

William Bunge: Expeditionary Geography

A commentary on six iconic maps from 'Fitzgerald -geography of a revolution'

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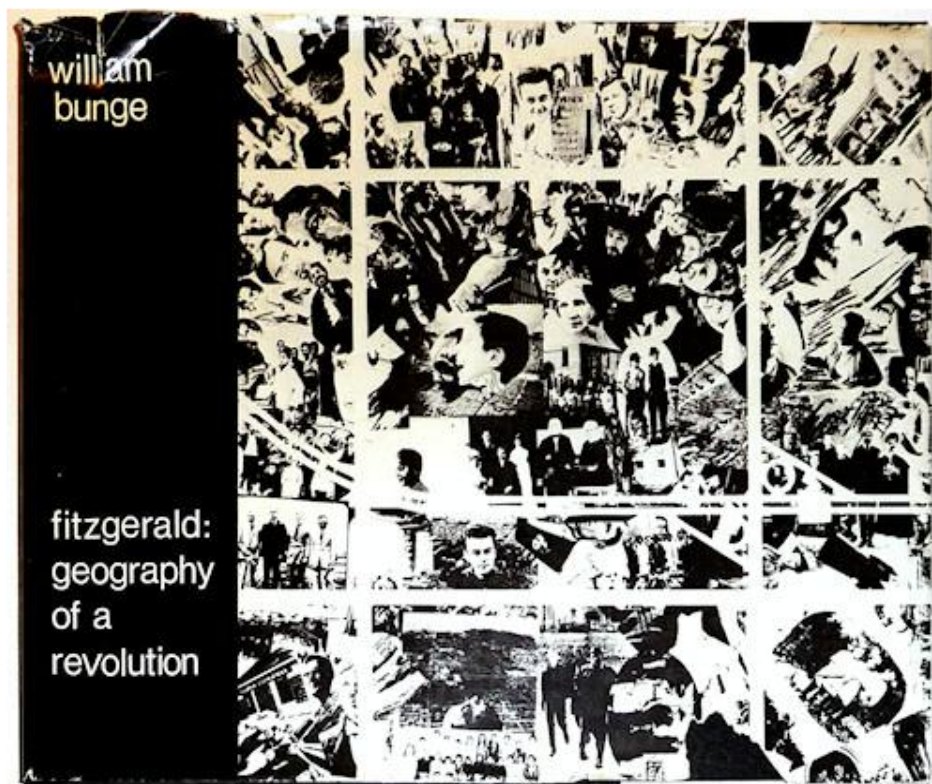


Figure 1. William Bunge's book *Fitzgerald: Geography of a revolution* published in 1971.

Bunge's project of expeditionary geography, and in particular his book *Fitzgerald: Geography of a revolution*, published in 1971, was one of the chief inspirations behind setting up Livingmaps. In that book he makes a distinction between what he calls skeletal maps, maps that visualise statistical information, and *life maps*, maps that tell stories in a way that brings this data to human life. The first kind of map is static, and provides a fixed framing of social reality; whereas the second shows that reality in movement. Bunge thinks that both kinds of cartography are necessary, complementing one another: the scientific mapping of the geo-politics of urban life and its structural and spatial inequalities guaranteeing the verisimilitude or authenticity of the personal geographies through which those inequalities are experienced and sometimes resisted. Today that distinction, between the visualisation of big quantitative data sets generated through algorithmic cartograms and the deep narrative mappings created by qualitative methods of scenography and oral testimony has intensified.

Bunge belonged to a generation of intellectuals who believed in scientific socialism as offering a higher form of rationality in the service of the fight for social justice. He was trained as a quantitative geographer, and thought that mathematical topology would put geography at last on a properly scientific footing. In the

while teaching in Detroit, he became disillusioned with the Academy, became an activist against the Vietnam war, supported the student movement, alienated his fellow academics by his outspoken views, got fired from his university job, and became involved in community campaigns against the endemic racism of Detroit's educational system, housing policies and city governance. He was blacklisted and could not get a job in any American university, and so in the early 1970s he moved to Canada where he is still living today. Bunge remained a lifelong communist; he was for a time an elected representative of the *Parti Communiste Quebec-quois*, but he was a dissident communist who believed in the value of popular and direct democracy, rather than in the saving power of the vanguard party.

Fitzgerald's Social Life.

In any matter so personal and intimate as the social life of human beings, the greatest flexibility and spontaneity must be maintained. Plans for a neighborhood New Year's Eve party in a rented supper club were unpopular, but the party held in a private home did marvelously well. During the folk-singing craze, the neighborhood maintained a group of singers. Nothing topped the feeling of family that Romona Tompkins and Marjorie Washington achieved by an amateur play and supper in the spring of 1966 at St. Timothy's Church. The Council is planning coffees, half a social gesture and half an attempt to form block clubs. A social and recreation center is needed where retirees can play cards, kids can play basketball, and the Council's offices can be housed. To date, public social life has centered in the churches, but not without some awkwardness. For instance, Baptists and Methodists are opposed to smoking and dancing. The black culture deeply respects churches but are traditionally Baptist and less at home in other churches. All the churches lack adequate space for athletics.

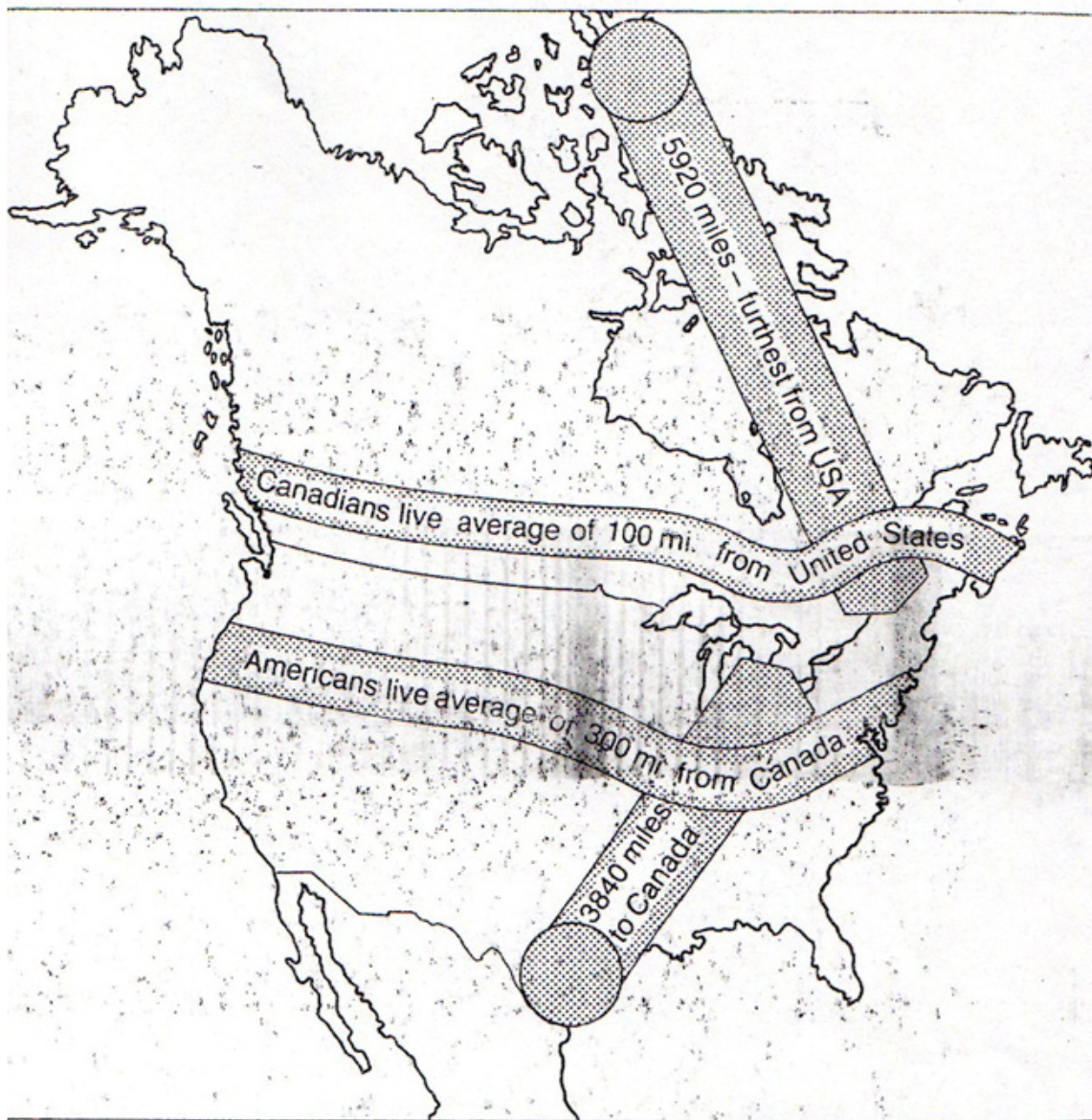
The social life of a community makes the difference between a place in which to live and a joint in which to hang your hat. But this social life cannot be planned. It is not possible to produce mechanically such an atmosphere; it comes from a common cause, a peculiar combination of human personalities. The shift from Reverend Martin Luther King's spirit of love, to the Vietnamese War and Stokely Carmichael's spirit of Black Power, greatly changed the social mood. The neighborhood has stopped singing songs like "We Shall Overcome," but it appears to be fighting harder than ever. A certain grimness, a death of hope in appeals to conscience, a doggedness, a toughness, a less moralistic and more calculating power-conscious outlook, perhaps even a certain European cynicism and sophistication is emerging and the circus atmosphere of demonstrations, marches, fun-poking at white racists, and mass rallies is gone. The first euphoria of social-cultural exchanges has left too. Curiosity has been satisfied. Some years back both races in the neighborhood



Figure 2. An example of the montage character of the book, weaving together photographs and text.

It was from the vantage point of being strongly embedded in the struggles of the black and white working class communities of Detroit that Bunge embarked on an *expeditionary geography* that was to culminate in the publication of his book on Fitzgerald. This remarkable book combines elements of oral history, cultural geography, social cartography, and visual ethnography to provide a rich, multilayered account of the past, present and future of a suburb of Detroit which was undergoing rapid socio-economic change, and had been one of the centres of the uprisings which marked the radicalisation of the civil rights movement in 1960's.

Bunge not only set out to capture the density and complexity of that local experience, he used it as a lens through which to focus and analyse the intersection of race and class in the unravelling of the Great American Dream.



Map 2.10 How close are Canada and the United States?

Figure 3. *Common sense proxemics and distances*, an example of Bunge's counter-mapping.

The form of the book is that of an atlas, weaving together maps, graphs, photo-montage, illustrations, landscape and portraiture, personal testimony, polemic and analysis into a trenchant narrative of life and death in a Great American City, concentrating especially on the predicaments of its children and young people (Figure 2). The atlas displays great sociological imagination, in the sense advocated by Bunge's contemporary C. Wright Mills, as having an ability to combine many different perspectives, to link biography to history, individual vignettes to collective memoryscapes, public concerns to private worries in a way that ruthlessly cuts across academic boundaries. For another he delighted in producing counter-intuitive geographies that put in question our taken for granted assumptions about spatiality, and what is near and far. My favourite example of this is his witty deconstruction of the common sense proxemics of national neighbourliness in relations between USA and Canada (Figure 3).

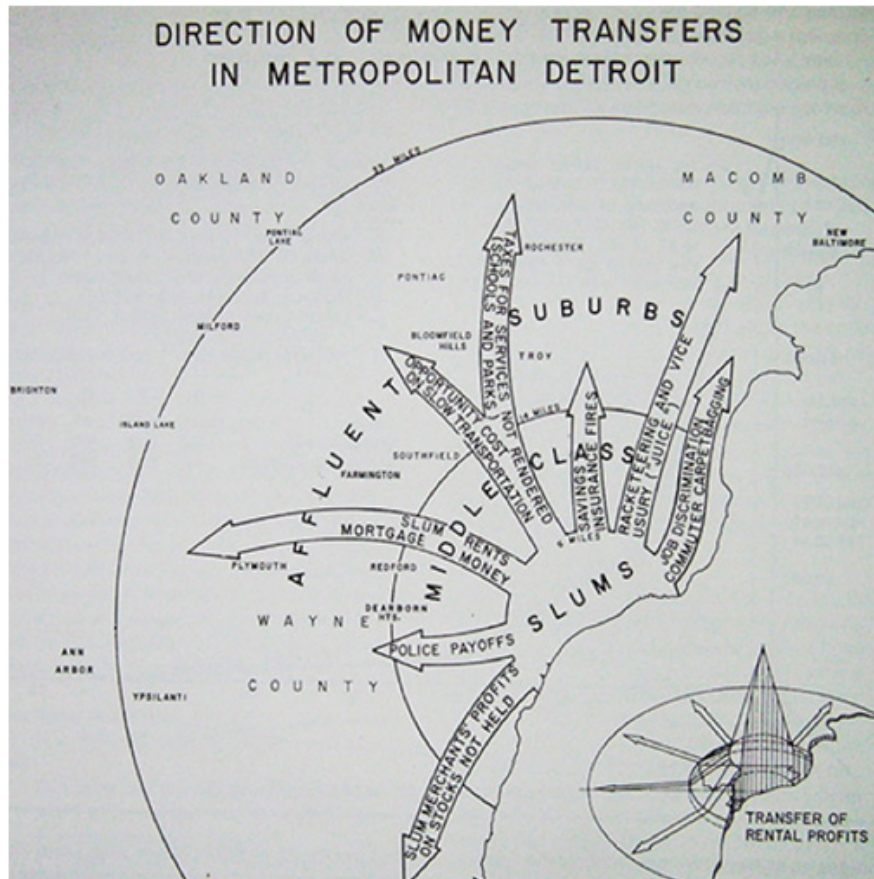


Figure 4. Mapping the directionality of money transfers as a kind of map of political ecology in Detroit.

For all these reasons Bunge's pioneering work remains exemplary, even if some of its concerns now inevitably seem to belong to a bygone political era. However two of the maps from Fitzgerald have become iconic and continue to be reproduced in human geography text books. The first (Figure 4) illustrates the transfer of rental profits from the slums of inner city Detroit to the suburbs, a picture of urban exploitation whose flow indicates what we would now call the political ecology of the capitalist city. Its spatial logic was to lead ultimately to the destruction of the city's industrial manufacturing base.

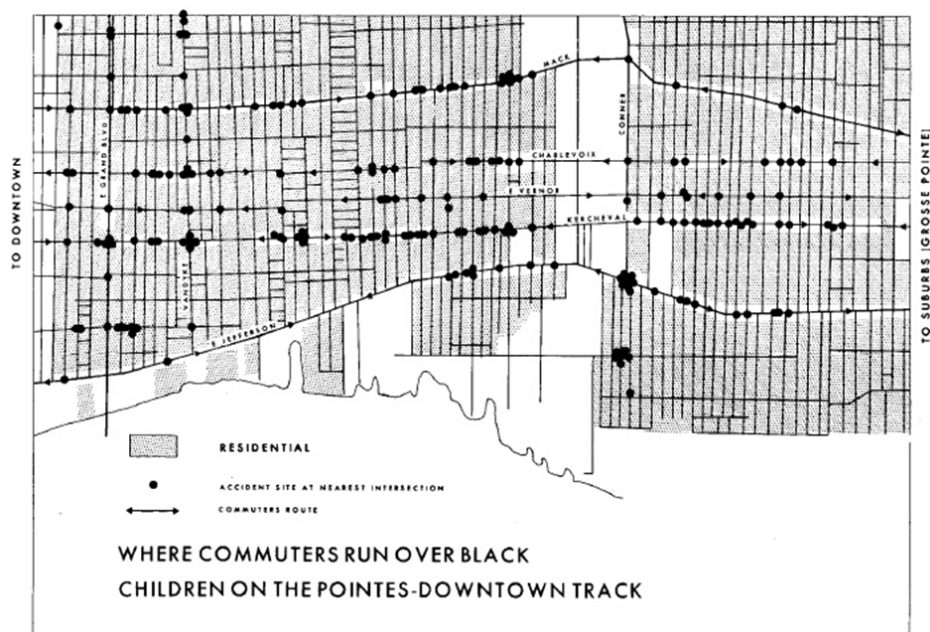


Figure 5. A mapping of disturbance.

