Welcome from the RGS-IBG Chair of Conference, Sarah Radcliffe

Welcome to the 2017 annual conference, hosted by the RGS-IBG in London. In a year of horrific displays of intolerance and hatred - as well as outstanding acts of solidarity and support - I offer a particular welcome to international students, scholars and visitors, and to participants who have been targets of neglect and exclusion.

In my role as Conference Chair, I sought to identify a conference theme that would encourage conversations across the discipline about our research as well as our teaching, professional position and the impacts of geography. Building on the potential for this conference to provide an arena and catalyst for ideas and projects, I hoped to spark reflection and debates around how geography can contribute to the transnational and globe-spanning processes and exclusions that affect us all, although in diverse and unequal ways. Decolonising, for Māori intellectual Linda Tuhiwai Smith, means “a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” (Tuhiwai Smith 2010: 33). Despite the end of formal colonial rule, our understandings of the world – about space, environment, nature, economy, democracy, cities, education, culture, and so on – often unconsciously and implicitly reflect enduring colonial legacies.

The theme of ‘Decolonising Geographical Knowledges’ draws attention to geography’s relation to privilege for some and exclusion of others, and invites us to think about how opening geography to the world provides an opportunity to discuss ways of doing geography differently. The opportunity to do geography creatively has generated a broad and innovative range of responses from the RGS-IBG Research and Working Groups and other networks. For instance I am delighted by the span of decolonial discussions covered by journal-sponsored and research group sessions throughout the conference. To mention one example, the Race, Culture and Equality Working Group has organised two sessions on ‘Decolonising institutional arrangements: insights from the arts, education, and policy’, which bring together a range of critical voices from within and beyond the academy, and which are also sponsored by Area. The rich programme additionally reflects the enthusiasms and energies of scholars and Research Groups beyond the conference theme. In parallel to the conference, the RGS-IBG journal Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers is publishing its first ‘Themed Intervention’ on Decolonising Geographical Knowledges, bringing together diverse perspectives.

The 2017 Conference opens on Tuesday evening with a panel of North American First Nation and Indigenous scholars talking about ‘Decolonising Geography in Theory and Practice.’ Panellists include Sarah Hunt and Michelle Daigle (University of British Columbia, Canada), Deborah McGregor (York University Canada), Jay Johnson (University of Kansas, USA), and Melanie Yazzie (University of New Mexico, USA). The conversations begun on Tuesday will be developed further in a session on ‘Decolonizing Land/Water: Critical Settler and Indigenous Perspectives on land/water governance’.

The lunchtime plenary sessions during the rest of the week include on Wednesday, Raewyn Connell (University of Sydney, Australia) speaking on ‘Decolonising the Republic of Knowledge: Futures for Social Science’; on Thursday, Abdi Ismail Samatar (University of Minnesota, USA/University of Pretoria, South Africa) speaking on ‘Africa’s First Democrats: decolonising the study of leadership and democracy’; and on Friday, Juanita Sundberg (University of British Columbia, Canada), speaking on ‘The politics of solidarity and decolonial possibilities’. Each talk will be followed by a short response from disciplinary experts, leaving time for questions and general discussion with the aim of bringing conference participants into the broad conversation about decolonising geography, a conversation that will hopefully continue in the specialized sessions and panels, and beyond the conference.

The conference will welcome around 1,600-plus participants who will contribute to around 380 themed sessions. The conference programme also includes sessions for post-graduate students and early career researchers. None of this would have been possible without the sterling work of the RGS-IBG staff, especially Catherine Souch and Sarah Evans, who have worked so hard to ensure the conference runs smoothly. The energy and hard work of convenors, presenters and discussants and others has also made the conference what it is too, so thank you.

I hope you each have a stimulating and enjoyable Conference, and welcome a chance to talk to you.

Sarah Radcliffe, University of Cambridge
Chair of the RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2017