

usg newsletter

UNION OF SOCIALIST GEOGRAPHERS

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A lot of changes in the USG were adopted in the Annual General Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, this past April. The purpose of this issue of the Newsletter is to summarize these changes.

First, the governing structure was streamlined. The former office of President and the rotating office of Newsletter Editor were combined into the new office of Corresponding Secretary, to which I was elected. The offices of Treasurer and Membership Chair were also combined, and Penny Nanopoulos at UCLA was elected to that. It was further decided that these two people ought to be reasonably adjacent to one another from now on, in order to speed up communication and co-ordination.

Second, the AGM agreed that the Newsletter had strayed much too far from its original purpose: to serve as a newsletter. As it took on papers and reports on research in progress, it became a burden beyond the reasonable capacity of the Simon Fraser local to bear alone. Many of you will remember our tardy realization of this injustice and our resolution to rotate the editorial function among all the larger locals. This approach gave each local an opportunity to showcase its interests, leaving BC with just the actual printing and mailing. All went well for a while, but then the fragmentation and dispersal of the USG membership disrupted the new approach (the Socialist Diaspora? someone could do a Monte Carlo simulation of socialist geographers' diffusion from the early red nodes across western Geografia -- "The Pink Osmosis"). Even these functions became an excessive drain on the shrinking labor power of SF or any other local, as did the editorial functions eventually. The San Antonio AGM, therefore, decided to reduce the Newsletter to a forum for announcements, so that it would not tax the resources of the single individuals that will be publishing it henceforth. It is to be distributed AT LEAST once a year, on or before March 1, in order to co-ordinate USG activities at AAG and CAG meetings. It may come out more frequently, should the Corresponding Secretary feel so inclined.

Third, most people at the AGM seemed gloomy and guilt-ridden about the ebb in USG activities the last two or three years. I would like to offer a few opinions on this matter, which I think were shared by many at the AGM. It is true that we have stagnated, as witnessed in the troubles we've had with the Newsletter and our general low profile at the last three AAG and CAG conferences. A number of factors contribute to these doldrums.

One of these undoubtedly is this depression, the latest in the crises of capitalism. Instructorships, research positions, post-docs, and planning jobs are scarce and relatively low-paying. Teaching and research assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships are likewise. In short, a lot of us find ourselves scrambling for the material means of subsistence, which does not leave much time for the USG. We must also keep in mind the powerful inducements to neglect our socialist principles in order to get, keep, or advance in a job, a pressure that particularly affects us academics in our peculiar position in the capitalist class structure.

Another factor stagnating us is the maturation of our analyses. By that, I mean that an increasing proportion of our membership has acquired a fuller understanding of the many divisive issues within socialist thought and practice -- and has become committed to particular approaches. These span the range: orthodox Marxists-Leninists, Trotskyites, Maoists, the Young Marx-ists, anarchists, and so forth. The resulting factionalism sometimes rules out rather than heightens dialogue and usually excludes newcomers from our debates. We have to confront this ideological fragmentation but should at all times keep in mind that the USG must be as much a teaching or informative organization as a forum for debate.

A third and perhaps the most direct cause for us sitting dead in the water is the Socialist Diaspora. Ten years ago, socialist geography consisted of a horde of graduate students clustered around the "first generation" luminaries, e.g., Dave Harvey at Johns Hopkins, Dick Peet and Jim Blaut at Clark, Michael Eliot-Hurst at Simon Fraser, and perhaps Bill Bunge in his peregrinations -- all radicalized by their student experiences in the 1960's. Five years ago, socialist geography had mushroomed as some of the students finished their Ph.D.'s and started new centers in the still expanding major research universities that hired them. This was perhaps the heyday of the USG -- many locals in Ph.D.-granting institutions being replenished by students who still recalled the 1960's positively.

Then, the negative aspects of the socialist geography diffusion took over. More and more Ph.D.'s and ABD's left the centers of socialist research in geography at a time of shrinking budgets and enrollments in academia. People gratefully accepted positions in strictly BA- or MA-granting institutions, community colleges, and small religious schools, if they could find academic work at all. Increasingly, we are cut off from training more socialist scholars, whether because of employment outside of research universities, lay-off or the fear of lay-off from such institutions, or the paucity of new graduate students (i.e., graduate students willing to explore such studies in light of the fiercely competitive employment situation awaiting future Ph.D.'s). The distribution of socialist geographers in academia has certainly extended, but they find themselves isolated -- the critical mass for sustaining an active USG local is scarcely to be found. In short, we are in a crisis of reproduction.

A fourth factor is the Socialist Geography Speciality Group within the AAG. As healthy a development as this is within the AAG, it does have a number of negative side-effects outside the AAG. Above all, it drains time, energy, and money from the USG. Equally importantly, its becoming the major locus of socialist geography in the US cuts off many American and Canadian socialist geographers from participating fully because of the cost of joining the AAG. It further cuts off international communication among socialist geographers by absorbing American and much Canadian research. The SGSG simply cannot fulfil the many roles of the USG: international communication, participation in socialist scholarship by geographers who cannot (or do not want to) join the AAG, and the informality of USG activities.

So, we do have a problem. Now is the time to tackle it, before it damages the USG beyond salvaging. Each of us needs to think about and communicate possible solutions appropriate to the new circumstances. I'd like to make a few suggestions now and solicit feedback for the March 1 Newsletter and discussion at the AAG meetings and in the AGM at the CAG meetings.

We ought to go back to our former, notorious habit of attending particularly reactionary papers in groups and criticizing their authors en masse. This draws attention to our approach and helps sensitize their audiences to these authors' and papers' weaknesses and hidden agendas. This very positive function can be carried a bit far when we demolish basically well-meaning authors who might have been friendly to our views had we not utterly humiliated them. We should confine our attacks to

those people who fully warrant it and employ a friendlier criticism on those who might be attracted to a Marxist approach, perhaps in private. Carrot and stick tactics, so to speak.

We have to define our education function within academia. It is vital to continue the development of young socialist scholars, but it is probable that the training of Ph.D.'s will become a smaller portion of our pedagogical work, even in Ph.D.-granting institutions. It would seem advisable to encourage already established academics to explore socialist approaches to their work, perhaps through constructive critiques at meetings and private discussions,

Additionally, some thought might be given to training the MA student, who may be heading for planning or teaching positions. Similarly, socialist geographers must pay increasing attention to BA students in geography and planning majors. We must consider our responsibilities to educate the non-geography students who pass through our general education courses. In sum, the diminishing opportunities for training socialist scholars in geography could be considered an opportunity to expand socialist ideas and practices among the generally educated populace, or at least to open many minds to the actual nature and necessity for socialism. Perhaps we ought to resuscitate the USG textbook for introductory geography courses. It had been envisioned as an anthology covering socialist perspectives on environment, population, urbanism, culture, etc. Neil Smith and Phil O'Keefe had agreed to edit it, but the project had to be shelved since only one of the solicited manuscripts was eventually submitted. This would seem to be a particularly useful project and might just revitalize the USG while expanding our basic educational function.

As for the presentation of research, Antipode and similar journals in related fields seem to be the correct forum for finished written products. In the USA, the SGSG, the AAG, and various regional meetings are the conventional outlets for relatively polished verbal presentations, as is the CAG in Canada. Similar outlet exists in the other countries boasting USG members. The USG does have one function that none of these can possibly provide: the presentation of work in progress and work by students for friendly advice and criticism. We should go back to scheduling strictly USG sessions alongside AAG and CAG meetings. To further encourage participation by students whose financial resources may be a bit strained by the costs of attending meetings, we could also arrange free or cheap lodging for USG'ers, much as

MEMBERSHIP/SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL FORM

_____ I wish to renew my USG membership through January, 1984. I understand that membership includes subscription to the USG Newsletter. Please find enclosed my check or money order for \$5.

_____ I do not wish to join the USG at this time but would like to receive the USG Newsletter. Please find enclosed my check or money order for \$5.

_____ Please find enclosed \$10 as a renewal of our institutional subscription.

SEND THIS SLIP TOGETHER WITH YOUR
CHECK OR MONEY ORDER TO:

Penny Nanopoulos
Department of Geography
University of California
Los Angeles, Calif. 90024
USA

NAME: _____

we have done in the past. The cramped fleabag room provides a real focus for USG planning and activities (the Lafayette Hotel in New Orleans comes to mind....).

These suggestions are tendered simply to get discussion going on the nature and fate of the USG. They are totally biased by my own base here in the United States and may have nothing to do with the experiences of the USG in other countries. I, for one, would hate to see the USG fold, but perhaps that, too, is a possibility we need to discuss. Please take the time to write me a note with your thoughts by January 30, so that I can incorporate them in the March 1 Newsletter. News and announcements are also needed.

By now, all USG memberships and subscriptions are due. We need money to get our next Newsletter out this March. PLEASE renew your membership/subscription as soon as possible by sending in your dues (which have been reduced in light of the change in the Newsletter's character) together with this slip. Please encourage others to join the USG, hopefully enough to maintain an active local of socialist scholars and students in your area. A restatement of our aims is in order here: "the purpose of our union is to work for the radical restructuring of our societies in accord with the principles of social justice. As geographers and as people we will contribute to this process in two complementary ways: (1) organising and working for radical change in our communities, and (2) developing geographic theory to contribute to revolutionary struggle." For further information and the names of USG people in your vicinity, write to: Chrys Rodrigue at the address on the front cover.