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At the beginning of January 2011, a petition was launched on the Internet by two academics, Irene Molina and Jerónimo Montero (Molina, 2011). Aimed at the international geographical community, the petition requested a change of site for the next regional meeting of the International Geographical Union (IGU) in November 2011, scheduled to take place at the Military School of Santiago, Chile (Escuela Militar del Libertador Bernardo O’Higgins). The petitioners expressed their astonishment that “a place so strikingly marked by terror” was chosen by the IGU. They argued that the two most important official reports on human rights violations and crimes against humanity during the Chilean dictatorship of 1973-1990 (Rettig report, 1991; Valech report, 2004) identified the Military School as a centre of torture and murder. Moreover, meetings of the DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional), Augusto Pinochet’s army intelligence unit that was responsible for much of the torture, disappearances, assassinations and other human rights violations, took place there in the weeks following the coup in 1973. The petitioners also drew attention to the fact that a 1979 decree signed by Pinochet that declares the Chilean Geographic Military Institute (Instituto Geográfico Militar) to be Chile’s official representative to the IGU remains in place today.

This protest against the location of an international scholarly meeting highlights the somewhat contradictory roles of academic geography in state maintenance and political resistance. The importance of the role played by the military in the arrangement of the IGU conference underlines the intimate relationships between military power, state power and the discipline of geography that have prevailed in Chile in recent decades (Caviedes, 1991). Those links are emphasised by the fact that Pinochet taught geography at the Military Academy and wrote several books on geopolitics and regional geography, including Geopolítica (Pinochet, 1974). Geopolítica had a strong influence on the politics of space and place during his dictatorship (Hewitt, 2001) and even influenced theories of geopolitics outside Chile (Kearns, 2009). This impact is not surprising if we bear in mind that geopolitical thinking after World War II remained influential in much of Latin America, especially in the Southern Cone (Brazil, Argentina, Chile), where most of its practitioners were members of the military (Child, 1979; Hepple, 1992).

For the petitioners, these links between geography and the military are problematic. They note the contradictions within Chilean society, whose collective memory about the past dictatorship is still divided (Stern, 2009). While Chile, like other Latin American countries, is deemed “post-dictatorial”, it continues to experience the legacy of the military regime and human rights violations (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). The reestablishment of open elections and the process of democratisation in the
early 1990s came hand-in-hand with the continued dominance of the military, especially Pinochet (Jelin, 2003; Acuña & Smulovitz, 1998). Today, armed forces are still involved in human rights violations in Chile, especially in the repression of the Mapuche communities in the South, who are demanding recognition of their historical and territorial rights (Amnesty International, 2010). For the petitioners, then, the proposal to host the IGU 2011 conference at the Military School - without addressing its significance as a place where unresolved national histories continue to be silenced - is unacceptable.

Scholars of memorialisation note, however, that performances and activities that reference dominant stories associated with a place can provide means for critical engagements that challenge prevailing narratives, and involve the negotiation of competing understandings of the past and of power relations (Hite & Collins, 2009; Till, 2003). In this vein, some commentaries published on the website of the petition suggest that the conference could represent an opportunity to acknowledge these legacies, as has been done with other conference sites bearing imperial and military links, such as the Royal Geographic Society in London.

Beyond the Chilean context, the petition regarding the 2011 IGU Conference location reminds us of other political mobilisations carried out by geographers, which have led to critical reflections within the discipline of geography. Like the calls to boycott Elsevier for its links to the arms trade (Chatterton & Featherstone, 2007; Hammet & Newsham, 2007; Pringle, 2007) or to boycott the Israeli academy (Slater, 2004; Storey, 2005; Waterman, 2005), this controversy over a key academic event invites political geographers to critically examine and redefine their practices and positions. It forces them to think about professional engagement, responsibility and solidarity. In other words, such controversies force us to consider how we relate to the “wider world” (Blomley, 2007; Massey et al., 2009; Kinpaisby, 2008) within and beyond the academy, as the (re)production of academic practices themselves has also been questioned as key sites of critical engagement (Chatterton, 2008; Castree, 2000). The controversy obliges us to question individual and collective attitudes in relation to the social realities affecting us and that intersect academic concerns with political beliefs or ethical values.

We will personally not be attending the conference because we do not feel comfortable with the venue, the strong influence of the military on the event or the limited possibilities for subversion. However, we are aware of the ambiguity of our decision, particularly in failing to take advantage of the possibility to contribute to critical discussions during the conference and thereby foregoing the opportunity to participate in debates on and within the very country where we conduct our research.

We are also aware that the issue is complex with regard to potential competing understandings of (self)righteousness. Clearly drawn ethical and political stances seldom exist, and several questions can therefore be raised and debated. Who decides what is "right", and where does one draw the line - that is, when is action to be taken, and when should it be avoided? Should academics and international organisations such as the IGU involve themselves in politics and disapprove of the contract, which the present government or part of the local academics might not have actively tried to change, until the 2011 conference brings the issue to the fore? Because what happens in one
country matters in others, especially if the organisation is international, what would be the implications of the IGU taking a stand against a currently valid and signed agreement? And how does one choose which governments should be criticised and blamed?

Conversely, is the IGU not already engaging politics by choosing not to position itself within this debate? Or does academic neutrality insulate the IGU from the political implications of its decisions? As of June 2011, approximately 411 academics around the world have signed the petition, of which ten percent have identified themselves as Chilean, which indicates that the disapproval is a relatively internationally shared concern. Is it therefore justified, in the name of academic neutrality, that the demands of such a significant number of petitioners addressing past and present military legacies be ignored? By remaining silent, does the IGU undermine its own legitimacy and credibility? In the end, whose organisation is the IGU, and on whose mandate are its actions taken? What kind of power does this type of organisation wield or choose not to wield?

We do not claim to have singular answers to any of these questions. However, we urge that they continue to be raised, so as to foster and maintain a long-standing reflection on geography and power relationships and their influence on disciplinary politics, particularly regarding the state or military power on the one hand and political resistance on the other. Geography, as an institutionalised profession and a scholarly discipline, has been inextricably entwined with the histories of modern states and empires since the eighteenth century (Godlewska & Smith, 1994). These close contacts between geography and those either seeking or holding territorial power have continued to the present day. This relationship has been shown - together with the discussion about the venue of the 2011 IGU conference - by many other examples, including the recent exchange in this journal regarding U.S. military funding of the “México Indígena” participatory mapping project in Oaxaca (Agnew, 2010; Bryan, 2010; Cruz, 2010; Herlihy, 2010). Finally, the petition, while posing key questions about the conflicting and transitional nature of memorialisation in post-dictatorship Chile, brings to the fore the broader issue of the inherently political and contested nature of geographic practices. It therefore points to the need to address the politics of geography directly.

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