

“A Great Day in Toronto”

The Founding of the Union of Socialist Geographers



The Union of Socialist Geographers was founded in Toronto in May of 1974. The photo, "A Great Day in Toronto" was taken as the final event of the meetings which gave birth to a formal Socialist/Marxist thrust in Academic Geography. The photo was taken on the steps of the Toronto Geographical Expedition House, 283 Brunswick Ave, Toronto. The photo taking marked the conclusion to several days of meetings which led to the formation of the Union of Socialist Geographers. Present in the photo are many of the luminaries of Radical Geography: William Bunge, Jim Blaut, David Harvey, Dick Peet, Wilbur Zelinski, Gunnar Olsen, Ron Horvath, Ed VanderVelde, Nathan Edelson, Charles Ipcar and others, as well as the author. A significant proportion of those in the photo were at the time students and activists whose names and subsequent histories are yet unknown. Through publication of this photo it is hoped that the names and histories of more of those present will become known. The initial focus of the gathering was the awarding of the Griffith Taylor Medal in Human Exploration which occurred at a special session of the Association of Canadian Geographers being held concurrently in Toronto. The award was presented to Clark Akatiff by William Bunge. As a tangible item the award was effectively the photograph on display at this presentation. It is submitted that the celebrated photo "A Great Day in Harlem" is to Jazz, as "A Great Day in Toronto" is to Geography. Both are iconic photos of unique events marking a passage in the evolution of the respective intellectual and artistic forms.

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In session *Music and Rhapsody* Saturday, April 16, 2011. 9:00am

The Photos

I am old enough to have been one of the youngest of the Jazz Cats. I caught the last blast of the Big Bands, heard the last gasps of Dixie, I was there for the birth of the cool, with Bird, Bop, Diz, Jazz at the Philharmonic. Being a White boy in a black crowd. Don't forget Fats Domino, and Big Mama.

Yeh, I'm hip. I'm an old Hip Cat.

So in that context let me introduce you to:

“A Great Day in Harlem”



Taken in the 50's, a great day in Harlem includes many of the jazz greats of their time, at a time when jazz was moving out of the

black community, and going to college, Not all of the cats were there. Parker wasn't neither was Louis, but Monk was, and also PeeWee, and Mulligan, Diz ... all them cats. And there are all the unknowns...the kids on the sidewalk, and the greats that are near forgotten. Like Red Allen.

So allow us to use one iconic photo to introduce another. Iconic photos freeze a moment in time when things are coming together and destined to change greatly in the future.

Because we have much the same situation. We have the stars and we have the supporting players, we have the forgotten and the never known about. We have those who are not in the picture but should have been.

We have a perfect image of what I am trying to say by presenting "A Great Day in Toronto" to this meeting of Geographers.

How did I end up with this photograph?

I was a young man in 1974 when I was given a poster sized photograph that had been taken on the steps of the Toronto Geographical Expedition's House, at the conclusion of the meeting which organized the Union of Socialist Geographers.

I was given the photo because I had been awarded an "Explorer's Medal" by Bill Bunge, who thought I had hit upon some fundamental geographical principle in my paper "Assault on the Pentagon." It was also because I had been designated as organizer for the USG.

As an organizer I was not very effective. I made some attempts to follow through, wrote a few things, held a meeting here and there, visited Vancouver once, but four kids, no money and illness

in the family led to my abandoning geography for many years. In fact I had actually forgotten about the photograph until I retired and began a new assault on high grounds of geography.

Even then, I had lost it in the clutter of my storage archive, only to be rediscovered just prior to the deadline for this meeting.

So here it is:

A Great Day in Toronto



I'll just give you a minute to look at this picture. You can't help but notice how happy all those folks look. The imperialist power in Viet Nam had suffered defeat; The Watergate was unraveling the Nixon administration. We had gotten it together to form a real organization for Socialism in Geography. The future was ours.

Yes it was a great day in Toronto.

Let me tell you who is here.

And do to do that, I and going to make a little enlargement.



The good looking guy in the center is me.

On my left, and mightily amused, is Ron Horvath.

To my right are comrades Bunge and Blaut.

And there's Dick Peet. Good old Dick, he's been in since the start.

And of course there's David. Young guy, but with a rapidly rising star.

Wilbur Zenlinski was there, and Gunnar, and others not as well known, but should be like Nathan Edelson, and Jim Lyon, Ed VanderVelde. And lots more, most of whom show only in the larger photo.

Many of them were students in Toronto, or British Columbia, but also from Michigan State. What has become of them? Who knows. I had thought Sue Ruddick was one of them, but she admitted to coming in later.

Lost socialist geographers.

I guess I am really in that class but I am working on being rediscovered.

And I should mention people who were not in the photo but should have been like Michael Eliot-Hurst, and Jim Lemon, and especially Ben Wisner. Lots more too, I am forgetting some of the best... Jack Eichenbaum for sure, and Dick Walker. Howard Horowitz.

But you know, the Wave crested at that time, Mid 1970's. Michael E-H went mad. Horvath's found refuge at the literal antipodes. Bunge-- exile in French Canada, continued to write the most trenchant thoughts of his time, but in pretty complete isolation from the academy.

And to be truthful, there was a lot of competition between those Cocks of the Walk, that didn't exactly lead to a formation of a really effective movement for social change. There were lots of varying personal agendas, often selfish at core. Plus the backlash to the progressivism of the late 60's and early 70's was ever increasing, leading eventually to Reagan.

For Me? I just had to give up on it.

I had to get a job that paid real money.

Worked 6 to 3 for 20 years, in a municipal dump.

Don't pity me. You should have it so good.

Meanwhile, back in the Academy, David is getting all the young geographers to read Marx. An interesting development. I come to these meetings these days and all the young men are looking like the young men in the photo. It is a scruffy 70's look. That's pretty good after all these years. Everybody is a somekinda Marxist. I think I am back in the party again.

How Did It Happen?

The other day a distinguished professor of geography asked me what were the underlying factors that led to the USG.

My answer was it was the times. The late 60's and early 70's was a time like no other. It was a much more open and less paranoid period of time. People were not afraid of taking chances. You could think in a way that you cannot think today, and in a way that you could not have thought before.

It was the time of the Weather Underground, the SLA, The Panthers, Counter Intel Pro, It was a time of war and the time when the USA went down to defeat at the hands of a rag tag army of Vietnamese. It was a time of Black Liberation, Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll.

It was psychedelic.

The economy was down and revolution was in the air.

Miracles seemed possible.

Geography had to be affected by these forces. So people came out of the woodwork. Ben Wisner is critical. This is the thrust of Compassion. The Friends who are always there. Ron Horvath, Jim Blaut, Dave Stea, David Harvey, Dick Peet, Me, Ipcar... Things just started happening. . . At the center: Bunge the old Red Stalinist.

If we look at it geographically, Michigan was ground zero. That is where the MicMog meetings were held in the Mid 60. In Brighton, at a bistro like the one where Hoffa was last seen. These were significant in that they provided a forum for William Bunge. Into that mix came a California component, in me. I was hired as Assistant Professor Geography at Michigan State University.(66-69) Once there a year, I influenced Ron Horvath to leave Santa Barbara for MSU.(67-73?) Together, along with Michigan's Ed VanderVelde, and Charlie Ipcar from Maine, we formed a core of progressive radicalism, with a west coast tint.

Got very involved in the Student Anti War movement and then with the Detroit Expedition and Institute. Horvath, in particular became the primary actuator of the ideas of the Expedition. Ipcar did significant work as an activist for student housing.

Then there was the exceptional summer of 1968. The time of the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the Yippies and the defeat of the McCarthy anti war candidacy and the Election of Nixon. The AAG meetings were scheduled for 69 to be held in Chicago. In tacit protest of the police actions in Chicago the AAG moved the meetings to Ann Arbor. It was at that meeting that the movement jelled. Wisner from Clark, Eichenbaum from Michigan, Bunge from Detroit, The MSU crowd, Blaut and Stea , I am forgetting some.

It was in Ann Arbor, 1969, that the anvil was struck. the sparks from which ignited a movement in geography which led to the

formation of the USG and which burns brightly, if a bit staidly today in the halls of these meetings.

Let me say a few words of how I came to this movement in Geography.

It is the roots that I have in the Movement that arose in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 50's and early 60's that provide my utility to the development and understanding of Radical Geography.

I came to geography out of the Peace Movement. Geography seemed to me the kind of study that provided the best perspective on the problems which beset the world.

My wife and I met as anti nuclear war activists while undergraduates at San Jose State College. We and others, including Frank Ciecorka, whose art work you will recognize later in this paper, organized a 50 mile march from San Jose to San Francisco on Hiroshima Day 1959. We were a lonely and happy band of crusaders.



I graduated from SJS in 1960 and entered UCLA as a teaching assistant.

In Los Angeles I was a “Johnny Appleseed” of the burgeoning student movement. I lived in a large student dorm. Many undergraduates came from families who were or had been communists or other radicals from the days of the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s. Since I had been involved in the “HUAC riot” in San Francisco, which was known to all, I became a key link.



Additionally, I found myself quite underwhelmed by the intellectual content of geography as it then existed at UCLA. Coming from a third tier school, I had expected the level of discourse to be much higher at UCLA, but I found it tepid and confusing. Sauer had just retired from UCB and spent a semester at UCLA. He was held in some degree of reverence by many of his acolytes, but I could not, at that stage of my intellectual development, see anything in his uninspiring monologues about the *Relaciones de Nueva Espana*.

In its place I read Feuer’s then just published reader on Marx & Engles and immersed myself in the highly factionalized politics of the left in Los Angeles which ranged from the Socialist Party (which I had joined) to various Communist and Revolutionary factions. On campus I became active in the Eugene V. Debs club

and taught an unofficial but well attended and publicized class on Socialism and Marxism.

As the decade passed I found my attention diverted from the fractious politics of the left to the internal developments in Geography. Kathy and I married and became close to the Hovaths, and we spent many hours debating the issue of geography and politics. Jim Lemon arrived as I neared completion of my studies and was more a friend than a teacher to me.

Additionally we became immersed in the cultural aspects of the rising political tide, especially the folk revival where UCLA and Los Angeles played a major role. In that connection I met Len Paige and Joe O'Donnell both geographers and banjo players. In 1965, while it was still legal, Len and I took a large dose of LSD which, as I explained afterward to Lemon, was the equivalent of a college education in its ability to strip the illusion from ones vision.



I stood near the photographer as the photo was taken Life Magazine 1966

Ahh....The Revolutionary upswing, which always comes around. Always unexpected. The impossible becomes possible.

Manifesto



Hand ciëciorka

And it is with the small group of geographers who -- having followed their cause and not their career, that the core of revolutionary geographical awareness rests. Yes, we reach out to our sisters and brothers who are paid to be geographers, but we assert boldly that without us they are nothing. We are the geographical intellectuals on the street, and in the obscure recesses of the academy. It is up to you, working class geographers, to translate that reality into words. There is a bright new generation in geography. There is work to be done.