In Memoriam

Karl Butzer, Latin Americanist Geographer

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Karl Butzer (August 19, 1934–May 4, 2016) passed away in Austin, Texas after a short illness, surrounded by family, friends, students, and colleagues. Karl was one of the most accomplished and significant scholars in any discipline; his work has had major impacts on physical and human geography, as well as geology, anthropology, archaeology, environmental history, African and Asian studies, environmental and sustainability sciences, and broader interdisciplinary debates. He also was an important figure in Latin Americanist geography, as reflected in his receiving both the Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholar Award and the Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award from the Conference of Latin American Geographers (Offen 2003, Scarpaci and Doolittle 1998).

Karl studied under Carl Troll in Germany, but his involvement in Latin America effectively began with his appointment in 1984 as the Raymond C. Dickson Centennial Professor of Liberal Arts, in what is now the Department of Geography and the Environment at The University of Texas at Austin. At that time the department was focusing on Middle Eastern and European Studies, but there were geographers with interests in Latin America who eagerly joined with Karl and his wife and research partner Elisabeth in departmental field trips to Mexico from 1985 to 1991. Karl and Elisabeth also helped organize field trips in Mexico for the 1989 (Querétaro) and 2000 (Austin) CLAG meetings.

Themes in Karl and Elisabeth’s research varied widely. They drew on their familiarity with Spain to study the ecological and cultural transformations related to the conquest, including transfer of the Spanish agricultural toolkit to the Americas. The introduction of cattle and sheep (including transhumance practices and cañadas) and irrigation innovations received particular attention, in terms of their relationship to vegetation and soils as well as interaction with indigenous agricultural traditions. They also worked on the cultural geography of architecture and indigenous maps. More detailed regional studies involving both archival and field research included the Bajío region and the town of Bustamente in Mexico, modeled in part on their long-term research involving the community of Aín, Spain. Karl also studied long-term climatic and environmental history in northern Mexico in collaboration with several of his students. This resulted in thirteen refereed journal articles, nine book chapters, and an edited volume with specific Latin American content, not including additional works published by Elisabeth on her own. In addition, five of Karl’s book reviews were for volumes specifically on Latin America, while many...
other book reviews included Latin American examples in broader discussions. Karl spoke on Latin American topics at numerous professional meetings, and participated in CLAG meetings in Mexico, Texas, and the Dominican Republic.

For most of his career at Texas, Karl taught graduate seminars, and through 2006 these included a seminar on the Historical Geography of Colonial Mexico. He meticulously prepared for each seminar with extensive readings and hand written handouts (e.g., Butzer 2006). Five of the 32 PhDs he supervised or co-supervised during his career were Latin Americanists; he also was a member of the PhD supervising committees of 15 Latin Americanist students while at Texas.

Karl was valued as a collaborator, colleague, and mentor not just for his formidable depth of knowledge, but also for his humility and support for multiple approaches to problem solving. His personal experience with totalitarian orthodoxy, and with nativist anti-refugee sentiment, made him deeply skeptical of all regimes, intellectual and otherwise, but particularly those that lacked mechanisms for self-questioning and openness to alternative perspectives. His (and Elisabeth’s) immersion in the communities of Aín (Spain) and Bustamante (Mexico) reinforced their respect for the ability of local, diverse communities to solve problems and adapt to change over long periods of time.

In his work on long-term human-environment relationships Karl sometimes used a systems framework, but only for its heuristic value in suggesting relationships for further exploration. He was not an “ecosystemicist” and resisted modeling. He was alert to issues of power imbalance and exploitation, but saw these issues as being widely diffused in daily life. In this sense he was a Foucauldian political ecologist, but he tended to avoid terms such as these. He discussed Derrida, Gramsci, Harley, Said, Harvey, and others with deep respect, but Karl was part of a much older tradition: a Mediterranean humanism spanning the Greek, Roman, Islamic, and Renaissance Catholic worlds, complicated by the Enlightenment and German Romantic Counter-Enlightenment, and the varieties of conquest culture and hybridity in Africa and the Americas. In these traditions, science and humane letters are equally valued and not seen as contradictory.

Steeped as he was in these traditions, Karl provided contemporary critiques of intellectual movements, starting with the cultural ecologists of the 1970s. By the 1990s, political ecology had achieved dominance; although Karl appreciated its focus on positionality and contingency and the resulting “greater sophistication about human culture and behavior,” he critiqued ahistorical and prescriptive tendencies within political ecology. He pointed out, for example, that critics of the Berkeley School sometimes ignored its increasing sophistication over the decades, and the fact that it “pioneered respect for the other as a cornerstone for foreign field studies” (Butzer 2006).

More recently, Karl critiqued the oversimplifications and just-so answers of Jared Diamond in analyzing the theme of collapse of civilizations, which underestimated the ability of local communities to adjust to dynamic social and environmental change. Karl’s research on variations in climate and geomorphology over time, and corresponding cultural adaptations, required long-term immersion in particular places. Local people appreciated Karl and Elisabeth’s recognition of their agency; community representatives of both Aín and Bustamante have visited and communicated their condolences for Karl’s illness and death.
Karls intellectual legacy will long affect our discipline and the Department of Geography and the Environment at the University of Texas. His personality will also continue to influence those who knew him. Often quiet at meetings, he had the ability to bring controversies to a constructive end through his thoughtful articulation of clever solutions that encompassed the viewpoints of every stakeholder. His pointed wit could be devastating to the pompous, but never cruel. In the field, in the office, in the classroom, and on the stage, his dedication to the pursuit of knowledge without ostentation or cynicism was evident. He was kind and generous to students and junior faculty, extending to all an affection similar to that bestowed on his own extended family. He will be greatly missed.

References
Butzer, Karl. 2006. About “Postmodernism.” Handout for Graduate seminar in Issues and Research in Geography, Department of Geography and the Environment, University of Texas at Austin.


Writings by Karl Butzer on Latin America


