

Commentary

Session jumping at the AAG

Calls for abstracts have just been announced for the 2008 AAG in Boston. So it seems to us a fitting time for some reflection on the last AAG. If you attended the 2007 AAG, and you are like us, you were perhaps a bit overwhelmed with the experience in San Francisco. Indeed, disorientation seemed a theme of many conversations in the Hilton lobby: record-setting attendance this year (officially 6700 people, with some claiming numbers closer to 8000), dozens of sessions at once, a stretched-out and confounding venue, and so very many people milling about. Perhaps it isn't surprising that these topics were the common currency of conversation. The annual meeting sponsored by the Association of American Geographers is by far the largest conference for the discipline. Every year people make remarks about its size, about how many things seem to be going simultaneously within one venue, and about the urban ecologies of the conference's host city that become temporarily swollen with geographers like us. It is also, perhaps, not surprising that the 2007 AAG meeting would set records. After all, how many people are particularly fond of San Francisco? How many people decided, like us, that because it was taking place in San Francisco, this year's AAG conference was one not to be missed? How many people, like us, recall that in 1994, the last time the AAG meeting was in San Francisco, there was similar talk of "breaking all previous records" with over 4000 people in attendance? The 1994 conference was, for one of us (Matthew), our first AAG meeting. After three years in Alaska, it was good to see old friends from graduate school and blissful to share in their stories of success, tender disappointment, and new aspirations. On top of that came the exhilaration of seeing the city for the first time, setting out from the Marriott and walking a few of San Francisco's streets, negotiating the city's lines of sight, its peculiar dynamics of enculturated curiosity, and its differentiated and differentiating spaces of security.

Discussions about the 2007 AAG spurred further recollections of the San Francisco conference in 1994. One particularly memorable moment involved a session wherein a widely known scholar in human geography, a senior academic with many books to his name, was scheduled to present the second of five papers. In 1994 he already had a high profile amidst some of the liveliest debates going in social theory. The room scheduled for his presentation filled to capacity. With all the seats taken, people stood along the walls and sat on the floor. Everyone listened attentively to the first two papers. When the well-known scholar finished, and before the third presenter—a graduate student—took the podium, the room began to empty out. Where once had sat close to one hundred people, only a dozen or so people remained. The student then began his paper, and he may have silently considered the irony. After all, one of the topics of that session was the culture of the academy.

Let us engage the politics of comparison here. Separately, the two of us have attended numerous different conferences since then: several RGS/IBG meetings in Great Britain, at least four Canadian Association of Geographers meetings, some of the International Conferences for Historical Geographers, not to mention conferences outside our discipline. At most of those conferences we tend to find a remarkably different atmosphere. Of course this has a lot to do with the much smaller numbers in attendance relative to the AAG. And perhaps the numbers can't be helped, though it is possible that, with many of us becoming far more interdisciplinary, fewer attendees

will materialize at future AAG meetings. We also hear murmurs that, in light of carbon budgets, more geographers are choosing to attend regional conferences instead, or a select overseas conference in their specialty. Notwithstanding the possibilities of those shifts, however, the AAG will probably remain by far the biggest venue for the discipline for some time to come, so the atmosphere is unlikely to change in that regard. But we also notice something else going on. In other conferences, people seem much less inclined to abandon a session once they've heard the paper they are most interested in. The audience tends to be a little more constant. People sit down at the beginning of the session and, with a few exceptions, they tend to leave at the end of the session after the questions have wrapped up and after exchanges have been considered. There isn't quite so much of this milling about, this 'jumping' back into the hallways and over to other rooms within the blocks of time scheduled for each session.

If human geography has taken something of a 'practice' turn in recent years, this might be a good analytic tool with which to diagnose the effects of session jumping. For, it seems to us, our coming into a session after it has started and our leaving before it has finished, our jumping from one session to another (in order to hear the papers that we most want to hear) is a rather peculiar practice at the AAG. And because it is a particular practice amongst us, it is amenable to change.

What are the consequences of this session-jumping practice? Three seem especially important. First, it feeds into a cult of personality. High-profile scholars in the discipline become 'big names' through the size of the audience their papers attract and, of course, they attract a sizeable audience through becoming big names in other areas (primarily book publications). Indeed, if one set about to design a perfect system for the production of stardom and obscurity, session jumping at conferences would be a vital component. This is because from session jumping follow stature-building stories over dinner about a room suddenly filling well beyond its capacity—seeming to empty of oxygen—as scholars cram in to hear the person they've heard many others talk about. So if we were to change our session-jumping practices at the AAG, we might alleviate the production of obscurity. This is not because we would each get our fifteen minutes of equal fame. Instead, certain names, persons, and particular bodies would be less the focus, less the subject, of either fetish or inattention.

Second, partly because of this constant movement consequent to session jumping, scheduling for proper room-size becomes equally problematic. This was certainly apparent at this year's AAG. Some rooms were filled beyond capacity. At the beginning of one session this year one of us had to stand in the doorway as there was no place to stand inside the room, let alone sit (though some seats were later vacated between papers). Conversely, other rooms seem underutilized, empty, almost cavernous. In those instances, we both find ourselves feeling concerned for those presenting papers in such spaces. Presenters have invested hundreds if not thousands of dollars to attend the conference, devoted large amounts of time preparing a paper for presentation, only to find precious few people in the audience. Perhaps the poor pairings of room size to audience may not be so amenable to any desired fix of 'better judgment' among conference organizers so long as session jumping remains a common practice at the AAG, thereby creating wider variations in attendance than might otherwise be the case.

Third, session jumping disrupts the incredible and rare opportunities for *dialogue* that the AAG conference can offer us. Dialogue is not a one-way process whereby we listen to an impressive paper, stay to hear one or two people ask insightful questions, and then leave with the impression that we've been touched by something clear and important. Dialogue is a messy affair that involves multiple perspectives bumping unexpectedly into each other, hopefully creating something entirely new and unexpected.

This kind of dialogue is precisely what can arise, for instance, when we hear the words of an impressive, well-established scholar followed by a cautious yet carefully honed paper given by a young master's student. The simple propinquity of the presenters, the papers, and the audience can produce new and unexpected outcomes. Questions might arise from hearing relationships between ideas. Or small sparks of something new might ignite by the end of a session, just when the much more established scholar offers insights into her or his fellow presenters' papers (or *visa versa*) and an audience member gives his or her opinion. Laughter might ensue. A new take on an old concept might take hold. In short, we think dialogue occurs with more intensity, with more possibility, when we remain in place and allow for the active power of place to do its work through, for instance, the small intimate connections created in conference rooms between dedicated audiences and well-recognized and not-so-well-recognized scholars.

Which leads us to a final, and eminently geographic, argument about the practice of session jumping. If you are like us, time is the rationale you leverage to explain zipping from room to room, entering and exiting meetings, or leaving sessions after one or two papers. There's just not enough time, and both of us succumbed to its pressures this last year—jumping between sessions far more than we ever had before. We were both less satisfied than usual, though we continue to believe there are many good reasons why we might want to abandon the space of an ongoing session between two papers on offer. We might, for instance, be committed to seeing a paper delivered in another room by our graduate student. Or perhaps the only way we could schedule an important meeting was to recognize there would be overlap. And of course we really wanted to make the book launch or a morning special session that conflicted with a colleague's paper we promised we would see. Yet for all our advocacy about the power of space and place, we geographers at the AAG seem nevertheless to privilege time above all else when we leverage these rationales. And in doing so, we might well be compromising what for many of us is the crux of discipline: a belief that place and space matter and that, like the people who occupy them, they are worthy of our careful, sustained, attention. When we jump between sessions, are we not privileging time above all else? And more than that, is there not a risk that we are commodifying time, trying to get that proverbial bang for our buck? Session jumping, it seems to us, is not a practice without risk. We risk re-producing an environment wherein we can forget the power of place. We risk entrenching, ironically within the confines of AAG conferences, the notion that space and place are neutral entities—that they are simple containers of action, neither socially nor collectively produced—within which we can simply move about, driven by concerns of time.

While we are passionate about wanting to point out some pitfalls of session-jumping practices, we also know that it's unhelpful to detail problems without offering at least some potential solutions. On the surface, the simplest solution is simply to reduce our own session-jumping practices. For those of us who skipped out of (or into) twelve of the sixteen sessions we attended, perhaps next year we could instead commit to remain in place for at least six sessions, and perhaps eight the year after next. Over time, that would produce less traffic in and out of the door during sessions. More difficult solutions would fall to session organizers. They can be held responsible for enticing people to stay with their session. And, as if all the communications necessary to bundle four papers on a theme into a session were not laborious enough, session organizers can also be called upon both to ensure presenters dialogue with one another in advance of the conference and to structure sessions in ways that foster more dialogue in the rare space provided by the AAG venue. Many organizers are already engaging with these challenges through the use of discussants, for instance, or by putting a panel discussion together that follows after several paper sessions on a

particular theme. Nonetheless, these experiments remain an uphill struggle in the face of so much session jumping at the AAG.

But practice isn't altered by such actions alone: there's the thought process behind the action that also requires consideration. With this in mind, we propose part of a solution involves reformulating our understandings of what is important, what is worthy of our attention. Too often we overlook moments, voices, and ideas that, in an academic tradition of canonization and emphasis on 'the big ideas', are conceptualized as lesser, as unremarkable. Changing this way of thinking so as to extend greater hospitality to the unexpected, we believe, will most fully alter the practice of session jumping. Indeed, we are reminded of Walter Benjamin's defense of always looking carefully at those things which, on the surface, seem exceedingly overlookable: "[the] chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history" (1969, page 254). In short, then, we believe an outcome of changing the practice of session jumping, and altering the conceptual motivation behind it, will be a more fully realized geography, disciplinarily and otherwise.

What we suggest is not a new code of conduct for the AAG's consideration and adoption, nor is ours a critique of *other* people's habits. Rather than anything so formal or so harsh, we are struggling to envision a different form of professional etiquette. If we have so far avoided the suggestion that attending to sessions in their entirety is a more 'polite' thing to do than catching the door between papers to meet other demands, it is not because we think the rationales of collegial sensitivity or due consideration are frivolous concerns in a world of realpolitik. To hold to a form of professional etiquette that privileges more sustained, collective dialogue should not be seen as simply being 'nice' or mindful. It should not be seen as a display of weakness—not at the AAG, where so many of us perform a tough individualism, muscling from room to room as potent adjudicators of who is worth hearing. In that context, the conviction to build deeper dialogue into the spaces we create, and the needs for consideration, empathy, and etiquette in the little time we have to do it, are tough demands. We think that taking those demands seriously, and scaling back the amount of session jumping, would make the annual AAG conference all the stronger. And this is something we are both looking forward to in Boston.

Acknowledgement. We are grateful to Susan Roberts and other colleagues for their generous feedback on this essay. All of the flaws and lingering errors remain our own.

Matthew Kurtz, The Open University

Sarah de Leeuw, University of Arizona and the University of Northern British Columbia

Reference

Benjamin W, 1969 *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* Ed. H Arendt, translated by H Zohn (Schocken Books, New York)