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Commentary 2: Bunge's *Fitzgerald: Geography of Revolution* as geography classic?

Fitzgerald, Bunge's great book on inner city Detroit, stirs any reader at a number of different levels. Its raw, uncompromising style, its blatant radicalism, its engaged scholarship, hits at the gut level, makes you angry, perhaps even provokes you to act. Yet the text stirs other emotions, too, more delicate, tender emotions, because *Fitzgerald* is equally a loving hue and cry for humanity, for urban life, especially for black urban life. In a strange sense, it is a book that might make any reader, 40 years down the line, *nostalgic*. Nostalgic, because then there was still hope, then there was still radical activism, geographical activism, scholarly engagement.

Back then, urban communities had not been entirely decimated by blockbusting and white-flight, by drugs and deindustrialization, by bitterness and bad faith. And there was a role for geographers in the heat of the action, allying themselves with ordinary people, making connections, putting themselves on the line, outside the academy, beyond the hallowed ramparts of university life. (Rereading Bunge reminds us how the University Inc., as a gentrifying property machine, was already in motion even in the late 1960s. Soon it would learn how to commodify knowledge and knowledge producers.)

That deep sense of nostalgia is most vivid in the assorted black and white photos, documentary-style photos animating *Fitzgerald*, some of bright-faced, smiling black kids, dancing kids, hopeful kids. Another is of a block meeting at

Bunge's own Fitzgerald home, where Bill, a burly white guy, waspy-looking with a goatee beard, is surrounded by black faces, by *female* black faces, young women sitting calmly, reservedly, dignified in their rage. It is amazing how much of Bunge's text is brought alive by black African-American women, by young neighborhood organizers like Gwen Warren, a teenage soul sister who shone with idealism and went on to lead the Detroit Geographical Expedition. Between the diminutive Warren and Bunge, the giant haystack geographer from Wayne State, an unusual political bond developed, a complex human affinity; they needed one another, and both knew it, just as their respective communities knew it.

Bunge was a privileged bourgeois kid from Milwaukee and he is not afraid to admit it, even if it often makes for a painful read. ('Support your local police,' a sixties' saying went, 'beat yourself up!') Therein lies another complex emotion dramatizing *Fitzgerald: guilt*. William Bunge Sr., Bill's pop, was head of the fifth largest mortgage bank in the USA and so was complicit in much of the redlining Bill Jr. denounces. Bunge's divided self considers the rich as equally schizoid: 'Personally, the rich are loyal to each other,' he says (1971: 135), 'often kindly, truly concerned with their children and tremendously full of humorous sense ... But, at the same time, these "generous" people perpetuate a system that sucks the poor dry.' 'Being raised bourgeois,' Bunge says (1979: 172), 'I always knew my class were thieves. It was the explicitness of the misery this produced, not the process, which I had to discover.'

He knew the rich close-up, their world of moneymaking, the structural injustices they perpetrate, the rules of their 'abstract' oppression; it was the concreteness, the outcome, that he had to comprehend, had to root out. Thus the urgent political task: to bring global and national problems down to earth, way down to earth, to the scale of people's normal lives, there where they can be revealed and contested, where they can be changed. Bunge walked the talk, moved to Fitzgerald, gained trust within black caucuses, within the black community, initially because of music: Bunge was a white dude who swayed to a black groove, understood black rhythms, played a mean, Monk-esque jazz piano, and thereby earned street cred in the 'hood.

What emerged in *Fitzgerald* is a stark rejection of campus geography, of cool distance, of citing, emphasizing instead *sighting*, of really seeing, of a situated knowledge; not a cowardly empiricism that hides behind the ruse of 'objectivity' but a geography that fiercely interprets data, calls a spade a spade. Bunge puts cartography through its political paces: the simplicity of descriptive maps makes for better propaganda, he says, for better agitation, for better ammunition to challenge City Hall. Kids were getting knocked down by speeding cars, hit and run accidents involving white commuters; there was nowhere for them to play; play space meant either beat-up sidewalks or semi-derelict lots, strewn with broken glass and menacing jetsam and flotsam; slum landlords were desisting from doing repair; buildings were becoming evermore forlorn, ripe for resale, for inflated rents, for future value-added; an expressway was scheduled to hack through part of Fitzgerald; Marygrove College's campus was encroaching, and so was Bunge's employer's, Wayne State's; walls were going up, bisecting and dividing people around class and race.

Needless to say, Bill's guilt-trip meant he was oftentimes too overwhelming as a personality; anyone who knew him, who still knows him, who still receives his periodic phone calls,

monologues bemoaning – usually correctly – the state of the world – know he is a pain in the ass, an obsessive activist (in the worst sense), a compulsive talker and ultimately a self-destructive force. (He could not have achieved what he admirably achieved if he had not been.) Bill never stops talking. I once spent several days at his Arthabaska home, a converted cheese factory, in deepest Quebec winter. Snow fell for days on end, piled up in drifts, and we could not go outdoors. There was no place to hide from this brilliant, loquacious man, who is also an insomniac! (In truth, he and Donia, his saintly Guadeloupian wife, were gracious and wonderful hosts. Bill even came to meet me at the bus station in a massive blizzard. On the journey back home, he let half-a-dozen neighborhood kids hitch a ride in the backseat.)

For one brief moment, for one brief sparkling instant, Bunge's *Fitzgerald* illustrated the potential of the Geographical Expedition, its potential for radicalizing the discipline of Geography, for radicalizing the real geography of the city. For a while a truly revolutionary theory, as well as a truly revolutionary Geography, was glimpsed, felt deep in the heart. Fifteen years ago, after that trip to see Bunge, I speculated – doubtless naively – on the possibility of reinstigating a similar geographical venture in our own time (Merrifield, 1995). Could we, too, I wondered then, plan something geographical, something radically geographical in the sense that Bunge conceived it? (In hindsight, Bunge's *Fitzgerald* is probably as raving mad as Herzog's *Fitzcaraldo*.) I suggested that Bunge's work, defects notwithstanding, did at least show geographers a possible way *into* the dilemmas that should bother us, dilemmas about our roles as committed scholars, dilemmas about what we should do to save life on planet urban.

I still believe that. But I know now that there will never be anyone like Bill Bunge again in Geography. *Fitzgerald* is another way of telling stories about city life, about its horrors and threats, its joys and possibilities. Our cities

continue to crumble, disintegrate financially and socially, yet geographers fret about tenure reviews and research evaluations, suddenly turn meek and subservient when their careers are put on the line. And so, here, another emotion strikes, strikes low and hard: how can we, today, we as geographers, especially we radical geographers, not feel *shame* reading Bunge's great book? In a big way, we have let him down, maybe let ourselves down, shied away from the book's central thrust, accepted the easy option. That shame should, like Bunge himself, gnaw away inside us, prick our consciences, force us once again to consider who we are as geographers and what we are doing, how we can make ourselves useful (or useless).

And if anyone should ask if *Fitzgerald* is a Geography classic, we can laugh in their faces. A geographical classic, yes . . . certainly; but a Geography classic, with an upper case disciplinary 'G'? Hardly. For that would be pure hypocrisy, would it not, given the way Bunge got ousted from the institution, given the way *Fitzgerald* has been totally ignored by the academy until this day. (It was ignored in its own day, too: Schenkman was the only publisher to touch the

book with a bargepole, and even then Bunge had to cough up the dough himself to pay for printing.) *Fitzgerald* is no Geography classic: how could it be, considering the way the discipline has moved in the exact opposite direction to almost everything this book says? To that degree, anyone interested in a career in Geography today, a career as a *professional* geographer – with tenure, citations, grants, the whole bit – should pass up reading *Fitzgerald*. It is not a book for you. Should you read it, should it touch you, inspire you, prompt you to take action, beware and be warned: BIG TROUBLE lies ahead . . .

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Commentary 3: Reflections on Bill Bunge's *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*

What drew me to William (Bill) Bunge's classic urban text *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution* is likely what drew in so many others: its radical and yet simple centering of humanity. Unlike so many texts written by geographers and other social scientists, its pages prioritize people, portrayed in large, fearless black and white photographs of faces, families, children, homes, street corners, and city parks. From the dedication and acknowledgements of the book's opening to its concluding pages, community

members and histories are not only centered analytically but embodied, their struggles revealed and revealed in.

Why was this so exciting and why does it remain so? *Fitzgerald* somehow managed to cut through that which can be alienating, elitist, and exclusionary about academic texts themselves. We use unnecessarily fancy language and theories to narrate fleetingly the astounding realities in which we live. Bunge was bold and inspired to work collaboratively to map, document, record, narrate, and show – in inspiringly straightforward ways – the racialized and classed geographies in which we live: where certain groups of people and ways of life are valued over others.