



CONFERENCE REPORTS

SSHA Conference Report: A GIS Turn in Social Science History

Anne Kelly Knowles

Ordinarily, the main purpose and pleasure of attending the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association (SSHA) are learning new methods and approaches from scholars outside one's own discipline. Not so for geographers at the 1999 SSHA conference that was held November 11-14 in Fort Worth, Texas. A series of sessions on historical applications of geographic information systems (GIS) drew unusually large audiences (including many non-geographers) and stirred up the liveliest discussions I have witnessed in ten years of SSHA conferences. By the last morning of the meeting, those of us participating in the historical GIS sessions realized that a critical mass of expertise, related research interests, and methodological approaches had emerged. It was a heady feeling to see the birth of a new generation in social science history.

The variety of the GIS sessions was striking. Topics included using GIS to redefine economic regions, trace the history of the book, visualize the Irish potato famine, document and preserve historic sites, and test the effect of railroad construction on out-migration from rural areas. Two common threads ran through these and other papers. First, GIS enables one to analyze much more data on a much finer scale than have previous geographical techniques. Second, GIS more readily integrates mapping and spatial analysis with the computational and statistical techniques long popular in social science history. The increasing use of GIS for historical research holds particular promise for illuminating the regional and local variation of national and international phenomena, combining broad questions with the richness of localized case studies.

Fresh work by Ph.D. candidates appeared alongside results from major projects by established researchers, the latter including the forthcoming Atlas of the Irish Famine and Humphrey Southall's application of the Great Britain Historical GIS in his research on occupations in nineteenth- and

twentieth-century Britain. Craig Spence (Goldsmiths College, UCL) unveiled his impressive mapping of land use and social geography in 1690s London, soon to be published in an atlas. Lora Richards of the United States Geological Survey's Mapping Division presented early fruits of the USGS Urban Dynamics Program, which is creating a "retrospective GIS" that will make historical land-use coverages of major urban areas available for public and academic use. Amy Hillier, a Ph.D. student in social work at the University of Pennsylvania, presented compelling work from her GIS-based statistical analysis of redlining in Philadelphia, followed by a more qualitative study of landscape change in the same city by American studies Ph.D. student Stephen Kidd from George Washington University.

Most presenters focused on the results yielded by their use of GIS rather than the mechanics of database design. This is a sign that GIS is maturing to the point of serving historical research rather than standing as a daunting challenge. A final session on issues related to digital historical databases emphasized this point. As Hamish James of the Essex Historical Data Service commented, any digital resource has a typical life cycle of creation, dissemination, use, and preservation. A few large spatial historical databases are now ready for dissemination and use, and more will follow. Britain is emerging as a leader in the development of GIS-based digital resources for historical scholarship and as home to geography departments with significant numbers of researchers engaged in quite sophisticated historical GIS, most notably the University of Portsmouth, which became the new site of the Great Britain Historical GIS Project on January 1, 2000.

The other four sessions sponsored by the Historical Geography network included one book session with Peter Trubowitz, on his *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (1998), and another marking the thirtieth anniversary of Donald Meinig's *Imperial Texas: An Interpretive Essay in Cultural Geography* (1969). A session on European migration raised powerful challenges to the old geographical models of migration based on Ravenstein's laws (the gravity and step-wise models are nearly dead). A jointly sponsored session on rural photography showed how that visual medium helps sensitize researchers and readers to the historical power of place.

The SSHA's Historical Geography network remains small but is clearly launched on a new trajectory with the influx of participants interested in historical GIS. A special issue of the journal *Social Science History* on