

SYMPOSIUM

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

Knowledge Production, Political Action, and Pedagogy in Trumbull

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In a 1974 review of *The Trumbull Community* that, remarkably, appeared in the *Annals*, Dick Peet claims that “the work of the dedicated participants in the [Detroit Geographical] Expedition suffers from lack of political direction” and that it is “time for advocacy groups to examine long-term political strategy” (1974:150). Peet criticizes the fourth installment of *Field Notes* on the grounds that “there is no attempt to fit these instances [the three areas of research in the paper: housing conditions; recreational space; and policing] into a general pattern of oppression by the owners of the means of production and governors of powerful institutions, and thus a chance at contributing to the more general, political struggle is lost” (1974:149-150). He does admit, however, that “[i]n the limited context of providing useful information to communities and working as advocates on behalf of community groups, the 1971 Expedition must be judged a success, and *Field Notes No.4* vital reading for anyone interested in community action” (1974:149).

I have elsewhere (Heyman 2007, 2010) discussed the way in which geographers in the late 1960s and early 1970s missed the fundamental point of the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI): its wholesale critique, as part of a more generalized critique of power, of the social scientific mode of knowledge production that privileges elite knowledge and the system of higher education which reproduces that mode of knowledge production.. Like the

DGEI more generally, *The Trumbull Community* documents a set of struggles to reconfigure power relations—not simply to change policies—around housing, recreation, and policing through a reconceptualized mode of knowledge production and a reimagined role for academic geographers.

Peet asks, “what meaningful (revolutionary) role could a group of university-related intellectuals, like the Detroit Geographical Expedition, possibly play in an area like Trumbull?” (1974:148). He misses the radical thrust of the DGEI because he fails to see that it was attempting to fundamentally shift the balance power in knowledge production from “university-related intellectuals” to ordinary people and in so doing to achieve exactly what he desires: “to overcome the effects of generations of alienation, social fragmentation, and the pervading sense of powerlessness” (1974:149). Peet does not recognize that the DGEI was reimagining the role of academic geographers away from traditional experts “providing useful information *to* communities and working as advocates *on behalf of* community groups” (ibid., emphasis added), towards pedagogues who widen access to knowledge production as a radical move to help people become better equipped to organize and take control over their communities. Despite Peet’s reading of *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community* shows the connection between knowledge production and organized community power that is a powerful model of political action. With emergent movements such as the Right to the City and Black Lives Matter, coupled with the deepening neoliberalization of higher education, this lesson is just as important today as it was in the early 1970s. As this paper now becomes readily available through *Antipode*, it’s important to call attention to this key feature of the DGEI.

The Trumbull Community is an ensemble of documents related to a partnership between the academics of the DGEI and the community group, People Concerned About Urban Renewal (PCAUR), that was housed in the Trumbull Community Center, rather than a single piece of work. Despite Peet’s misreading, each section of *Field Notes No.4* shows that the project was “about” the need to reconstruct power relationships within the domain of knowledge production as a vital part of reconstructing them more broadly, rather than simply “about” the specific struggles of the community around issues of housing, recreation, and policing. As the “Foreward” (sic) makes clear, the partnership between academics of the DGEI and members of

PCAUR was more akin to participatory action research (PAR; see Heyman 2007) than to the “advocacy” model that Peet (1974:149) imagines, where the academics are “providing useful information to communities and working as advocates on behalf of community groups”. Rather, the DGEI conducted a “free community planning class” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:1) that derived its direction from the issues facing the community and sought to equip community members with technical and conceptual tools for organized action. As *The Trumbull Community* makes clear, it was not the academic “advocates” who “provided” information to the community and spoke on their behalf, but community members themselves who conducted the research, wrote the reports, and advocated on their own behalf before powerful organizations, such as the Detroit Housing Commission, the Board of Governors of Wayne State University, and the Detroit Police Department. The DGEI academics played a decidedly supporting role, “assist[ing]” and training members of PCAUR who participated in the community planning class. Thus, the DGEI’s primary function was *pedagogical*.

This pedagogy, however, was directly linked to the issues facing the Trumbull neighborhood, as PCAUR member Sam Stark explains in a interview transcribed in the *Field Notes*. The point of the community planning class was to “break down the class barriers, the acceptance that only certain people have the brains, the expertise, the knowledge or experience to determine what is right and proper and make decisions for us”, which is a necessary step towards “eliminat[ing] the landlord-tenant relationship and the profit motive in housing ... We are also raising the possibility of cooperatives oriented towards businesses. Businesses owned and controlled by the community—groceries, stores, laundromats, etc., the types of basic retail services a community needs to survive without outside interests practicing the diseconomies of the ghetto upon us” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:9). For Sam, reconstructing power relations within the domain of knowledge production is a necessary pedagogical project that is part of the struggle to gain control over housing and the local economy: “We are organizing around the need for a change in power relationships between institutions and communities ... the programs operating out of the Trumbull Community Center provide a service and more importantly they educate people to the need for a long-term struggle” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:10).

This connection between knowledge production and community control is evident in the three main sections of the *Field Notes*, on housing, recreation, and policing, where community-written reports represent new, non-expert knowledge produced by community members themselves that demonstrate community competence in governance. As the conclusion to the housing report states, “Trumbull residents have been forced into a struggle for the *control of the land* on which the community is located. The struggle means challenging the ideology that determines which interests are to participate in the planning process and whose plans are given the most serious consideration. The need for good housing and a safe environment will only be met when the community is allowed to determine how its land is developed and how its people are treated” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:27). “Control of the land” is grounded in the ability to create “plans” and participate in the planning process—that is, to produce knowledge from the perspective of the community itself. Overturning power relations in planning requires overturning power relations on the “ideological” level—that is, in the domain of knowledge production.

The third section of the *Field Notes*, on policing, provides a clear example of how knowledge production is linked to community control. This section includes a study of the “The Geographical Pattern of Police Effectiveness” that was produced by the community planning class with the assistance of DGEI academics. The report uses mapping and correlation analysis of crime and policing statistics to compare the level and effectiveness of police protection in the Cass-Trumbull neighborhood to other parts of Detroit. The analytical conclusion is of a “pattern of unequal protection ... revealing poor protection in the central city (with the exception of the central business district area of Precinct 1) and good protection in the almost exclusively white, higher income sections of the northwest and northeast” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:43). The heart of the analysis that leads to this conclusion is a graph, Figure 6, which shows the “protection gap” between the “best protected” areas and the “protection rate” in other precincts, as measured by the “number of police per 1,000 population relative to the crime rate” (ibid.). This graph, the accompanying maps, and the report itself constitute a bold claim to a new piece of knowledge that has been created by reinterpreting the police department’s own statistics, thus producing the very concept of a “protection gap”.

Importantly, the report does not end by recommending a mere adjustment of police officer distribution: “Simply putting more police in the community may not be the answer, but some method of effective protection must be found” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:50). Instead, it uses the production of a conceptual object called the “protection gap” as the basis for asserting the right of the community to participatory governance: “The community viewpoint is that the community has a right to better protection and should be involved in planning for its own safety if the Police Department cannot ensure good protection. Such cooperation has not been sought by the DPD because it tends to regard people living in poor communities as the enemy, and because they claim (with the help of dubious statistics) that they are in fact being effective” (ibid.). Knowledge production is intimately tied to control over the community through control over policing; thus, a transformation of social relations in both domains is necessary.

Though the section on policing is the strongest example of how knowledge changes when produced from a non-expert perspective, it is the section on recreation that most clearly shows how knowledge production can lead to successful community action. The “Report on the Need for Maintaining Matthaei as Recreational Space for the Cass-Trumbull Community” uses geographic analysis and tools (i.e. mapping) to show both the quantitative and qualitative needs of the neighborhood for recreational space (it shows a lack of safe, clean, open spaces compared to other parts of the city). However, the introduction to the report demonstrates how this production of knowledge fits within the context of community action. The report, which was produced by the community planning class with the assistance of DGEI academics, became the basis for a publicity campaign that gained the attention of then-State Senator Coleman Young, as well as local TV stations and newspapers. The report was also the basis for a presentation to the Student-Faculty Council of Wayne State, which “decided to reverse its original position and support the community plan for the area” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:30). These actions and the report ultimately caused the Wayne State Board of Governors to scuttle plans for turning the contested area into a parking lot. Thus, the production of knowledge was key to achieving this significant community victory.

Peet’s critique of *The Trumbull Community* suggests that it provides interesting insights into discrete local struggles but lacks a larger, political-theoretical coherence that would make it

useful in a “more general, political struggle”. Seen through the lens of traditional academic expertise in the realm of knowledge production, perhaps it looks that way; seen through the lens of a reconceptualization of the role of academic geographers as pedagogues who help widen access to knowledge production as a radical move to help people become better equipped to organize and take control over their communities, it emerges as a powerfully coherent challenge to dominant social relations, both inside academia and outside as well. Now that *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community* is readily available, along with the earlier *Field Notes*, the pedagogical model of the DGEI may help us today to reimagine the political role of academic geographers, not just in community-based work but in the classroom as well.

References

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