

SYMPOSIUM

**The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute Then and Now...:
Commentaries on *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community***

**DGEI/SHE *Field Notes No. 4: The Trumbull Community:*
A Postscript**

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In 1969, when I was a student at Bristol University in the UK, Bill Bunge, as the author of *Theoretical Geography* (Bunge 1966), came to talk to the Geography Department. There was no mention of his book; rather he accused geography of being a profession that drew up maps for states, colonial conquests and military expeditions. He spoke inspiringly about how we should direct our attention to an entirely different task of mapping and serving “the continents and islands of mankind”, hence the acronym “SHE” (Society for Human Exploration; see Figure 1 below).

He spoke without stopping for three hours, asked the staff to show him where the slave pens of Bristol were located, and, when the baffled staff went home, led a group of us on a conducted tour of what he shockingly called (to a UK audience) “the ghetto of Bristol”, never having visited the city before.

Shortly after I went to teach at Syracuse University, and decided to take a small group of students to Detroit in the summer of 1971 to undertake a Geographical Expedition. Bunge agreed to the idea but after an initial briefing introducing us to local activists he pretty much left us to get on with it.

That summer we worked for a community group in the Cass-Trumbull Corridor—a rapidly deteriorating housing area close to the Wayne State University campus—on projects and campaigns identified by the group. At the same time we tried to follow the Bunge

methods of political action mapping and community engagement. *Field Notes No. 4* were written up later as a record of our work.

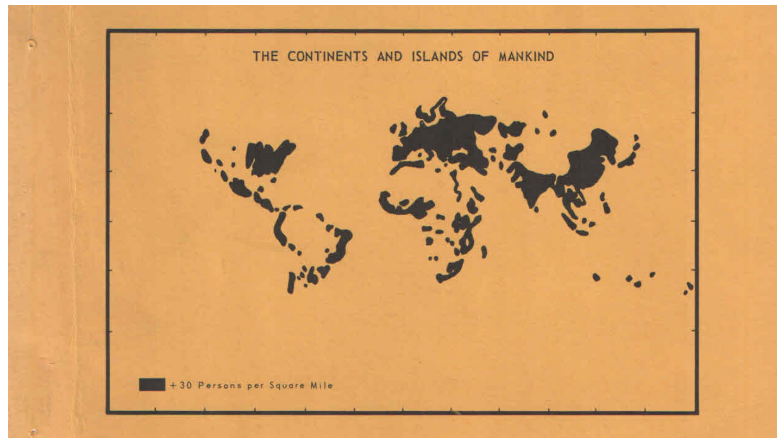


Figure 1: From the outside front cover of *Field Notes No. 4* (Society for Human Exploration 1972)

This experience and the politics of the time encouraged me to take a small group of students to London in 1972 (the London Geographical Expedition) spurred on by a comment from one of the Detroit activists: “You should go back home and do this with your own people.”

We worked for three months for a community action group in South London (the North Southwark Community Development Group), supporting their campaign against the invasion of their community by commercial property development, enabled by the local authority, which was forcing out local people and industries. At the end of that summer I stayed on in North Southwark for six years as a community planner and organiser, and later for a further ten years as a community planner in the contested space of the London Docklands.¹

¹ On the history and present condition of North Southwark, see the archive “Southwark Notes—Whose Regeneration?”, which includes a number of book chapters and journal articles stretching back to the 1970s (including Ambrose and Colenutt 1975). See also <http://35percent.org>

The DGEI and Bunge has never left me. Above all, it is about keeping oneself honest, and using and developing new skills to support working class struggles, in this case in conflicts over urban land and development.

On the politics of the DGEI, Rich Heyman reports that Dick Peet thought the DGEI lacked serious class politics. There may be some truth to that but I would say that community action is always about trying to create coalitions and movements, and there are real challenges for community organisers in how they conduct themselves and in how they display their political views. Kay's comments in *Field Notes No. 4* (Society for Human Exploration 1972:10) on the often negative views of outside organisers held by local residents hit the nail on the head.

Community action covers a wide range of political actions, but on the whole includes trying to lobby local and central government over particular issues, or to initiate alternative forms of service delivery or development, e.g. the successful Coin Street Community Builders campaign in London.² At the same time, it should involve the struggle to link local struggles to wider left political movements.

What is clear, as noted by the *Antipode* commentators, is that in the Trumbull Community and many other community campaigns there are sharp conflicts over the use and development of land where working class communities live and work. In London and other cities, the property market, with the banks and finance houses that fund it, often in alliance with local governments, is the enemy of community development; and this is where the challenge for community action lies.

Bunge's book on Fitzgerald, "Geography of a Revolution" (Bunge 1971), with its map of rental profits flowing out from the inner city "City of Death" to the outer-suburban "City of Superfluity" says it all.³ More than ever this type of community

² See <http://coinstreet.org>

³ "...what if a simple map of Detroit divided into three regions (Death, Need, and Superfluity) clarified how the money flowed between these three regions and massively predicted the human condition within these three regions. Such a modeling of that city could effectively show that "the rich take money from the poor". Quite apart from any of the scientific questions raised by such a simple model is the political danger that the model might indeed be true and bring such clarity to the geography of Detroit as to potentially arouse citizens in that

protest/research/action is needed—as a billionaire property developer steps into the White House...

References

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Bunge W (1974) Simplicity again. *Geographical Analysis* 6(1):85-88

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https://radicalantipode.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/dgei_fieldnotes-iv.pdf (last accessed 13 January 2017)

city.” (Bunge 1974:86)