

THE SPATIAL TURN IN HISTORY

Symposium at the GHI, February 19, 2004. Convener: Thomas Zeller (University of Maryland/GHI). Speakers: Denis Cosgrove (UCLA), Karen Till (University of Minnesota).

The relationship between historians and geographers has not always been an easy one. Over the last decade, however, more and more historians have begun to pay attention to the spatial dimension of history, and thus have become increasingly aware of the work of cultural and historical geographers. In February 2004, the German Historical Institute contributed to the ongoing conversation between geographers and historians by inviting two cultural geographers, Denis Cosgrove and Karen Till, to present their work. Their papers are published in the "Features" section of this *Bulletin*.

A workshop on the spatial turn is certainly timely. But it is also fair to say that historians often hesitate to address the spatial dimension of the processes that they are studying. On the most obvious level, many are wary of spatial analyses because of the overly deterministic way space has been used by scholars in the past. One need not only think of the geographical determinism inherent in the work of scholars such as Ellsworth Huntington or Karl Wittfogel; even in anti-racist and anti-essentialist works such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, spatiality sometimes tends to be the primary causal factor for many conclusions. In addition, the German word for space, *Raum*, very soon takes on an odious dimension, evoking the Nazis' push for *Lebensraum* or the supposed *Volk ohne Raum*. While spatial thinking of course does not necessarily lead to expansionist or aggressive policies, the legacy of the Third Reich has certainly left its mark on the debate over the spatial dimension of history. One could further develop this point by looking at the intersection of history and geography in various countries with different academic traditions. Great Britain, for example, has had a very productive school of historical geography, as has the United States. By contrast, after 1945, Germany's geographers and historical geographers no longer thrived as they had before World War II.

Since the 1990s, historical interest in the formation of space has increased, and certain subdisciplines within history, especially environmental history, have begun paying more attention to the spatiality of the historical enterprise. The geographer Edward Soja has accused historians of writing history as if it took place on the head of a pin; this is less true for environmental history. As the environmental historian Richard White recently noted, however, even environmental historians, with their awareness of large processes of change over time and space, still tend to

regard space as a simple, empty container for political, social, or cultural developments. Historians today can learn much from the ways in which geographers, in particular cultural and historical geographers, conceptualize space and use it in their analyses. As the American cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky once wrote, "if geographers dare not ignore history, practitioners of history and the other social sciences and humanities must reciprocate by taking the spatial factor into full account in their endeavors." The GHI's symposium attempted to encourage historians to consider the spatial dimensions of history by introducing them to the work of two prominent cultural geographers.

Thomas Zeller