18 Towards a critical school Geography

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In our working lives as geography teachers we should never forget or abandon those ideals which draw so many of us to the job in the first place. School Geography has the potential to develop young people's understanding of their 'place' in the world and so help form their identity. It can enable them to perceive the structures and processes which help and hinder their development, and can also foster the commitment to social justice and democracy, and the conserving, participatory and critical forms of citizenship, whereby they can seek to conserve or change those structures and processes and thereby help to create a better world. The International Charter on Geographical Education (IGU 1995) provides a comprehensive statement of such ideals and they are reflected in the aims, for Geography in the National Curriculum for England and Wales (DES 1990).

The reality is that such ideals are increasingly neglected or put to one side as geography teachers' work, along with that of other teachers, is deprofessionalized or proletarianized. Teachers are increasingly required to adopt the role of technicians who deliver prescribed and pre-packaged content, assess and stratify pupils by reference to standard norms, spend more and more time serving an educational bureaucracy, and cope with a growing minority of alienated and disruptive pupils. New working conditions and forms of accountability increase teachers' workloads and erode their professional, economic and political status (Harris 1994). Young geography teachers are therefore more likely to work with disillusioned and cynical older colleagues than they were ten or twenty years ago. They are more likely to be affected by the high levels of stress and low levels of morale which pervade some staffrooms and they are more likely to have inadequate resources, facilities or encouragement to teach Geography in an enlightened way. Schools and teachers are variously affected by recent attempts to redefine, restructure and repoliticize schooling, but in general it is becoming harder for geography teachers to work in ways which reflect progressive and radical ideals.

Nevertheless, this chapter urges geography teachers to cling to such ideals and seeks to introduce them to the theory and practice whereby they find contemporary expression. It traces the history of the radical or critical tradition in geographical education and suggests how it can be revived and updated using advances in academic geography and curriculum studies. It outlines the aims, content and pedagogy of a critical geography for a society undergoing profound change and

hints at the political skills and alliances which geography teachers will need t
develop if they are to gain greater control of their work and develop a tru
professionalism.

Developing an historical perspective

What counts as school Geography (its content, teaching methods and assessmen
is largely, but not wholly, determined by dominant groups and interests in socie
The links between powerful economic, political and cultural interests and th
everyday realities of geography classrooms are complex and are mediated by suc
agencies as National Curriculum working parties, textbook publishers, examin
tion boards and PGCE courses, but school Geography is socially constructed an
continues to play a role in the economic and cultural reproduction of our advance
capitalist society. It helps to produce young workers and citizens with 'appropriat
knowledge, skills and values and so contributes to changing forms of social regu
tion whereby the state, and other institutions, maintain social order and ensure th
reproduction of both the means and conditions of production.

Our society's need for a school subject which would foster nationalism, imper
alism and a positive view of the world of work, while teaching useful knowledge an
skills to future clerks, merchants and soldiers, largely explains the entry of Geo
raphy into the school curriculum in the late nineteenth century and its subsequen
revival and growth in the universities to meet the demand for qualified teache
(Capel 1981). Old geography textbooks reflect the racism, ethnocentrism, sexis
and paternalism which pervaded the early teaching of the subject (Marsden 198
and it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that this legacy was thoroughly expose
and real efforts made to counter stereotyping. Geography and history were favoure
as social subjects for inclusion in the curriculum at the end of the last century an
they have sustained their privileged position despite periodic challenges (Goods
1983). The majority of pupils continue to be deprived of sufficient economics, p
tics, sociology and cultural studies to develop a real understanding of geograp
and the provision for social or citizenship education in our state schools is inad
quate to sustain, let alone improve, our current deteriorating level of democrac

While school Geography's legacy of stereotyping has been exposed there h
been less attention to the changing ideologies, or ideas which contribute to soci
regulation, which have pervaded the Geography curriculum. Existing studi
(Gilbert 1984) suggest that changing ideological emphases have left generations
pupils largely impotent as agents of social change. Nationalistic and imperialist
ideology taught them an unquestioning respect for nation and empire. Environ
mental determinism and natural regions taught them to accept a society shape
and limited by nature, while economic determinism taught them to accept th
social relations of capitalism as normal and inevitable. The separation of the phy
ical and human geography taught them a false separation of nature and society
while the subject's view of progress reinforced the modern faith in science, tec
nology and bureaucracy. Too much school Geography continues to draw solely
empiricist and positivist philosophies and so describes rather than explains t

world. It fails to recognize power s
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than to accept the world largely as
asking students who have recently
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Enough of such pessimism. Ca
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tion pedagogy (Wright 1988). Ra
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Current educational reform

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Act's curriculum objectives
cultural, mental and physica

world. It fails to recognize power, conflict and agency, or to consider social alternatives, and can be seen to suggest to pupils that there are no real alternatives other than to accept the world largely as it is. Anyone doubting this assertion might try asking students who have recently passed A level Geography, what they understand by capitalism, green politics, or the state.

Enough of such pessimism. Capitalist schooling, and an essentially capitalist school Geography, were opposed from the outset. Elementary education for the working class was only conceded when people's popular efforts at self-education proved too threatening to the establishment and when its need for a more literate citizenry and technically competent workforce proved overwhelming (Shotton 1993). In 1885 the anarchist geographer Peter Kropotkin advocated an anti-militarist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist education through geography which would examine issues from the point of view of the working class, foster social harmony and mutual aid, and involve pupils in the everyday life of the community (Kropotkin 1885). Such messages have since been periodically applied, revived and updated by a minority of geography teachers who, like other radical educators, have drawn on Marxism, anarchism, progressivism, humanistic psychology and liberation pedagogy (Wright 1989). Radical education 'flowered' briefly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, along with the new Left and the new social movements, and some predict that it will resurface again in the late 1990s or early 2000s as the political pendulum swings back towards democracy, social justice and the empowerment of the individual through collective action.

Current educational reform and the National Curriculum

The conditions of sustained economic growth and social democracy which gave expression to radical ideas in the late 1960s were not to last.. The onset of an economic crisis and the need to restore levels of capital accumulation resulted in the rise of the New Right and the onset of a long period of economic, social and educational restructuring which continues to have profound effects on teachers' lives. The transition from an organized to a disorganized regime of capital accumulation, and from Fordist to post-Fordist labour processes, required changes in the mode of regulation together with new forms of schooling (Flude and Hammer 1990; Whitty 1992). The state's expenditure on education for the majority of pupils would continue to fall in real terms and market forces would play a greater role in allocating pupils to more diverse kinds of school. While opting out, local management of schools, and open enrolment were designed to restratify schools and pupils, National Curriculum testing, examination league tables and Ofsted inspection reports were designed to provide indicators to guide the decisions of those parents who have real choice. The National Curriculum is essentially a minimal provision or entitlement. It does not have to be taught in private schools, but its similarity to earlier academic curriculums hints at its social control function and suggests that it is not suitable for advancing a liberal interpretation of the 1988 Education Reform Act's curriculum objectives: that education should promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at school and of society.

The rise of the New Right owed much to its ability to sense people's disillusionment with those forms of social regulation which accompanied organized capitalism and to promote an alternative social vision to that associated with the welfare state. Thatcherism developed a mode of regulation and ideology in tune with disorganized capitalism and its economic, political and cultural imperatives were to shape the content of the National Curriculum. Too much education was once more seen as a dangerous thing and the curriculum again pressed into service to tighten social regulation and control. There were tensions between those who emphasized traditional, economic and progressive values (Ball 1990), but the outcome was a curriculum which seeks to rekindle nationalism, individualism and moral certainty, and prevent a coherent and critical understanding of society and social change. The cross-curricular elements do seek to address the Act's curriculum objectives, but they are non-statutory, not related to one another, not free from ideology (Ahier and Ross 1995), and are likely, following the Dearing Review, to disappear yet further from the perceptions and priorities of most schools and teachers.

After a brief romance with positivism and the 'new' geography in the 1970s, school Geography was challenged in the early 1980s to assess post-positivist philosophies (behavioural, humanistic, welfare and radical geographies) and incorporate these into the curriculum so that it would better meet pupils' and society's needs (Cook and Gill 1983; Huckle 1983; Johnston 1986). The response was somewhat limited, for the government's educational agenda soon threatened the very survival of school Geography and its status as a foundation subject could be assured only by promoting its more conservative characteristics. At a time when academic geography engaged with diverse philosophies and social and cultural theories in order to explain the contribution of space, place and geography to the profound social changes which were taking place (Cloke *et al.* 1991; Thrift 1992), the school subject's professional establishment turned its attention to a reinterpretation of the school subject which seemed to be little informed by these developments and parallel developments in social education (Bailey 1991; Wise 1993). The construction of the Geography National Curriculum was not without its critics and dissenters but the final product gives little indication of the relationship between geography and society and does little to advance teachers' and pupils' understanding of the threats and promises presented by disorganized capitalism (Morris 1992). It fails to indicate what 'enquiry' really entails or what 'understanding' the themes really involves, and while some teachers and textbook writers have interpreted it in progressive and radical ways (Hopkin 1994), it has generally been a conservative influence (Roberts 1991).

Such reforming of school Geography between 1985 and 1995 drove an increasing number of radical geography teachers to seek support from the 'adjectival' educations which had grown alongside the new social movements from the late 1960s (Dufour 1989). Environmental development, peace, human rights and futures education, seemed more prepared than school Geography to draw eclectically on the natural and social sciences so that pupils could explore how the world works and how it might be changed. They were more prepared to examine social structures and processes and adopt a genuinely democratic

empowering pedagogy, and seemed more in touch with the realities which confronted and interested pupils from day to day. Supported by development and environmental non-governmental organizations, and by other agencies seeking to promote equality through education, the adjectival educations have developed a wide variety of curriculum material (Hicks and Fisher 1985; Huckle 1988; Pike and Selby 1988) which has influenced geography teaching (Fien and Gerber 1988; Serf and Sinclair 1992). Many radical teachers continue to promote integrated humanities as a vehicle for linking these educations to cross-curricular themes, but it can be argued that a proliferation of adjectival educations, often embracing competing liberal, radical and utopian agendas, has slowed the emergence of a genuinely radical social (and socialist) education which integrates all their concerns (Lauder and Brown 1988; Chitty *et al.* 1991). Like a radical geographical education, such education should now be based on an understanding and application of critical theory.

Critical theory

In the 1980s, when structural Marxism and socialism lost some of their authority and appeal, radical educators increasingly turned their attention to critical theory and the ideas of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas (Gibson 1986; Young 1989). Such theory draws on both Weber and Marx and shifts the focus from labour and the social relations of production to social interaction and the nature of language and morals. Habermas' principal claim is that interaction has become distorted by the rise of positivism and instrumental reason which promotes science as universal and value-free knowledge and so fosters a distorted and incomplete understanding of our relations with one another and the rest of nature. His critical theories seek to reveal this distorted or incomplete rationality and empower people to think and act in genuinely rational and autonomous ways. They deal with legitimation crisis, knowledge constitutive interests, and communicative action, and can be applied to the development of a critical theory of geographical education.

Habermas argues that the modern state must manage the economy while maintaining the support of the majority of the electorate. It attempts to do this through technocratic systems which are pervaded by instrumental rationality, but economic problems are thereby displaced first to the political and then to the socio-cultural sphere. An inability to maintain simultaneously capital accumulation, full employment, social welfare, and a safe and healthy environment, contributes to a legitimation crisis along with a motivational crisis as people lose faith in state institutions and liberal democracy. The state then develops new kinds of regulation and consultation in an attempt to restore legitimacy and motivation, but opposition parties and movements in civil society may use such innovations to reveal the limits of technocracy and the continuing need for decision-making and problem-solving governed by genuine rationality, democracy and moral principles. Legitimation crisis provides some explanation for many young people's disillusionment with society and politics and hints at the foundations of a relevant citizenship education

through geography which would enable them to consider the diverse beliefs, values and strategies of those groups seeking more radical and participatory forms of democracy.

In deciding what kinds of knowledge and geography might best contribute to a new radical agenda, teachers should be guided by Habermas' notion of knowledge constitutive interests. He suggests that human beings have three distinct categories of interest which shape their social construction of knowledge. While their technical interest in the control and management of their physical environment leads to empirical and positivist knowledge, their practical interest in understanding and participating in society through communication with others leads to interpretive or hermeneutic knowledge. Both are of value in relevant contexts but both can act as ideology, for positivism treats the social world as if it were part of the physical world (with given structures and processes), while hermeneutics recognizes the difference but is also too inclined to accept the social world as it is. Both encourage people to overlook the true form of their relations with the rest of human and non-human nature (their state of alienation) which can only be revealed through critical theory.

Critical theory serves people's emancipatory interest in being free from alienation and the constraints of ideology and distorted communication. It recognizes the difference between the physical and social worlds but, unlike hermeneutics, it critiques and seeks to improve the latter by, for instance, making it more egalitarian, democratic and sustainable. Such theory should inform all geographical education which seeks to develop autonomous and self-determining individuals, yet school Geography has been slow to consider and incorporate critical theory as Unwin (1992) reminds us in his comprehensive account of the history of geography in terms of Habermas' knowledge constitutive interests.

The theory of communicative action provides the means whereby we can test the validity of critical theory and develop a critical pedagogy. It maintains that all speech presumes an ideal speech situation in which participants are required to sustain and defend four kinds of validity claim and in which only the force of better argument decides the issue. What they say should be meaningful, true, justified and sincere, and in a truly democratic society it will be possible to redeem all such claims and so arrive at a consensus in ways free from distortion, manipulation and domination. The process of actively constructing and reconstructing theory and practice through rational discussion and democratic politics leads to communicative action based on shared understanding rather than to strategic action based on instrumental reason. It leads to universal knowledge and values, serves to validate critical theory, and may be described as praxis or participative action research. Such enquiry provides geography teachers with a form of socially critical pedagogy, or democratic problem-solving, in which they and pupils employ different kinds of practical and theoretical knowledge to decide what people can, might and should do. It is through such pedagogy that empirical, hermeneutic and critical knowledge is combined and pupils come to recognize their true interests and identities.

Critical approaches to education based on Habermas' work have been criticized by those who claim that he clings too strongly to a modern notion of a univers

rationality, knowledge and values, and can be seen to reduce politics solely to a matter of communication. His theory is essentially modernist in clinging to a single grand theory or narrative of emancipation, and idealist in locating the causes and solutions to our current crisis in modes of discourse. He assumes that undistorted communication necessarily corresponds to universal needs and knowledge claims, gives too little attention to the power which sustains technocracy and instrumental reason, and puts too much faith in the new politics of social movements rather than the old politics of class. The recent work of Giroux and others (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Giroux 1992) on border pedagogies suggests that it is possible to develop a critical pedagogy between modernism and post-modernism which is anchored in political economy. This would be more sensitive to notions of power, language, context and difference and would be far more modest in its claims to be able to empower others.

Priorities for a critical school Geography

Returning to our ideals as geography teachers it would seem important to make more use of critical theory and pedagogy to help young people find their identity and place in the world – to find out how, why, with what, and where they belong, and to develop their sense of longing and belonging within a range of communities or collectives. This requires us to develop curriculums which help pupils answer the following types of questions:

- How are people and geography (places, spaces, and people–environment relations) being constituted by society?
- What roles can people and geography play in constituting society?
- How should people understand and connect with history, the economy, the state, civil society, and the rest of nature, as they affect their lives and local and distant geographies?
- What provides people with their identity, longings, sense of belonging and meaning in life?
- What social and cultural resources can people use to extend their imaginations, to construct places and communities where they can live sustainably with each other and the rest of nature, and to develop their identities and sense of belonging and meaning in life?
- What longings and belongings should I develop, and what kinds of society, geography and community allow me to express my identity and desires?

Addressing such questions through socially critical pedagogy requires inputs of critical knowledge concerning the economy, the state and civil society, contemporary culture, and people–environment relations. Pupils should develop a basic understanding of the nature of organized and disorganized capitalism (modernity and post-modernity) and the manner in which they shape, and are shaped by, geography. They should understand the processes of economic restructuring and globalization, should assess their impact on workers and communities in diverse

locations, and should evaluate the roles of appropriate technologies, labour relations, the market, regulation and planning, in moving Britain, Europe and the global community towards more equitable and sustainable levels of economic welfare.

As far as the state is concerned, school Geography should develop a multidimensional and multilayered form of citizenship which prompts a critical engagement with economic, political, social and cultural rights and responsibilities at local, national, regional and international scales (Lynch 1992). Pupils should explore how governments can protect and extend people's rights and responsibilities but should recognize that post-modernity puts strains on the nation state and conventional forms of politics and prompts greater attention to civil society and social movements based around race, gender, the environment, community and identity. Classroom activities should explore the complementary nature of the old emancipatory politics and the new life politics and help pupils to understand how their search for meaning and identity is made more urgent, challenging and exciting in a post-modern world.

It is the realm of culture and cultural studies which presents critical school Geography with its greatest challenge and potential. Disorganized capitalism is increasingly a cultural economy of signs and spaces in which the information and communication structures of consumer society replace social structures in shaping people's lives (Lash and Urry 1994). Young people increasingly form their identities from the raw material of media and consumer culture and adopt a post-modern attitude which is sceptical of all authority, revels in artificiality, accepts a fragmented and placeless existence, regards security and identity as purely transitory, and welcomes an aestheticization of everyday life in which politics becomes the politics of style, presentation and gesture. Post-modernism threatens fragmentation, relativism and the erosion of community, but it also offers the possibility of using new cultural technologies, products and attitudes to redefine identity, community and pleasure, as a means towards radical democracy. School Geography should acknowledge that young people face a world with few secure signposts yet display much commitment and imagination in using popular culture to construct meanings and identities. Our lessons should educate their sensibilities and interests by exploring how texts of all kinds represent places and environments and shape the geographical imagination, how the meaning of texts can be constructed and reconstructed to serve different interests, and how different senses of longing and belonging are produced in different place, among different groups, at different times (Gilbert 1995; Morgan 1995).

Our relations with the rest of living nature, in a world increasingly pervaded by manufactured risks, are the focus of such phenomena as green consumerism and protest over live animal exports. These reveal the increased significance of identity and cultural politics for young people, and suggest that a relevant school Geography should merge physical and human geography under the umbrella of political ecology, should develop citizenship within the context of the old and new politics of the environment, and so allow pupils to explore the kinds of technology and social organization which may allow us to live more sustainably (Huckle 1993).

A return to professionalism

School Geography is in urgent need of reform. After a decade or more of largely pragmatic development at the bidding of politicians and dominant interests within the subject community, it is now time to acknowledge that the subject has distanced itself from change in society and from those developments in academic geography and curriculum theory which could be used to enable us better to meet our ideals. We need to return to professionalism in geographical education and debate the new social, theoretical and pedagogical challenges with rediscovered energy and enthusiasm (Marsden 1995). New times have brought much de-skilling and de-professionalization, but they also offer the prospect of developing more flexible and responsive curriculums for schools with more empowering structures and cultures (Hargreaves 1994).

New technologies provide a means of transforming modern institutions for schooling into post-modern institutions for education. The open geography classroom with real and virtual links to the community and wider world, in which computer-assisted learning frees teachers to teach and pupils to learn, is an exciting prospect. How soon it arrives, and in what form it arrives, largely depends on wider political struggles over the future of disorganized capitalism and the nature and funding of schooling. Establishing a critical school Geography requires radical teachers to continue to turn existing curriculum frameworks in more empowering directions and to argue their case, by example, in such settings as department meetings, Ofsted inspections, Geographical Association and union branches, and meetings organized by community groups and political parties. They should form alliances with those elements of the new Left and cultural industries which are using critical theory and pedagogy to promote radical democracy and should seek to popularize their subject and its potential for social education within the local community. A strand of critical school Geography has continued to develop in recent difficult times and its fortunes in coming decades partly depend on a minority of geography teachers winning more of the arguments, gaining more support, and so helping to secure the conditions in which their ideals can become reality.

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