



SYMPOSIUM

The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute Then and Now...:

Commentaries on *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community*

Detroit, Geographical, Expedition, Institute:

Unpacking the History and Structure of the DGEI

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The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI) began in Detroit, Michigan, in 1968, where it was co-founded and co-directed by Dr. William Bunge, a white American geographer trained in spatial science, and Gwendolyn Warren, an African American community leader. In a public conversation with Professor Cindi Katz at the City University of New York in 2014, Warren explained that geographers at the time were asking themselves: “How were we going to make it [geography] more relevant? And how we were going to use the tools to assist people in urban communities in making change?” (Warren and Katz 2014). As DGEI’s Research Director, Bunge focused on designing yearly expeditions into Detroit communities, where academics and local residents would together study a pressing social problem. And as the Administrative Director, Warren led the educational mission within the Institute.

The DGEI’s founding was part of the growing wave of radical scholarship within North American Anglophone geography. At the Ann Arbor, Michigan, meeting of the Association of



American Geographers in 1969, a contingent of DGEI members “converged, collaborated, and synergized” (Castree 2000:955) with other radical geographers, who began to recognize, and define, themselves as a group for the first time (Peake and Sheppard 2014). Prominent among this group were those from Clark University who had just started the journal *Antipode* that year. *Antipode* was the result of graduate students, including Ben Wisner—who edited the first issue—and faculty members, such as David Stea and Jim Blaut, who wanted a journal to read, and publish in, that represented their view of geography. Their goal, explained in the inaugural issue’s editorial, was “radical change—replacement of institutions and institutional arrangements in our society that can no longer respond to changing societal needs ... that often serve no other purpose than perpetuating themselves” (Stea 1969:1).

The DGEI shared this vision. As explained in an *Antipode* article by Ron Horvath (1971:73-74), a DGEI member at Michigan State University, “ ... the black community and some professional geographers [attempted] to build an institution that would link the university to the needs of the disadvantaged Blacks in the city of Detroit. The activities of this institution included both community-related research and university-level education”. This last point is essential, and lost when the DGEI is referred to simply as the Detroit Geographical Expeditions. DGEI members linked research and education because it was through the Institute that community members could be involved in knowledge production. Instead of seeing knowledge as something to be transferred, either up the chain to the academy or down to students, they favored training people to be able to identify the roots of problems, and then solve them.

The Institute brought free university classes to members of the Detroit community in a way similar to the rural extension model practiced by land grant colleges. Courses were first offered through the University of Michigan (UM) in the summer of 1969, before shortly moving to Michigan State University (MSU), and then ending entirely in the fall of 1970. At the height of the Institute’s operations in the spring of 1970, 470 enrolled students were able to carry a full

course load chosen from eleven courses across ten departments. While there were over 50 faculty members interested in teaching—and willing to donate their salaries to pay the students’ tuition—the number of courses offered was limited by the funds available to pay the university’s record-keeping fees (Horvath 1971). Students who successfully completed a year of coursework could enroll at any Michigan university as sophomores. In the fall of 1970, 17 students entered MSU, 11 went to Wayne State University, and three went to UM, while other students applied to universities outside of Detroit (DGEI 1971). In addition to the commitment to volunteer faculty, free tuition, and the admission of successful students to sophomore status, the Institute also ensured that classroom education was based on the use of case studies, that DGEI students had resources equal to all other students, and that the program was under community control (Horvath 1971).

The Expeditions built on the Institute’s educational mission of training residents of the local communities to be contributors to knowledge rather than just sources of knowledge to be appropriated. The latter was part of what Bunge (1969:39) called the “white-pith-helmet mentality” that was central to centuries of colonial expeditions. Bunge wanted to preserve the revolutionary potential of the expedition model, where discovery and understanding can lead to change. But he forcefully argued that the human condition was as equally deserving of exploration as other features of the earth’s surface. By undervaluing the study of cities, geographers had left “vast stretches of the map ... as ‘unexplored’ as Antarctica in 1850” (Bunge 1969:38).

Warren and Bunge relayed the results of their Expeditions in their “Field Notes”, which appeared yearly from 1969-1972. We can get a more precise understanding of the Expeditions by examining *Field Notes No.2*, which took the form of a report on school decentralization (Colvard and Cozzens 1970). This project was built upon two courses offered by the DGEI, on “Cartography” and “Geographical Aspects of Urban Planning”. The courses’ students, along

with community groups and academics, were responding to a request by State Senator (and, later, five-time Mayor) Coleman Young and Director of the West Central Organization John Watson to analyze the Board of Education’s proposals for school redistricting (D’Ignazio 2014). The DGEI produced an analysis so sophisticated, detailed, and convincing—showing that four of the Board’s eight plans were illegal, and the others put the legal maximum number of black children under white voter control—that the Board of Education was forced to respond to it. In contrast to the Board’s report, which was prepared with a \$350,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, the DGEI was able to produce a plan for approximately \$200 that “placed the same number of Whites under black voter control as Blacks under white control, while still allowing both Blacks and Whites to control the vast majority of their own schools” (Horvath 1971:78). As described in *Field Notes No.4* (Society for Human Exploration 1972), the last Detroit Expedition was held in 1971 in the community of Trumbull, and focused on the problems of housing, police protection, and health services. But other Geographical Expeditions were led in cities across the world in the following years, including in Toronto and Vancouver—within the framework of Bunge’s Canadian-American Geographical Expedition—and Sydney, Australia, by Ron Horvath, who left Michigan State in 1972 (Peake and Sheppard 2014:310).

After five years without a university position, Bunge—who was fired from his job as an assistant professor in the Department of Geography at Wayne State in 1967—moved to Ontario where he taught on a few one-year appointments. He then left academia to drive taxis in Toronto, and later Québec, where he also ran for a seat with the Communist Party of Québec in the 1990s. In an interview in 1976 for the series “Geographers on Film”, he linked his work in the DGEI with driving a taxi. Rather than choosing the “imprisonment” of being on a university campus, he argued, it is better to “actually go out and do it [geography]”. Driving a taxi cab, he said, “is the single job that I know, education through labor, where you really learn about the city” (Bunge 1976:74). Warren took extension courses through the Institute and graduated with an



MFA in Curriculum and Instructions from MSU. She has dedicated her career to public sector administration, where she has worked in the areas of education, health, and social and community services in California, Florida, and Georgia.

In the nearly 50 years since the DGEI was founded and carried out its major works, the Expedition and the Institute has had an arguably limited effect on how academic geographers conduct research. But the heart of its mission lay less in academia than in changing communities and the people who lived in them. So, given this, it is fitting that perhaps the greatest accomplishment of DGEI was training so many people to concretely engage with important social problems. Reflecting on the DGEI's legacy, Warren concluded that: "We were successful. There were people who participated in this project, in this major urban environment, who were changed forever. And as a result of the lessons we learned, and the experiences we had, they've gone on to introduce, and create, the same fight ... [T]he message about honoring the community, making children the focus for the future generation, investing in our elders, is basically something that I've incorporated in my life and all works that I've done since then. And I do believe those folks that I spent my younger years with trying to change a city, or save a city, are probably out there doing the same thing" (Warren and Katz 2014).

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