressed itself in a concurrent “economisation” of social-scientific research. The free-marketisation



of the academy now prizes “applied geographical research ... prioritising the kind of technical and practical knowledge (and training) that is most useful to state companies and private businesses—most visibly, GIS and spatial analysis” (Timár 2002:8). Philosophical and political “neutrality” is, of course, an unwritten rule. This trend is particularly troubling, for with the dismantling of academies and institutes that followed 1989 and the now almost pervasive reliance of such scholarly institutions on outside funding, “collaboration” with the state as well as the private sector is now an unavoidable necessity for most Eastern and Central European geographers. As several of the geographers present from Hungary, Poland and Romania remarked during the course of the conference, exercising “radical praxis” in such conditions is not easy.

Timár’s address served as an important reminder to all of us not to take for granted a singular definition of critical thought and action, speaking to one of the driving concerns of the ICGG since its inception: how to create an international critical geography movement able to work towards a common goal while respecting and reflecting the different needs, different possibilities and even different understandings of what it means to be a critical geographer across diverse contexts.

This very question formed the focus of the closing debate of the conference. Although most of the participants felt that the discussions and debates of the previous days had been productive and stimulating, some also expressed unease with what, it was felt, were prevailing “criteria” for a “truly” critical geography: criteria that derived from a singular set of “critical” theories and praxes now dominant (and taken for granted) in the Anglophone academies. Several participants at the meeting noted, for example, that at this “critical” meeting there was no talk of hunger and hardly any attention paid to the issue of global poverty. “Not fashionable topics in the international critical academy?” they asked.

The question of what “properly” constitutes “critical theory” was, indeed, a heated one throughout the conference. In their presentations in the opening session of the “Critical Geographical Praxis” theme on the first day of the meeting, both Berg and Simonsen remarked forcefully on the ways in which geography (and critical geography, as well) has long constructed a privileged position for the Anglophone academy as the “theoretical centre”. They noted the ways in which other, “peripheral” academies (including even most continental European ones!) have long been considered atheoretical, either the *objects* of the centre’s theorizing or subordinate academic *subjects* who should adopt the centre’s theoretical apparatus. The closing debates of the conference confirmed that this was a key concern of many of those present—and one that would have to be addressed by the ICGG head on if it wanted to maintain its “international” aspirations.

In his opening presentation, Minca (2002) argued that although we readily admit that “geography is power”, it is much more difficult to realise that “geography is also power *within* the geographical community. Our various positions and positionings are also important *among us*. It would be wrong to ignore them or pretend that they do not exist”. What the Békéscsaba meeting revealed is that we still very much need “a critical geography of critical geography”, to cite Lawrence Berg. What is critical in one national and academic context is not in another—from postcolonial Canada, where the first ICCG meeting was held, to postdictatorial South Korea, to postsocialist Hungary.

### The Languages of Critical Geography

A second concern that shaped debates and discussions at the conference was the question of language. In planning the meeting, many ICCG members argued that to foster a truly open and critical debate, innovative session formats were not enough, for even the most de-centred, participant-oriented modes of interaction can be just as “closed” as any paper session if *access* to them is limited. The prior two conferences, though proclaiming themselves “international”, had been exclusively Anglophone meetings and, although the predominance of the English language was questioned and put to debate, the problem remained.

For the third conference in Hungary, two official languages were chosen: English and French. The choice of the second language was motivated by the conference’s European setting and, especially, the dominant role of the French academy in shaping Eastern and Central European geographical traditions. Unfortunately, however, although a French-language call for participation was circulated to Francophone academies (in Europe as well as Africa), the number of French speakers at the conference was quite limited and, as several Francophone participants pointed out, English still unquestionably remained the dominant language of communication during the meeting.

Indeed, one of the most difficult tasks was to remind participants that English was *not* the first language of the great majority of those present. For many of us, it was a second, third or fourth language that, although we might use it as an everyday working tool, requires of us a continual process of both linguistic and conceptual translation. Holding sessions principally in English may have been in many ways the “practical” thing to do, as this was the one idiom that most of us shared; what was difficult was to foster an awareness that not all of us shared it *equally*. At the outset of the conference, we made a plea to the theme coordinators and session chairs as well as all the participants to speak slowly, to repeat as necessary, to use visual aids and printed materials—anything that would allow for the widest possible



communication. Of course, difficulties still arose. Some native English speakers speed-read their papers in RGS/IBG or Annals of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) mode—incomprehensible even to those of us who work in the Anglophone academy. In addition, some of the discussions ended up being quite exclusive, both in thematic focus and in terminology. But an incredible amount of solidarity also developed: people who rewrote their papers at the last minute, transcribing the entire contents on overheads; spontaneous volunteer “mediators” who took it upon themselves to translate questions, answers and even pieces of talks.

### Future Directions?

What were the most positive things to come out of the meeting? The final session of the conference, which provided a forum for participants to voice their opinions, highlighted a number of issues. The first (and most important, to our mind) was the “opening” that the conference provided *for* and *to* Eastern and Central European geographers. As Timár noted in her opening talk, the exchange of knowledge and contacts in post-1989 Eastern and Central Europe has been overwhelmingly unidirectional—“from East to West”. Over the past decade, the Eastern and Central European geographical academies have become cheap labour and information pools for Western transition “experts”, furnishing research staff and empirical knowledge that is then interpreted by their Western colleagues in prestigious “international” journals (and here we come again to the question of theorising subjects—and the subjects of theory). We do not know how successful the Békéscsaba conference was in challenging this divide. What we do know is that many of our Central and Eastern European colleagues expressed their hope that this meeting served as an important building block for future academic and intellectual cooperation of a different kind from that described above, both *between* the (ex-)“East” and the international critical geographical community and *among* the various Eastern and Central European geographical communities, which largely severed ties when relations with the “West” (and Western funding agencies) became paramount. The opportunity to exchange common experiences and challenges among the various geographies “in transition”—whether in terms of shared research interests or in terms of common experiences of transforming academic and institutional contexts—was cited as a very important one.

So, too, was the “freedom to speak” that the participants felt the conference had provided: both the intellectual freedom to talk about certain issues (such as questions of gender, cited by several participants) and the freedom from certain power relations that govern national academies and that usually preclude younger scholars from voicing

their views or even presenting their research. As one of the Hungarian participants noted at the closing session, this was the first time that she saw “Hungarians of every academic level being friendly with each other”. If the ICCG can provide even a temporary forum of this sort, we should be quite proud.

The next ICCG has been tentatively scheduled for 2004–2005. Our Mexican representative, Blanca Ramirez of the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, has graciously offered to host the meeting. In the meantime, our principal challenge remains open: how to build an international group that can work towards a common “critical” project but that at the same time is able to embrace different strategies, different paths towards that goal—a movement that can speak with a common voice, but that is also able to declare its critical praxis in many different vocabularies of dissent.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the co-organisers of the Békéscsaba conference, Judit Timár, Joe Painter and Claudio Minca, for their valuable suggestions and input into the writing of this piece.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The full programme of the conference is available on the ICCG Web site.

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