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"GEOGRAPHY AND THE WORKING CLASS:
A MARXIAN SURVEY"

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GEOGRAPHY AND THE WORKING CLASS OR RADICAL GEOGRAPHY RIDES AGAIN

A MARXIAN SURVEY AND A MOCK OUTRAGE*

ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT. The trend toward a marxian based geography is briefly surveyed and suggestions are made for the further understanding of this tendency. In particular, it is suggested that a better, and more concrete understanding of the concept of the working class is critical to the further advance of revolutionary consciousness within geographical science. The marxist position of the working class is outlined and is applied to the functioning of geography as a part of the political economy. The consequences of this analysis are outlined and some suggestions for further development of a radical geography are made. The critical idea is that the current radicalization taking place in geography is a function of capitalist crisis, and that the success of this radical movement in geography will be determined by the degree to which a working class line is held.

Keywords: POETICS, GEOGRAPHY, REVOLUTION, PROLETARIATE!

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MANIFESTO

It is a common misconception of American Geographers to believe the discipline in which they labor is by its' nature conservative,¹ and that it is void of the political-intellectual controversy that characterizes other academic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, economics, history, and philosophy.² In particular, the concept of a marxian geography is one that has been little noticed and less understood;³ in fact, until recently, many might have doubted that there did exist such an entity. However, recent works,⁴ some

1. The notion of the immutable conservatism of geography is widely held by geographers and others. For some it seems an article of faith, for others a relentless and debilitating truth. Only a few see the paradox. To be conservative is to be radical. see "The Paradoxes of Hui-Shih," (Needham, 1956).

2. The literature on political controversy and the above mentioned disciplines is vast. Sahlins and Service (1960) pay explicit attention to the contribution of Marx to the development of anthropological thought, as have many other prominent anthropologists (Aberle, k., 1968; Harris, 1968). Sociology has long nurtured a marxian and dissenting tradition (Mills, 1959), and Economics (Sweezy-Baran, 1966), History (Williams, 1964), and Philosophy (Sarte 62?; Bree 1972) have always been the arenas in which the basic marxian-bourgeois dichotomies have been cast.

3. During the period of the Cold War, there was a tendency in western scholarship to confuse marxian geography with the practice of geography in the Soviet Union. This confusion is manifest in an otherwise informative article on soviet geography by Matley (1966).

4. Most of this work remains in manuscript and is highly scattered, (Horvath-Akatiff, 1970). Doubtless many contributions have been lost owing to the censure of orthodoxy, (McKnight, J. 1964?; Bunge, 1968a), Others are beginning to trickle into print (Akatiff, 1974). Antipode is prominent in its efforts to publish such matters.

by distinguished and honored practitioners of the discipline,⁵ have begun to define a marxian line in geography, and this paper is intended to review some of these recent contributions and to place them in a broader perspective of marxian history⁶ in order that our further developments along this line might be spared the mistakes of earlier generations.

I will attempt to establish, at least through outline, the following propositions about geography and revolution. First, it will be argued that geography, in spite of the manifest political conservatism of many of its practitioners⁷ is not by nature a conservative discipline, but rather is a radical subject in the sense of radical meaning fundamental,

5. Bunge, William. Fitzgerald, Geography of an American Revolution, Shenckman/GLP, Boston, [197].

Harvey, David. Social Justice and the City, John Hopkins, Baltimore, 1973.

6. Few are even aware of the existence of a strong marxian, anti-nazi position within Intra-bellum (1918-39) german geography, (Bunge, 1968b). Wittfoegel wrote an opus on the subject of marxian geography vs. "geopolitik" which remains untranslated. Lenin compiled much of his work in cognizance of geographical science (Lenin-Antev), but little analysis of the material has transpired. Special mention must be made of Kropotkin and Reclus who were both geographers and revolutionaries, and of the works of Marx and Engels, especially the Communist Manifesto, Dialectics of Nature, and the primitive accumulation sections of Capital, are of primary importance. Doubtless there is much more in all European and Asian literatures which remain to be discovered.

7. Figures published in the AAG newsletter (June-July '70), indicate geographers were more than twice as inclined to consider themselves "conservative" or "very conservative" than were the average of social scientists. The same survey indicated geographers were three times less inclined to designate themselves "left" on the political spectrum than the average social scientist.

and going to the heart of matters.⁸ Secondly, it will be argued that professional geography as it has evolved in the 20th century, especially in the United States, must be understood as a specialized sector of the labor market and not primarily as an intellectual-scientific discipline. It will be argued that the current crisis of the profession⁹ is more related to the crisis of employment of "professional" geographers, than to the exhaustion of intellectual tasks, or of important ideas relevant to the further development of the profession, and that the only solution to this professional crisis lies in a radical expansion of self-awareness and consciousness of purpose---not through marginal expansion into new fields of wage slavery.¹⁰

It will be further argued that the transformation of geography into a meaningful vehicle of human liberation will be

8. This is an old idea in physics. It has recently been given philosophical meaning for geographers in some of the works of Toumlin (1953) and Dolphin (1970). The best expression of this idea readily available to geographers are the comments of James A. Michener, reprinted in the December 1970 AAG newsletter. The celebrated novelist stated that he found geography "takes precedence over everything else, even history, because of the need to be grounded in the fundamentals which have governed and in a sense limited human development."

9. Almost every issue of professional publications include some aspect of this "crisis." Whether it be lack of jobs (Newsletter, June-July 72); lack of respect (Newsletter, Feb. '73) or lack of relevance (Serge newsletter), all these problems are subsumed in the reality of a declining comparative bid price for geographical labor, which is itself but a subset of general empauperization predicted by Marx and others.

10. The basic marxian analysis of "wage slavery" may be found in Marx's "Value, Price and Profit," available in many editions and languages.

accomplished through the vector of an empauperized minority of revolutionary and theoretical geographers, initially recruited from the co-called "middle-class," but ultimately of working-class origin. It is suggested that this class of geographer (ERG's)¹¹ will grow rapidly during the ensuing generation, especially as academic posts dry up, and alternate courses of professional survival (such as the Detroit and Toronto Expeditions, Saklan, DIG, etc.)¹² begin to emerge. Eventually--and probably sooner and more swiftly than any might imagine--the ERG's will no longer be a minority but a majority and a strong challenge to the intellectual hegemony of the State Aided Professors (SAP's) who currently dominate geography.

In this struggle, it appears likely that the ERG's will prevail, since the SAP's, in fact, have much more to gain by joining the intellectual revolution than by resisting it. This is especially so since the bourgeois status of geography has already slipped to the line of extinction, and the best

11. ERG's. A noun from Empauperized Revolutionary Geographers. Also the shifting sands of the desert; an uncommon, but predictable geographical phenomenon of great popular interest and fantasy.

12. There is lots of this "alternate Geography" going on. Doubtless some of the ERG's will gain both fame and fortune through their non-academic geographical enterprises. (In which case they will become REG's which are REGular Geographers who were at least once revolutionary and empauperized.) Still, the overwhelming characteristic of ERGish geography will be an inability to succeed within the framework of SAP (State Assisted Professional) geography, and a growing internal cohesiveness as numbers and issues grow.

strategy for survival--as a cognizant, proprietary science--
is through alliance with futures.¹³

The ERG's, however, are indifferent to this problem. As a proprietary entity, geography is merely a vehicle. For sentimental reasons it would be nice if Geography (in the sense of an Established Pillar of Society, etc.) turned out to be on the side of the people, but if not, it is nothing worth fighting over. The ERG's will out, one way or the other, and if their route is to forsake the "profession" which spawned them, so be it. Geography (estab. 1904) will shrivel like an unplucked grape...not to a raisin, but to a hard seed which may in some unforeseeable future sprout life anew, but for the present is dead.

13. Kuhn, T. S. Structure of Scientific Revolution (1962). The reason this is here is that Ronald Horvath said "everybody has to cite Kuhn these days." I hope I'm not late.

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