

Annual Conference 2009

Welcome from the chair of conference

Royal
Geographical
Society

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

A very warm welcome to the 2009 Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), convening outside of London for the first time since 2004, and in the vibrant northern city of Manchester. Whether you are here from overseas or the UK, passing through for a day or in for the whole event, I am very pleased that you have taken time to join one of the largest annual international meetings in Geography. I hope that you are inspired by what you experience and leave stimulated by what is on offer.

When I developed the theme **Geography, Knowledge and Society** in July 2008, little did I realise that debates within the discipline concerning what constitutes admissible ways of knowing the world would surface so acutely in the practice of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). On the one hand, our discipline has a richness of enquiry, one that enables geographical engagement in both social and natural worlds in new and exciting ways. On the other, we are a discipline that has an origin and a history that can sometimes feel very different to that which we perceive today. In the 150th anniversary year of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, we are reminded of how new types of knowledge can unsettle, reshape and reformulate our understanding of the world around us, but only if we allow it to do so.

In eliciting ideas for the sessions for the 2009 meeting, I asked potential convenors and speakers to imagine three entry points. The first is concerned with the framings that our knowledge brings to the world within which we find ourselves; the ways in which these framings simultaneously constrain and enable new understandings; and the ways in which different framings don't add up, can't be reconciled, but can still co-exist, sometimes intersecting and, most exciting still, generate new and more radical forms of geographical explanation. Framings matter because they shape what we do and how we do it; they structure how we allocate scarce resources; and, most importantly but rarely recognised, framings originate in that complex relationship between us and the world of which we are a part. Friday's plenary, to be given by Dr Gerry Kearns of Virginia Tech and Cambridge University will recall Halford Mackinder's place in establishing scientific Geography in Great Britain, one which reminds us that the debate over how we produce geographical knowledge is one that is many decades old. On Thursday, the Director of the RGS-IBG, Dr Rita Gardner, will lead an open forum that discusses the challenges facing the Society and its engagement of multiple audiences with geography.

The second entry point is concerned with the new approaches, methods and techniques that underpin the vibrancy of the subject as we know it today. The conference will show how we make new sense of the world through innovation in the kinds of knowledge we allow to be admissible to geographical explanations; ranging from new ways to survey remotely and to measure quantitatively; through to the new media, imagery, sensory perceptions and other emotions that challenge the way we think about the world. This will include the kinds of knowledge that don't fit into conventional forms of analysis and explanation; as well as the ways in which new forms of knowledge challenge the conventional distinction between researcher and researched. I am particularly pleased to welcome María Fernanda Espinosa, Permanent Representative to the United Nations for Ecuador, who will open the conference on the evening of Tuesday 25 August. Looking through her distinguished career, one that spans the government of Ecuador; the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Programme on Social Equity and Conservation; the IUCN Indigenous Peoples and Biodiversity Policy; and children's participation research with UNICEF; but one which includes a Ph.D. in Geography; we can look forward to an exciting start.

The third entry point is concerned with Darwin himself, his legacy upon the discipline, and the re-enchancement with Darwin's view of the world that is so radically changing some parts of Geography today. Two of our journal lectures (*Progress in Human Geography* and *Progress in Physical Geography*) will lead on this reflection. Jim Moore of the Open University will speak on *Darwin's Progress and the Problem of Slavery* and Mike Summerfield of Edinburgh University will speak on *Darwin and Landforms*. We have a number of other plenary speakers addressing a wide range of geographical topics, and I am particularly pleased to welcome Donald Mitchell (Syracuse University,

USA; *Antipode* lecture) and Janet Townsend (Newcastle University, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* lecture).

Finally, I want to thank those who really do run this Conference, notably Catherine Souch, Victoria (Tori) Jeffers and Daniel Stoker. As Chair of Conference, I have often wondered what it is that I am meant to do given the vibrancy of the RGS-IBG's research groups and the importance of sustaining the 'ground upwards' tradition of our annual gathering. Catherine and her team do the organisation and management of the Conference so well that even this concern has been assuaged. 2010 takes us back to London and I wish my successor Neil Wrigley the very best of luck.

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