Chapter Two Epistemology

In which we learn that critical realism combines ontological realism with epistemological relativism and provides a firm foundation for a socially critical geography curriculum that is superior to those offered by positivism and interpretivism. While social realism and its notion of powerful knowledge is a product of the knowledge turn in curriculum theory that has gained much influence, its critics employ critical realism to oppose its rejection of standpoint theory and everyday knowledge and its neglect of ethics and social justice. Their arguments support a reframing of the geography curriculum that allows students to extend and refine their knowledge as critical pedagogy prompts dialogue between everyday knowledge, academic knowledge, and the knowledges of the powerful and the powerless. The chapter concludes by assessing whether the 2025 review of the national curriculum for England is likely to support such reframing.

Epistemology is the theory or study of knowledge and is derived from the Greek words *episteme* meaning knowledge or science and *logos* meaning science or theory. Epistemology is about ways of knowing or different types of knowledge.

Knowledge (language, concepts, ideas, discourses, ideologies, values, etc) is real. As part of culture or the superstructure (Figure 4, page 11) it has its own structures and mechanisms, evolves along with the economy and politics, and has powers to shape events and experiences. They then act back to shape knowledge, a process illustrated by current culture wars between the populist right and the populist left.

Knowledge as a social product

Critical realists regard **knowledge as a social product** produced through the ongoing activity of people working with the rest of the natural world in specific historical and geographical material conditions (knowledge as the transitive dimension of reality (page 1). This means that knowledge is never simply factual, always value laden, serves purposes and interests, and reflects power imbalances in society. It is the cultural medium whereby we make sense of reality.

New knowledge builds upon and transforms existing knowledge, a phenomenon illustrated by the changing content of the geography curriculum. Critical realists seek knowledge that is **explanatory**, that seeks to explain past and present phenomena while accepting that precise forecasting of future events is impossible. Such knowledge is also **fallibl**e in that it is questionable and never definitive. Recognition that knowledge is socially produced and fallible means that critical realism is committed to **epistemological relativism**. This holds that the world can only be known through conceptual frameworks that always have limitations and that notions of truth, objectivity, value, and rationality, change with time.

Explanation, causality and judgemental rationality

As we saw in the previous chapter, to explain a phenomenon or event that happens in the world it is rarely sufficient to link it to another event or chain of events (to confine explanation or knowing to the actual and empirical domains). Invariant event regularity does occur in closed systems that occur in the bio-physical world or are engineered in the laboratory, but reality consists mainly of open systems in which invariant regularities do not occur.

Critical realism adopts a multi-causal worldview whereby phenomena and events are to be **explained vertically** by looking for interactions between the layers of reality and **explained horizontally** by looking for interactions within layers. Such explanation was applied to COP29 in chapter one with the chances of slowing global heating being related both to the underlying mechanisms (the operation of Earth and social systems) and the conjuncture of events surrounding the meeting of COP in Baku.

Despite epistemological relativism it is possible to decide between competing claims to knowledge because claims are not epistemologically or morally equal and there are rational and ethical grounds for preferring one to another (or judging which accounts of the world are better or worse). Such decisions involve **retroduction** [1] an alternative or supplement to deduction and induction. A 'what-must-have-been' theory is postulated to explain the evidence (e.g. of global heating) and then compared the other existing 'what-must-have-been' theories that compete to explain the evidence (e.g. the Greenhouse Effect theory of global heating vs the natural processes theory). This logical comparison of theories involves **judgemental rationality** [2] that enables geographers and others to claim rational grounds for choosing between competing knowledge

claims and insist that not all theories or statements about the world are equally valid.

Such rationality may involve **immanent critique** which questions the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the idea or system of beliefs being advanced. For example if a person who believes in the importance of avoiding global heating believes that the government should invest in carbon capture and storage, immanent critique would point out its long term environmental and financial costs [3].

Ethics, explanatory critique, and emancipatory spirals

Seeing knowledge as a social product means that it is entangled with other aspects of social life. Critical realism rejects facts vs values dualism and sees knowledge as incorporating both facts and values or ethics. **Ethics** is concerned with what ought to be or questions of value. What ought to be the relations between people? Between people and the rest of nature? Between communities and nations within global society? Ethical debate gives meaning to such concepts as democracy, justice and sustainability with debate within global civil society resulting in the Earth Charter [4] (see page 11) and its principles for guiding transitions to sustainability.

The dualism between facts and values is a feature of positivism (see below) which claims that facts and values are separate things and that there is no way to get from a factual statement to a value statement (Hume's law – you can't derive an 'ought' from an 'is' [5]). Consequently, the sciences are to deal with solely with the factual while claiming objectivity and value neutrality. Such claims often provide a screen that shelters ideologues for example those who deny global heating on the grounds of what they claim is 'objective' scientific evidence.

Contrary to Hume's law it is sometimes possible to move from a factual statement to a value statement (e.g. if global heating is happening it is preferable to take the train from London to Edinburgh rather than fly from Heathrow). Hence critical realists give immanent or explanatory critique [6] a key role in critical social theory. As we have seen, this involves criticising false ideas and the actors and institutions spreading them. It aims to:

- Identify the underlying structures and mechanisms that shape social reality.
- Explain how these mechanisms generate observable events.

- Provide a more complete and nuanced understanding of social phenomena.
- Go beyond superficial descriptions to address the root causes of social issues

Such critique seeks to explain the current lack of democracy, justice, and sustainability and offer knowledge of how to change society in ways that deliver these virtues. Critical realists advocate **emancipatory spirals** [7] whereby social scientists, including geographers, engage with radical social movements and political parties to reflect and act on environmental and social issues in ways that develop and refine knowledge that can guide transition to a more democratic, just, and sustainable society. Such spirals may involve critical and participatory action research, social justice campaigns, community organising, emancipatory entrepreneurship, and critical pedagogy in school classrooms.

Such spirals are associated with human flourishing or the capabilities approach [8] to social development as conceptualised by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and applied to school geography by the GeoCapabilities project [9]. As we will see, debate on the populist left is much occupied by how the knowledge generated by emancipatory spirals can be employed by a coalition of interests (a counterhegemonic bloc) to change the prevailing common sense and political economy (the prevailing hegemony) and bring about systemic change. This would usher in new forms of post-capitalist political economy that foster capabilities along with the kinds of ethical principles outlined in the Earth Charter. Critical realists do not offer a particular prescription for such change but for most their ethical engagement is explicitly political. See for example Sayer [10].

Critical realism, positivism and interpretivism

As a foundation for the geography curriculum, critical realism competes with positivism and interpretivism. These three philosophies of knowledge are summarised in Figure 2.1 (page 29).

Chapter one introduced foundationalism and naturalism. **Constructivism** is the belief that there is no objective social reality and therefore no objective truth (anti-realism). The world is to be understood as a social construct, produced in language, discourse, values, and signs and symbols or all kinds (strong or thick social constructivism). Critical realists acknowledge the role of such cultural

mechanisms but insist they have a material base in changing bio-physical, economic, and political structures (weak or thin social constructivism).

Positivism is the philosophy of knowledge dominant or hegemonic in the contemporary world and in the school curriculum. As Figure 2.1 suggests it is focussed on the empirical and actual domains (reality is what appears to us as experience and events). It maintains that reality consists of clearly defined entities (phenomena and events) whose properties do not change fundamentally when in contact with other entities. It further maintains that event regularities are common in the actual domain, that the social world can be explained / studied in the same way as the natural world (naturalism), and that it is possible to derive universal laws that operate in each. It denies constructivism in claiming that while values may be socially constructed, it is possible to exclude values from scientific explanation and derive objective facts about the world.

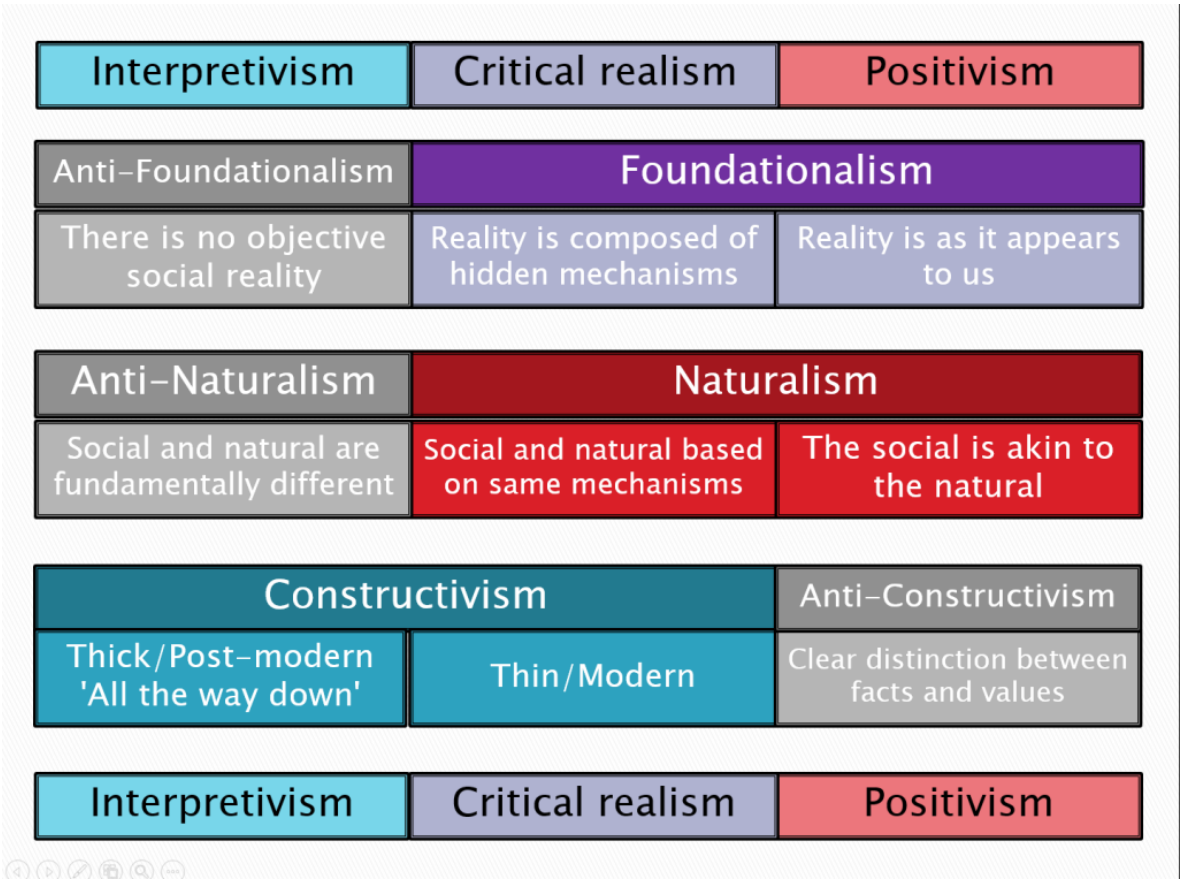

Figure 2.1 [Three philosophies of knowledge](#) [11]

Positivism's separation of facts and values allows its users to claim that their work is objective, neutral and value free while suggesting that the work of those using other philosophies of knowledge is biased, value laden and unscientific.

Mainstream economics is an example of this as it develops ideas and strategies to sustain capital accumulation and economic growth via such mechanisms as deregulation and cuts to taxes and welfare. So too is mainstream educational thinking that assesses student and school performance by a narrow range of indicators and then adjusts policy in ways, including marketisation [12], that are designed to improve them.

As Figure 2.1 suggests, critical realism occupies a middle ground between interpretivism and positivism. It combines ontological realism with epistemological relativism, acknowledging both the existence of an objective reality and the social nature of knowledge. This approach allows it to address complex social issues in ways that may be overlooked by purely positivist or interpretivist methods.

Standpoint theory

Standpoint theory [13] maintains that a person's knowledge of the world is shaped by their background and experience that reflects their location within the prevailing socio-economic order or political economy. It suggests that all knowledge is socially situated and critiques the conventional view of science and knowledge as being overly objective. It also suggests that groups who suffer exploitation and expropriation (the working class, the precariat [14] and the subaltern) have 'double vision' as their experience enables them to understand both the knowledges of the powerful and the powerless (see Lukacs [15] on the standpoint of the proletariat). Hence standpoint theory is valued and applied by socialists who also reject the claim that by viewing all standpoints as valid, such theory encourages relativism [16]. Drawing on critical realism, they acknowledge epistemological relativism but claim that reference to realist ontology provides a means of deciding which standpoints are more truthful than others.

The reality examined in chapter one, its structures and mechanisms, acts on people in ways that form their standpoints and these then enable and limit their perceptions and understandings of the world. They may be aware or unaware of this process and a prime aim of schooling should be to raise students' awareness and understanding of knowledge and its role in the ongoing reproduction of society by focussing not only on experienced phenomena (the empirical domain) and events (the actual domain) but also on the structures and mechanisms of the real domain that include the structures and mechanisms of knowledge as defined above.

Students develop their standpoints from birth, learning everyday lay knowledge (e.g. the concepts or river, hill, factory and city) and everyday tacit knowledge (e.g. wayfinding) from family, community and media. This learning integrates perceptual and linguistic abilities and results in abilities to 'know that' (facts, concepts and ideas) and 'know how' (skills). By the time they reach secondary school they carry a considerable amount of everyday knowledge into the classroom. The Funds of Knowledge Approach [17] to education recognises the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for community, household or individual functioning and well-being. By developing curricula that acknowledge and build on these it seeks to counter deficit thinking or the idea that low school performance among disadvantaged students is caused by underlying linguistic, economic and cultural limitations. It gives priority to the social usefulness of knowledge (its use values) rather than its exchange values as a passport to a 'good' job and upward social mobility. If students' standpoints and their everyday knowledge, drawn from funds of knowledge in their community, are not recognised in schools they are likely to experience alienation and become disruptive as they cannot connect academic school knowledge to what they already know.

Vygotsky, the dialectical nature of learning and objectivity

The notion that academic concepts and ideas, such as those subsumed by geography and critical realism, should be built on and transform everyday concepts and ideas is central to the educational thinking of Vygotsky [18] and has been applied to learning in school geography [19] notably by Margaret Roberts. Vygotsky highlighted the dialectical and transactional relationship between everyday knowledge and more abstract and theoretical (school) knowledge and suggested that teachers should guide mediation between the two as the curriculum (the theory) is evaluated against practice (the students' experience and understanding of the world). This requires critical pedagogy, a form of praxis involving reflexivity, [20], that is a shared journey towards higher states of consciousness, emancipation, and greater objectivity [21] (via provisional truths or better understandings of reality) that serves to undermine false consciousness, ideology and fetishism (see page 4). It involves students seeking to resolve the cognitive, practical, moral and emotional conflicts that result from consideration of school knowledge and modifying their everyday knowledge and standpoints accordingly.

Geographers and their standpoints

Geography as a science is enmeshed in the history of modernity and its associated structures and processes (colonisation, industrialisation, secularisation, urbanisation, etc.) that include the rise of global capitalism. School geography was introduced into Britain to serve the needs of Empire for workers who had some knowledge of distant locations and citizens who would take pride in Empire. Geography in universities developed subsequently to meet the need for geography teachers and both academic and school geography were written or produced with a range of exclusions. The knowledge and geographies of those marginalised by virtue of their class, 'race', gender, sexuality, disability, or location was ignored. Geography became predominantly a white Eurocentric project that was opposed by radical voices [22] from the start. It is only in recent decades that critical academic geographers have come to the fore to reinterpret the subject's history, reveal its politics and role in past and present conflicts, reclaim lost knowledges, acknowledge that objectivity and truth are goals only ever partially realised, and produce a more inclusive geography. While there is a strong movement to decolonise school geography [23] other exclusions, notably that around social class, remain largely unchallenged.

In their working lives, geography teachers adopt a standpoint that is reflective of their socialisation as geographers and educators. They are influenced by their pre-service and continuing education as teachers and by curricula and associated guidance prescribed or suggested by national government, examination boards, textbook writers, and subject associations. But they do have some autonomy to decide what sort of geography teacher they should be: mainstream or critical, conservative, progressive or radical. Central to their choices as curriculum makers is how they address what, who and how questions relating to curriculum, how they balance mainstream and critical knowledge, and what role social justice plays in their decisions.

What, who and how questions

In an article designed to raise ethical questions of justice, Zipin and Brennan [24] suggest that prescriptive national curricula, like that being reviewed in England in 2025, generally put the WHAT question before WHO and HOW questions. They are too ready to prescribe a diet of academic knowledge organised into discrete subjects, before asking whether students can recognise themselves, their everyday knowledge, and the issues that concern them in the resultant lessons.

Who, they ask, should be represented in the curriculum along with their knowledge? How should they be represented? What social purposes should the curriculum serve? And how can learners' democratic participation in their learning be assured? These are questions of curriculum justice that this chapter seeks to address.

Consideration of standpoint theory and the dialectical nature of learning has already addressed the who and how questions. We should build knowledge from academic geography on the foundations of students' everyday knowledge using critical pedagogy. Addressing the what question requires that we draw on both mainstream and critical geography and both the knowledge of the powerful and that of the powerless.

Mainstream and critical geography

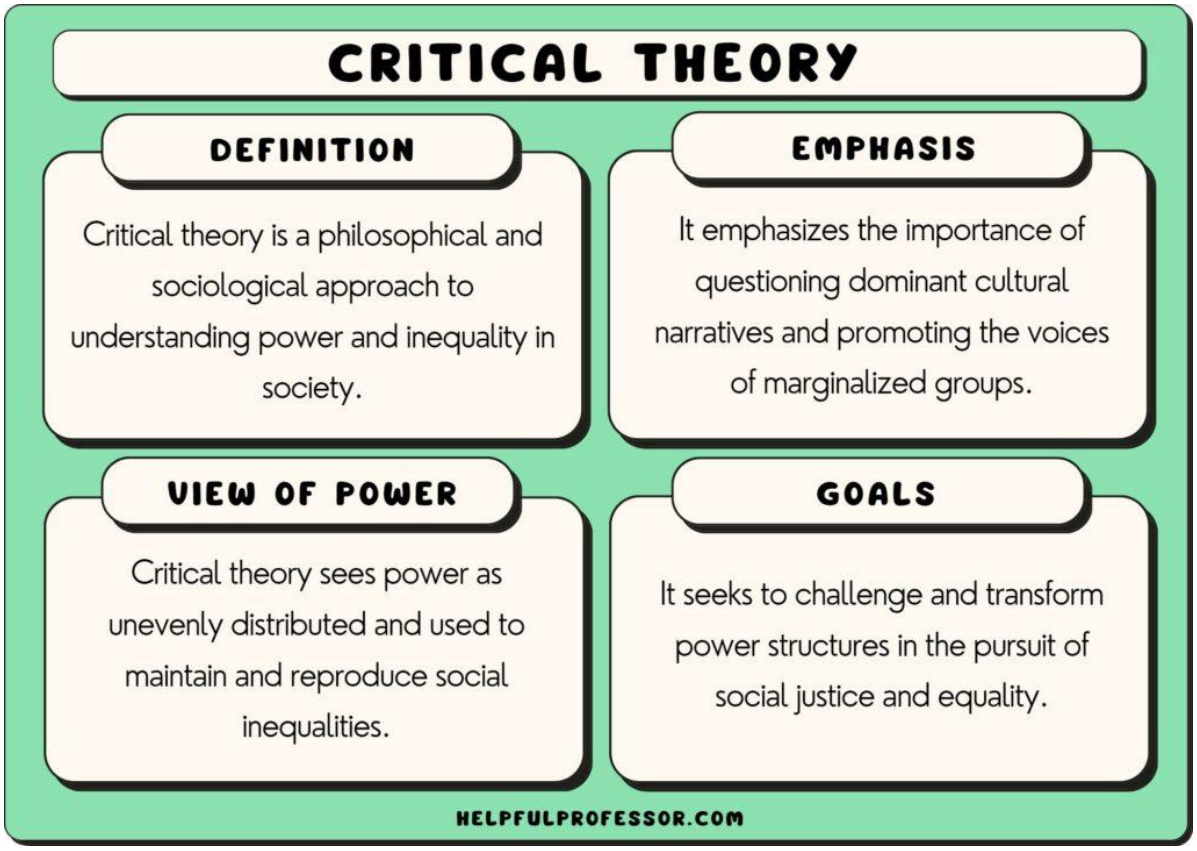

Figure 2.2 Critical theory [25]

Human and environmental geography draw on **social theory** that has two dimensions, one descriptive the other prescriptive. **The descriptive dimension** describes society and advances explanations for social phenomena, events, problems and changes (e.g. the rise of right-wing populism in Europe), while the

prescriptive dimension goes beyond description to suggest how society ought to be and advance normative or value-based arguments, judgements and principles to support its claims (e.g. how schooling should respond to the rise of populism). The prescriptive dimension rakes two forms: **mainstream theory** seeks to justify, legitimate and defend the present social order while **critical theory** seeks to explain why and how society should be transformed or re-organised with different institutions reflecting different principles and values. Marxism, feminism, ecologism and decolonial theory are examples of critical social theories that continue to shape critical geography and education. Figure 2.2 (page 33) summarises four key aspects of critical theory. As we saw in chapter one, critical realism offers a philosophy of science that underpins or serves as underlabourer for such theory.

The knowledge of the powerful

The **knowledge of the powerful** consists of that which the ruling class and their employees / supporters in the economy, state and media use to run society and the ideology they use to maintain citizens' consent to the prevailing social order. It draws on mainstream social theory to support the technocratic management [26] of society and Gramsci [27] developed the concept of hegemony to analyse the associated ideology. Fraser [28] defines hegemony:

"Hegemony" is his term for the process by which a ruling class naturalizes its domination by installing the presuppositions of its own worldview as the common sense of society as a whole. Its organizational counterpart is the "hegemonic bloc": a coalition of disparate social forces that the ruling class assembles and through which it asserts its leadership. If they hope to challenge these arrangements, the dominated classes must construct a new, more persuasive common sense or "counterhegemony" and a new, more powerful political alliance or "counterhegemonic bloc."

In the past forty years the 'free market revolution' or rise of neoliberalism has resulted in the ruling class imposing its worldview (its powerful knowledge of the world) on the rest of society as 'common sense' or the widely held belief that here is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism (see Fisher on capitalist realism [29]). The main assertions of neoliberalism are listed in the first column of Figure 2.3 (page 34) while the other two columns compare its promise with the reality.

The ideology	The promise	The reality
Citizens should be freed from bureaucracy.	Neoliberals supported politicians who crushed powerful labour movements, privatised public companies and marketized the welfare state. Thay did this in the name of freedom.	Society is as tightly regulated, surveilled and controlled as it was in the period 1945 to 1975. What changed with neoliberalism was who was planning society and whose interests they were serving. Workers were now excluded from both corporate and state planning.
Big government (the state) is inefficient and should be reduced in size.	Societies are too complex to be governed by a centralised authority without unintended consequences. The market is superior to government. The size of government (the state) should be reduced.	Corporations operating in a market that they plan along with their political allies are just as capable as governments of wielding largely unaccountable power. The size of the state has not reduced and its main function is now supporting capital's pursuit of profit and clearing up after crises caused by its greed.
Public spending is wasteful.	Neoliberals claim to reduce public spending and deliver tax cuts. Welfare and public services are deemed inefficient.	Public spending has not fallen, ii has simply been redistributed. States now spend billions on supporting big business and the wealthy with subsidies, tax breaks and bail outs.
Public services should be privatised.	Inefficient public utilities should become efficient profit-maximising corporations.	National infrastructure was transferred to an oligarchy of quasi-public corporations whose profits were guaranteed by the state.
The citizen should become an entrepreneur.	Citizens are urged to become entrepreneurs or 'mini-capitalists' who manage their own portfolios of assets and liabilities.	Citizens no longer engage in conflict and debate in the political sphere. They become floating voters supporting the party they perceive to support their own interests. Politics is depolitiised.
The free market	The free market delivers competition between firms and governments that leads to efficiency and promotes both private and public interests	The reality of capitalism is not numerous small businesses competing with one another for market share but a few vast enterprises co-operating with one another and with states. We live in a world of pervasive private planning that marginalises public interests.
The public interest	Corporations make profits for their shareholders and jobs and products that benefit all. Wealth trickles down.	In largely 'unfree' markets outcomes are not efficient for all. Profits are distributed to the already wealthy and without strong unions, workers face lower wages and higher prices. Wealth 'trickles' up rather than down.
Consumer choice	The market guarantees consumers freedom of choice.	Consumers have limited real choice about the products and services they consume.
Political and economic power are separate	Corporate and state power serve fundamentally different interests. The state is a neutral arbitrator between competing interests. Firms and states are enemies in the free market.	State policy is shaped by the balance of power in society. Politicians and state departments implement laws and regulations in the interests of those best able to influence them. Firms and states are often powerful allies, especially in times of crisis.
Democracy should be replaced by technocracy	Policies created by technocratic elites are superior to those created democratically by citizens	The prospect of government by the people has been replaced by rule by technocratic elites and vested interests. Representative democracy has been suppressed.

Figure 2.3 (page 35 above) **Neoliberalism, the promise and reality**
(Based on Blakeley, 2024 [30])

Gilbert and Williams [31] extend Gramsci's concept of hegemony to suggest that it comprises material, institutional, and technological components alongside the cultural or ideological, including '*a set of entrepreneurial, competitive, individualistic norms that are encouraged across a range of social sites from schools to reality television shows and internet influence culture*. (Gilbert & Williams, 2022: xii). They maintain that most UK citizens neither actively consent to, nor actively dissent from, neoliberalism. Their passive consent is a mix of cynical resignation at their lack of political agency, a conscious but ineffectual critique of the selfishness and harm that capitalism engenders, and an embrace of the everyday pleasures that consumerism, the popular media, and digital platforms provide.

The knowledge of the powerless

The **knowledge of the powerless** is that of those who suffer exploitation and expropriation under capitalism. The working class, while continually reshaped by technological and economic change, are exploited to varying degrees by unjust and unfair working conditions as they have only their labour to sell. Others are expropriated as their human capacities and their lands are confiscated and conscripted into circuits of capital. The latter group includes subaltern peoples [32] or groups and individuals who are marginalized, excluded, and silenced by dominant power structures, both in the context of past and present colonialism and imperialism and also as members of a growing global precariat [33] The term subaltern, that we first met on page 5, highlights those who are socially, politically, and geographically disempowered, denied agency, and excluded from mainstream narratives and institutions. If exploited members of the working class and expropriated members of the subaltern wish to challenge the prevailing hegemony, they must form a counterhegemonic bloc that offers a different 'common sense' or knowledge of a different way of organising society, meeting human needs, and realising human capabilities along with sustainability.

In the UK and elsewhere the radical or populist left [34] offers the powerless such an alternative 'common sense' that blames the rich and their political allies for the problems they face (e.g. falling standard of living, lack of 'good' jobs and available housing, declining public services) and offers radical democracy or the popular control of society and social development as the solution. The current

struggle for hegemony or culture war is between the populist left and the populist right [35] that blames the problems facing the powerless on migrants (including refugees seeking asylum [36] and members of the global precariat arriving in small boats) and on politicians who fail to put native citizens first. Reform and its racist leader Nigel Farage [37] represent the populist right with an ideology that is a nativist version of neoliberalism. In April 2025 YouGov [38] found that UK citizens were evenly divided with 15% claiming to be very or fairly left wing and 15% very or fairly right wing. On a scale from minus 100 (very left wing) to plus 100 (very right wing), 18 - 24 year olds were found to be at minus 25. The public rated the Greens, Labour and Reform at minus 55, minus 40 and plus 70 respectively, while political scientists rated them minus 60, minus 25, and plus 85. In September 2025. 44% of Britons blamed the rich [39] for national woes while 38% blamed migrants. They had more confidence in Reform [40] to deliver change than any other party and it was ahead in the polls. All parties represent different blends of class and identity politics [41] and it was only some on the democratic green left who were advocating a political economy based on a critical epistemology and holist ontology.

Powerful knowledge and social realism (SR)

Powerful knowledge is a concept linked to social realism [42] that has gained currency in educational policy making and school geography in recent decades due to the 'knowledge turn' in curriculum studies inspired by the writings of such philosophers and sociologists of education as Wheelahan [43] and Young [44] and the work of the GeoCapabilities project [45]. It suggests that the new sociology of education [46] (introduced by Young and others in the 1970s) led to the rise of student-centred, liberal progressive curricula (see Figure 2.6 pages 44 & 45) reflecting a strong constructivist philosophy of knowledge (see Figure 2.1. page 29). Social realists argue that in the interests of equality it is now time to return to knowledge in ways that ensure all students have access to the powerful knowledge provided by academic subject communities such as that of geography,

SR supporters draw on Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane social bases for knowledge [47] to distinguish between the sacred as an internally consistent world of concepts (powerful knowledge) and the profane as a vague and contradictory continuum of procedures and practices (everyday knowledge). They believe that the work of academic communities of scholars guarantees progress towards objective truths or powerful knowledge free from the influence of the knowledge of the powerful. This powerful knowledge has far deeper,

broader and more cohesively ordered concepts and practices than everyday knowledge and is thus a sounder basis for curriculum. Social realists are distinct from social constructivists (Figure 2.1 page 25) in focusing on the specialist status of intellectual disciplines as loci of judgemental rationality that significantly transcend partialities and so guarantee powers to knowledge. Constructivists fail to respect such loci and see intellectual communities as inevitably partial and prone to profane plays of unequal power relations in their knowledge productions.

I challenged the GeoCapabilities project's notion of powerful disciplinary knowledge (PDK) in 2017 [48], sought to demonstrate the power of a geography curriculum underpinned by critical realism in my ebook Critical School Geography (2020 [49]), and addressed some outstanding issues raised by key actors in their evaluation of the GeoCapabilities project in 2024 [50]. This chapter has been strongly influenced by Zipin, Fataar & Brennan [51] who assess how adequately curricula based on SR warrants accord with standpoint theory, Vygotskian approaches to pedagogy, and Fraser's theory of justice.

Social realism and standpoint theory

As a departure from the new sociology of education, which reduces knowledge to mere standpoints, interests, and power relations, social realism asserts that knowledge—while socially constructed—is objective and real, playing a vital role in transcending personal experience and ensuring equitable access to education Zongyi Deng [52].

As Deng suggests, social realists reject standpoint theory along with the need for curriculum to accommodate students' everyday knowledge and Vgotskian approaches to pedagogy. Edwards [53] and Wrigley [54] regard this move as misguided as when based on critical realism rather than interpretivism, standpoint theory is not irrealist, relativist and ignorant of the post-empirical revolution in the philosophy of science, as social realists suggest. Their argument is summarised in Figure 2.4 (page 39) with the critically realist position reconciling a belief in objective knowledge with the subjectivity of students' standpoints in a manner that avoids relativism on the one hand and discrimination against some groups on the other. The question mark against conservative in the ideology row and social realism column, indicates that social realism risks confusing powerful knowledge with core knowledge [55].

	Interpretivism	Social realism	Critical realism
Objectivity	Objectivity impossible.	Objectivity realised by academic communities	Objectivity negotiated with reference to ontology.
Knowledge and understanding	Knowledge is merely a matter of personal standpoints.	The most objective knowledge is that of academic communities.	Everyday knowledge is constantly revised in dialogue with academic knowledge.
Curriculum	Curriculum celebrate the diversity of knowledges. No common / core curriculum.	Curriculum provides access to powerful disciplinary knowledge. A knowledge rich curriculum.	Curriculum is negotiated in ways that allow students to test the validity of knowledge.
Educational ideology	Progressive / Student centred	Liberal / Conservative?	Critical / Radical

Figure 2.4 Three positions on objective knowledge and curriculum (based on Edwards. 2012)

Geography educators have produced a considerable literature outlining the characteristics of powerful geographical knowledge [56]. My reading of this literature suggests that some geographical social realists associated with GeoCapabilities are emergent critical realists who have moved from column two to column three (Figure 2.4) in their successive arguments. This is seen in David Lambert's [57] response to Winter, Kasuji, Poh, Richarson, & Whittall [58] who critique PDK through a decolonial lens highlighting what they see as its reductive binary (dualist) frames ('powerful' vs 'everyday', academic vs 'everyday', curriculum vs pedagogy), and its neglect of the racialising politics of geographical knowledge production that together serve to marginalise the 'everyday' knowledge of people globally in ways that sustain racialised inequalities. In reply, Lambert insists that PDK:

- is a heuristic device not a precise analytical concept
- focusses on what knowledge can do, it's generative powers or the intellectual powers it bestows that foster the learner's capabilities

- is dynamic, always contested and changes with new insights, perspectives and methodologies
- helps to clarify who and why questions regarding curriculum before what and how questions
- is NOT the inert, given knowledge of the powerful

PDK explicitly calls for a curriculum of engagement of both students and teachers with the transformation of knowledge selections and meaning making. Thus, PDK does not provide a normative framework to determine whether geographical knowledge is 'powerful' or not, but it is a generative concept that provides curriculum making questions – such as 'in what ways is this in my teaching programme potentially powerful to the learner?' and 'in what ways might they become significant to learn?' Lambert, 2025, p. 51

In his characterisation of PDK and the extract from his article we see Lambert's acceptance of students' everyday knowledge (standpoint theory) and a view of knowledge and critical pedagogy (meaning making) that reflects critical realism or the normative framework that he admits PDK lacks. His arguments are reflective of column three in Figure 2.4.and in this article and elsewhere he admits a growing interest in critical realism. So perhaps we should not be as dismissal of PDK as Winter and her co-authors are when they claim that PDK reflects neoliberalism, side-steps the politics of knowledge, and marginalises critical education.

'Powerful knowledge' serves as a quick relief antidote in a fragile political climate to domesticate the very soul of geography, to silence resistance to inequality and to hide geography's bedrock epistemology of differentiation and extractivism in its widest sense. Winter et al, 2024, p. 74

If we give PDK the benefit of the doubt and continue to argue as I did in 2017 that powerful knowledge is critical knowledge underpinned by critical realism, then the relationship between powerful knowledge and social power (currently neglected by SR) becomes more significant. The geography curriculum would then build both mainstream and critical geographical knowledge on students' everyday knowledge in ways that address matters of significant concern to them, reveal the knowledges of the powerful and powerless, foster an understanding of hegemony and counter-hegemony, and develop critical social literacy as a means of defending and extending democracy and social justice. Such an answer to the why question regarding curriculum is summed up by Wrigley:

Our curricular aim should be not only to satisfy everyone's entitlement to Knowledge, but the capacity to apply it to significant matters in the interest of democracy and social justice. This would be truly powerful knowledge. Wrigley, 2017, p.22 [46]

Social realism, ethics and social justice

A key aspect of the separation of the sacred and profane is SR's insistence that the sacred plane must primarily be about advancing knowledge and its power to establish objectivity and truth, not morality. While SR finds authorisation for curriculum knowledge selection in social-epistemological but not social-ethical reasons, Zipin et al [59] argue 'that a both/and ethical-and-epistemological valuation of reasons for curriculum knowledge selection is both viable and desirable, and indeed their mutual exclusion is impossible' (p. 17/18). For SR the separation of knowledge questions from ethical questions (fact/value dualism) is necessary to locate powerful knowledge on a high- minded plane where objectivity and truth rule and ethics and values are considered contaminants.

In seeking to bring ethical purposes to curriculum, Zipin et al give ethical priority to knowledge that has use-value in learners' lived social-cultural spaces (socially situated, culturally specific knowledge practices and uses). Rather than regarding curriculum justice as a matter of mere redistribution of access to powerful knowledge and so a matter of 'epistemology trumping ethics', Zipin and his co-authors argue curriculum justice is inseparable from ethics and that structural power inequalities and the knowledges of the powerful and powerless should be acknowledged in curriculum.

Social realism's conceptions of what constitutes justice are too thin to meet the needs and aspirations of power- marginalised groups seeking better lives through schooling. Zipin et al draw on draw on Fraser who critiques the 'Westphalian' framing of justice that shaped 'normal social science' and insists that the what of justice refers to distribution, the who of justice refers to fellow citizens of the nation state, and the how of justice is the province of 'scientific experts' who exercise impartiality among competing claims. In a globalised world such assumptions are inadequate as is the mainstream social theory they shaped. Her 3-R dimensions of post-Westphalian justice, outlined below (Figure 2.5, page 42), offers a more robust framing of justice that is congruent with standpoint theory and Vygotskian challenges and reveals the limitations of SR's focus on the redistribution of 'powerful knowledge'.

- **Redistributive justice** is about ensuring that citizens have equal access to that which meets their needs and develop their capabilities. The curriculum should provide all students with access to diverse ways of knowing and being in the world. These include academic AND everyday knowledges AND the knowledges of the powerful and powerless that are relevant to the issues they face in their present and future lives.
- **Recognition justice** is about the equal recognition of different groups that hold different ethnicities, identities, and knowledges within global society. Such recognition requires the curriculum to recognise standpoint theory and local funds of everyday knowledge so that students can recognise themselves in what they are taught. It also requires recognition of subaltern knowledges and the pluriverse of knowledges that originate in the global North and South. These have the power to support or challenge student identities.
- **Representative justice** is about all global citizens being able to participate equally in the decisions that shape their livers. Students should play an active role in deciding curriculum content and pedagogy and work with teachers and others in the local community on action research projects (enquiries) that enable them to evaluate and develop knowledge through reflection and action (critical pedagogy).

Figure 2.5 The three components of Fraser's theory o justice [60]

A critically realist curriculum

Zipiin and Brennan [61] arrive at **recommendations regarding the curriculum** that reflect standpoint theory, Vgotskian pedagogy, and Fraser's theory of justice and can be considered to stem from a critically realist philosophy of knowledge.:

- *That the multiple challenges facing humanity and the planet – locally and globally – are emergent, not fixed. They continually generate new conditions, considerations, and complex combinations that existing knowledge cannot grasp. The complexity of these 'problems that matter' – especially the futures of young people – call for interdisciplinary curricular engagement. Further they call for connecting knowledge from community life-worlds with academic knowledge, so that all who are affected can contribute to understandings and options for action.*
- *In this context, curriculum needs to be both future-orientated and action-orientated. Curriculum in practice should be understood as most fundamentally a dynamic process of working **with and on** knowledge. In*

this way both students and teachers recognise themselves ***as knowledge-making agents.***

- *Working on complex problems of local and global urgency attracts interest and engagement of diverse people who feel affected and have experience and knowledge to contribute. This can include people from diverse communities, and from diverse fields of specialist knowledge, to work with students and teachers. Mattering problems then attract a 'dialogic democracy' (Callon, Lacournes & Barthe, 2009* [62]*) across diverse knowledges, such that all who participate both learn and teach, contributing to each others'* ***knowledge-abilities.***

  Ziplin & Brennan, 2020, p. 86

What orientation to the geography curriculum is necessary to realise these recommendations? How should it be framed in terms of their underlying critically realist philosophy of knowledge?

Three orientations to the geography curricula

Rather than returning to debates about curriculum futures that were part of the GeoCapabilities project, I intend to outline three orientations to the geography curricula by developing the typology offered by Kemmis, Cole & Suggett [63] over 40 years ago. They drew on Habermas [64] to suggest that knowledge is constituted by three different interests: the technical interest in problem solving that constitutes positivist (empirical/analytic/scientific) knowledge (mainstream science); the practical interest in mutual understanding that constitutes interpretivist (historical/hermeneutic/literary) knowledge (the humanities); and the emancipatory interest in realising a life free from unnecessary constraints that constituted critical (social scientific/emancipatory) knowledge (critical science). Habermas [65] envisaged a dialogic, discursive and radical democracy that draws on his notion of knowledge constitutive interests to promote debate among citizens over what is technically possible, culturally acceptable, and serves to extend their democratic rights and responsibilities.

Kemmis and his co-authors outlined three orientations to curriculum: the conservative / vocational orientation; the progressive / liberal orientation; and the socially critical orientation. In Figure 2.6 (pages 44 & 45) the text in italics is taken from their text. I have added additional material drawn from my 2024 article [66] on GeoCapabilities and renamed their socially critical curriculum the

socially critical AND critical realist curriculum. Readers familiar with GeoCapabilities will recognise in Figure 2.6 elements of its three curriculum scenarios.

	Knowledge	**Epistemology and Ontology**	**Curriculum knowledge**	**Politics and view of society**
The Conservative, traditional curriculum *The vocational/ neo-classical orientation to curriculum and schooling*.	Based on a given and inert selection of knowledge-as fact. An under-socialised view of knowledge. Risks becoming rigid and unresponsive. Separates knowledge from values and academic knowledge from lay knowledge (modern dualisms).	Empiricist, positivist, realist and objectivist. Empiricism focused on reality as experienced. Positivism looks for universal laws that don't exist. It gives a shallow perspective on causation.	Prepackaged, stable and classroom ready. *Objective. a public matter, exists in books, performances; mostly described as skills and Information, (facts, concepts) which have their meaning and significance in occupational or disciplinary contexts; special concern is for the technical/ rational/scientific/managerial interests of knowledge (knowledge for control). Strong split between 'mental' and 'manual' (skills) aspects of knowledge*	A conservative curriculum preserving both existing knowledge and its unequal distribution. Unsuitable for democratic high-quality education.
The Liberal / Progressive curriculum *The liberal-progressive orientation to the curriculum and schooling*.	Generic and considers curriculum content to be arbitrary and flexible. Values 'everyday' or popular knowledge. Risks curriculum becoming knowledge adverse.	Interpretist irrealist and subjectivist. Interpretivism encourages a curriculum based on the funds of 'everyday' knowledge whereby individuals, households and communities	*Subjective. a 'private' or individual matter, exists in accomplishments or 'In the head' of the individual; mostly described as learnings, attitudes and living skills which have meaning and significance in the individual's life context and the culture; special concern is for the practical/ expressive, cultural Interests of knowledge for communication, deliberation and*	Motivated by an inclusive democratic principle. Shaped by the interests, purposes, and needs of all students and future citizens. Risks idealism.

		give meaning to phenomena.	*refinement. Integration of mental/ manual in individual work.*	
The socially critical AND critically realist curriculum A socially critical AND critically realist framing of the curriculum that accommodates other framings while also critiquing them. Builds on positivism and constructivism. Goes further to look at causes, social structures and their impacts.	Shifts the focus from epistemology to ontology Seeks to overcome modern dualisms. Accommodates both everyday and academic knowledge and the knowledge of the powerful and powerless.	Ontological realism with epistemological relativism. Maintains that the concepts of experience, events and causal mechanisms are essential to an adequate approach to causality. Reaches its conclusions through powerful methods involving retroductive reasoning and judgemental rationality.	*Dialectical. an interplay of subjective views of the world and the historical and cultural frame-works in which they are located. Sees knowledge as constructed through social interaction and thus as historically, culturally, politically and economically located. This kind of knowledge is not easily specified: it has its meaning in actions or projects whose significance is in specific historical, political and economic contexts. It places a central value on the role of knowledge in social action: the emancipatory interests of knowledge (knowledge for social justice through critique and collaboration). Mental and manual aspects of knowing are integrated in group work*.	A radical curriculum that draws on critical social theory, for example decolonial, eco-socialist and feminist theory. *School and society reflect one another; school may help in overcoming social inequities and preparing students for participation in social, political and economic activities, with a stress on socially, morally and politically justifiable conflict resolution*.

Figure 2.6 **Three Orientations to Curriculum (adapted from Kemmis, Cole & Suggett, 1983)**

Having arrived at a critically realist framing for the curriculum that answers the why, who, how, and what questions I now consider it necessary to refocus on the what question relating to curriculum content. Since social realism fails to clarify the relationship between powerful knowledge and social power and underplays the dangers of the powerful shaping the curriculum in their interests, it is worthwhile looking again at the knowledges of the powerful and powerless, this time in the context of the rise of right and left populisms.

Neoliberalism, right populism and post-truth

We met neoliberalism in chapter one in connection with critical realism's four planar model of social reality and the global crisis (page 12) and again, earlier in this chapter, when introducing the knowledge of the powerful (Figure 2.3 page 26). Neoliberalism expresses the interests and values of a coalition of ruling class interests that includes a global economic elite or oligarchy who now control the technology and finance sectors with the help of their political allies. Right-wing populism [67] serves this elite and its tech bros (the broligarchy [68]) while claiming to serve 'the people' who have legitimate grievances related to living in a neoliberal societies in which globalisation, deindustrialisation, and austerity [69] has eroded their living standards. It employs the media, especially social media, to communicate knowledge, in the form of discourse, ideology, and post-truths [70] all of which contribute to neoliberal hegemony while deflecting citizens' discontent and anger onto others (e.g. immigrants, supporters of globalisation, the 'radical left', those who are 'woke', [71] the courts, the constitution, universities). Believing all populism to be anti-democratic, the Tony Blair Institute [72] provides a summary of populist leaders in power around the world.

Seymour terms the ideology that has swept right populists to power 'disaster nationalism' [73] . This is not the same as 'historical fascism' but is like it in that is offers to restore the comforts afforded by family, race, religion, nationhood, and nature. Its growing support removes socially democratic governments from power and erodes the powers of institutions of global governance. It thrives on irrationality, conspiracy theories, post-truths and the manipulation of citizens' passions, including their resentments. Disaster nationalism led to riots in England in July-August 2024 and Reform UK, under the leadership of Nigel Farage [74], continues to foster hate while suggesting that schools have 'poisoned' students' minds with woke ideas [75] and promising reforms aimed to restore their pride in Britain.

Disaster nationalism is propelling the USA into authoritarianism [76] and is opposed by the No Kings [77] movement. President Trump regards tariffs on trade as a means of 'Making America Great Again' as they reassert US trade dominance, redress an historic trade imbalance, force US dependent economies to lower tariffs and invest in the US, and so reassert US power. Seeing a threat to their economies and sovereignty, the Bric nations, led by China [78], are proving to be an emerging axis of resistance or an explicitly anti-western alliance that seeks closer links with the global South [79]. It seeks to trade in currencies other than the US dollar while redirecting trade to avoid the US. Global trade and geopolitics are in flux and the impact of Trump's trade war on US inflation and consumers may undermine his popularity. Meanwhile other leaders, including Putin, Xi, and Netanyahu, are similarly autocratic and wars in Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere reflect a world in which the rules-based global order is under attack, international diplomacy is failing, and such leaders seek to extend the territory they control.

Brecher [80] argues that the espousal of postmodernism and interpretivism along with its determination to deny universal truths, by thinkers on the left helped the rise of right populism. Intellectual space was ceded to neoliberalism with thinkers on the right first taking the opportunity to attack the relativism of the left and then co-opting interpretivism to deny the idea of truth altogether. For leaders like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump truth is simply irrelevant. What they say makes no claims to be true. It just expresses how they feel on the day and can be denied on the next day. Language is just rule-free rhetoric, the kind of everyday language used by their supporters. The result is a growing anti-intellectualism and distrust in politics.

Cannibal capitalism, 21st Century socialism, left populism

If right populism and the threat of fascism is to be confronted, older school students need to be introduced to the knowledges of right and left populists as they consider the knowledges of the powerful and powerless. Fraser theorises neoliberal capitalism, as an institutional social order that she labels 'cannibal capitalism' [81] and offers signposts towards 21st Century socialism or a post-capitalist society that offers a realistic alternative (see Figure 2.7, page 48). Her analysis and prescriptions are an example of how knowledge is socially produced and evaluated as critical social theorists engage with progressive social movements and political parties in emancipatory spirals to clarify the causes of the current global crisis, explain and. critique right populism, and offer ideas that

Cannibal Capitalism	21st Century Socialism
An institutionalised social order that includes four non-economic conditions for the possibility of a capitalist economy: • a large fund of wealth expropriated from subjugated peoples, especially racialised peoples, • a sizeable fund of unwaged and under-waged labour devoted to social reproduction, • a large fund of free or very cheap inputs from non-human nature, • a large body of public goods supplied by states and other public powers. Each harbours social relations, social activities, and social wealth. When these background conditions are considered capitalism becomes a type of society – one in which the economy is distinct from but dependent upon background conditions that it 'cannibalises' (erodes, depletes, destroys) in its drive to accumulate capital. In additions to economic injustices (class exploitation of wage workers, a tendency to crisis, lack of economic democracy) capitalism shows non-economic injustices and crisis tendencies grounded in the relations between the economy and the four non-economic conditions of its possibility. The result is an entwining of economic, ecological and social crises with imperialism and racial-ethnic antagonisms. This compound crisis gives rise to decolonial, feminist/anti-austerity/urban-municipal, and environmental, social movements along with movements seeking democratic global governance. Capitalism has a built-in democratic deficit, it erodes our autonomy, shapes our working and non-working lives, social development and all our futures. It cannibalises us by devouring our collective freedom to decide together how we shall live.	**Social justice**. Systemic change should overcome class-domination AND asymmetries of gender and sex, racial/ethnic/imperial oppression and political domination across the board. Address labour concerns AND social reproduction, structural racism, imperialism, de-democratisation, and environmental degradation. **Institutional re-design** What capitalism has decided 'behind our backs' should be the subject of democratic institutional re-design. How the social spheres (economy, politics and culture) are delimited, organised and function should be re-thought holistically and democratically to overcome the separation of production from reproduction, exploitation from expropriation, the economic from the political, and human nature from non-human nature. The spheres should be mutually compatible and responsive with soft and porous boundaries. The priorities among these spheres should be the nurturing of people, safeguarding nature, and democratic self-rule not commodity production and economic growth. To ensure sustainability all the natural resources and services, public goods, and political capacities used up in social production and reproduction should be replenished. Institutional re-design would vastly expand the scope of democracy by re-framing what constitutes 'the political'. **Social surplus. Q**uestions of what to produce and what to do with the surplus would become matters of democratic decision-making with priority given to unmet needs, both locally and globally, and the payment of historical debts to other societies. **Role of markets.** No markets at the top, no markets at the bottom, possibly markets in the middle Democratic allocation of social surplus at top, democratic provision of social needs via social provision of public goods and services at bottom. Markets, co-ops, commons, self-managed projects and other experimental forms of economy in the middle. Top and bottom are socialised and de-commodified.

Table 2.7 The author's summary of Nancy Fraser's arguments concerning Cannibal Capitalism and 21st Century Socialism

can be used by the populist left [82]. This worldwide movement directs 'the people's' discontent and anger at economic and political elites and seeks to unite the working class and subaltern peoples in campaigning for a counter-hegemony. Jeremy Corbyn's popularity [83] with young people in the late 2010s was the result of him being seen as a left populist and in May 2025 Zac Polanski [84] was seeking to convert the Green Party into an eco-populist party.

A Pluriverse of knowledges

It is in the teaching of economic and social development that school geography can question and deconstruct the western idea of development as progress and open the curriculum to the 'pluriverse' of epistemic critiques or knowledges of the powerless offered by post-colonial / decolonial scholars and movements.

Figure 2.8 (page 50) lists one hundred reformist (ontologically dualist and epistemologically mainstream or critical) and transformative knowledges (ontologically holist and epistemologically critical), with the latter challenging the 'modernist ontology of universalism' [85] by offering a 'global tapestry of alternatives' that represent a worldwide confluence of transformative economic, socio-political, cultural and ecological visions'. While the editors of Pluriverse dismiss reformist knowledges, there are many entries in the transformative category that find expression in populist left movements in the global North, for example agroecology, degrowth, direct democracy, ecofeminism, pedagogy, permaculture, radical ecological democracy, and the transition movement. You might explore some of the transformative knowledges listed in Figure 2.8 with which you are not familiar and reflect on which of those listed can contribute to the 20st Century socialism envisioned by Fraser in Figure 2.7. You might also consider which of these knowledges should feature in the geography curriculum at key stages 4 and 5 along with the knowledges about trade unions, democratic economies, and municipal socialism considered in chapter three.

Pluriverse was published in 2019 and examples of more recent transformative knowledge in the making can be found on the website of the Progressive International [86]. The global social theory website [87] explains the thinkers and concepts that contribute to 'the global tapestry of alternatives' and in the global North, debate around a green new deal [88] has provided one focus for the populist left and a counter-hegemonic bloc. See the discussion between Chantal Mouffe and James Schneider [89]. Degrowth has attracted the attention of critical

Reformist Solutions = 'a range of innovations devised mainly in the global North and promoted as progressive 'crisis' solution'. p. xix	**Transformative Initiatives – '**worldviews and practices, old, new, local and global, emerging from indigenous, peasant and pastoral communities, urban neighbourhoods, environmental, feminist, and spiritual movements. They reach for justice and sustainability in a multiplicity of ways.' p. xix
BRIC economies, Circular Economy, Climate-Smart Agriculture, Development Aid, Digital Tools, Earth System Governance, Ecomodernism, Ecosystem Service Trading, Efficiency, Geo-Engineering, Green Economy, Lifeboat Ethics, Non-Extractivism, Reproductive Engineering, Smart Cities, Sustainable Development, Transhumanism. 'A critical review of their rhetoric and practice exposes internal incoherences and suggests that they are likely to become ecologically wasteful profit-making distractions' p. xix	Agciro, Agdals, Agroecolocy, Alter-Globalisation Movement, Alternative Currencies, Arbitration for Sovereign Debt, Autonomy, Biocivilization, Body Politics, Buddhism and Wisdom-based Compassion, Buen Vivir, Chinese Religions, Christian Eco-Theology, Civilisational Transitions, Commons, Community Economics, Communalidad, Convivialism, Cooperative Ecosystems, Country, Deep Ecology, Degrowth, Democratic Economy in Kardistan, Direct Democracy, Earth Spirituality, Eco-Anarchism, Ecofeminism, Ecology as Culture, Eco-Positive Design, Ecovillages, Energy Sovereignty, Environmental Justice, Food Sovereignty, Free Software, Gift Economy, Gross National Happiness Bhutan, Hinduism and Social Transformation, Human Rights, Hurai, Ibadism, ICCAs – Territories of Life, Islamic Ethics, Jain Ecology, Judaic Tikkun Olam, Kamersa Assike, Kawsak Sacha, Latin American and Carribean Feminism, liberation Theology, Life Projects, Mediterraneanism, Minbimautisiiwin, Nature Rights, Nayakrishi Andolon, Negentrophic Production, New Matriarchies, New Water Paradigm, Open Localisation, Pacific Feminisms, Pacifism, Peacewoman, Pedagogy, Permaculture, Popular Solidarity Economy, Post-Economia, Prakritik Swaraj, Queer Love, Radical Ecological Democracy, Revolution, Rural Reconstruction, Sea Ontologies, Sentipensar, Slow Movement, Social Ecology, Social Solidarity Economy, Tao Worldviiew, Transition Movement, Tribunal on the Rights of Nature, Ubunti, Undeveloping the North, Wages for Homework, Worder-led Production, Zapatista Autonomy

Figure 2.8 Reformist and Transformative Knowledges outlined in Pluriverse, a Post-Development Dictionary [90]

realists Buch-Hansen & Nielsen [91] and I have drawn on their work to re-vision the GeoCapabilites project [92].

The mainstream, socially democratic or reformist left

Where, you are perhaps wondering, is the mainstream, liberal and socially democratic left in all this? To answer that question we need to consider the argument that neoliberalism died with the financial crisis of 2008 and has been on life support ever since. Its rescue by the banks (quantitative easing) prompted an asset boom that widened inequalities but following Brexit, the Covid pandemic and continuing austerity, UK governments failed to restore levels of growth and productivity, In response to competition from China, the USA first adopted Bidenomics and then Trump's tariffs on imports Both were designed to restore the economy, generate jobs and revive manufacturing. Gabor [93] is among economists who theorise the emerging post-neoliberal political economy that prompts such policies and Figure 2.9 compares neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism	Post-neoliberalism
Free and open markets	Protection of key sectors of economy
Globalisation – offshoring	Deglobalisation – onshoring
Small state – limited government intervention. Managerial state	State is back – more government intervention, Transformative state
Investment relies on private sector	State prepared to borrow to invest
Industrial and regional policy left to private sector	Revival of state's role in industrial and regional policy. Planning is back.
Reliance on USA for security	Europe and UK increase arms expenditure as US withdraws support
Privatisation the orthodoxy	Nationalisation of key sectors, e.g. railways, steel
An economy rooted in finance, consumerism and globalism	An economy rooted in production, work and localism

Figure 2.9 Neoliberalism and Post-neoliberalism compared

Having purged itself of the populist left [94], Labour in the UK was inspired by Bidenomics and once back in power set about restoring economic growth and productivity, reviving public services and modernising Britain. The chancellor Rachel Reeves's actions were however constrained by self-imposed fiscal rules [95] and by the bond markets. She adopted a conventional supply side economic model (securonomics [96]) rather than the foundational [97] or everyday model [98] she had favoured earlier (see Figure 2.10, page 52) and there was much speculation in 2025 on whether and how she would further raise taxes to pay for the government's programme. Labour in power has to date failed to offer citizens

a convincing vision of the future and after a year in office its record is mixed [99]. The populist left's supporters are drifting to the Green party and to an as yet unnamed party [100] supported by Corbyn.

Foundational Economics	Securonomics
A transformational economic model Focus on the economy of foundational services, housing, health care, etc. Priority provision of universal basic services Rethink purpose of economy to support human flourishing and challenge wealth A moral economy, more inclusive and more committed to social and ecological goals Promotes local wealth building and economic democracy In tune with devolution of powers to Wales, Scotland and the regions Favoured by a populist left	A conventional economic model Focus on the tradeable, competitive economy Priority growth and rising GNP Focus on reforming policies and institutions to boost productivity and growth Largely 'business as usual' to rebuild Britain's economy and public services Seeks private financing and transfers risk to asset managers and pension holders Out of tune with devolution Favoured by a mainstream, socially democratic left

Figure 2.10 Foundational economics and securonomics compared (Crisp, 2024 [101])

Having answered the what question relating to curriculum content in more depth, I conclude this chapter with reference to the 2025 review of the national curriculum for England and the likelihood it will lead to a more socially critical curriculum.

Curriculum and Assessment Review 2025 [102]

A research briefing [103] from the House of Commons Library outlines and compares national school curricula across the four nations of the UK. The integrated curricula of Wales and Scotland are considered in chapter three and here I focus on the current (2025) review of the national curriculum for England and its acceptance of powerful knowledge as a key element of its conceptual approach. Bailey [104] provides background to this review outlining recent culture wars between traditionalists and progressives and suggesting that education secretary Bridget Phillipson found it easier to tackle the curriculum than other pressing issues facing schools (funding, rising absence, teacher

recruitment, nine students in every class of thirty living in poverty, etc.). Sylvester [105] summaries the arguments against too many exams at age 16.

The review is chaired by Becky Francis, former head of UCL Institute of Education with Zongyi Deng [106] of UCL a member of the review panel. Its interim report [107] was accompanied by a position paper [108] that listed the three elements of the review panel's conceptual approach: an understanding of the NC in terms of purposes and goals, programmes and school subjects, and teaching as curriculum practice; the application of Schwab's practical lens; and a focus on powerful knowledge and effective pedagogy to develop students' skills and capabilities required for life and work.

The national curriculum is seen as serving three key goals: equipping students with knowledge and skills necessary for life and work; fostering responsible citizenship in a democratic society; and promoting holistic development – intellectual, social cultural, spiritual and moral, emotional, and physical. **School subjects** like geography are to be seen as not merely collections of knowledge but must be understood in the context of the NC's goals and expectations, as well as the practical work of teachers in the classroom. The careful selection and organisation of knowledge is needed to equip students with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adopt and thrive in the world and workplace of the future. Teachers are seen as **'curriculum makers'** in that they interpret and transform the content of a school subject within the NC to 'author' instructional warrants with students in the classroom. At the core of curriculum making is the process of unpacking and interpreting content to unlock its educational potential.

The review panel adopts a philosophical approach informed by Joseph Schwab's conception of the practical [109]. This rejects 'theory-instigated' reform (reform based on a theory of new persons, new knowledge, or a new society) on the basis that 'a significant body of research has repeatedly shown that radical theory (vision) – driven reforms have little to no impact on the work and practice of schools and classrooms.' Schwab starts not with theory but an investigation of the problems and issues facing the curriculum within the community. This is followed by deliberation over various alternative solutions and a decision on an appropriate course of action characterised by incremental improvements rather than immediate changes. Following Schwab, the review adopts **three working principles** that can be summarised as evolution not revolution; focussing on most

significant and pressing issues without destabilising the system; and identifying barriers to quality provision in the existing system and developing solutions.

As regards **curriculum knowledge**, the paper argues that equipping students with 'the knowledge and skills required to thrive as citizens in work and throughout life' requires the enactment of a knowledge-rich curriculum or knowledge-rich teaching where knowledge is regarded as 'powerful' because it provides, (quoting from Lambert [110]), 'more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world' and allows us to move beyond personal experiences and 'envisage alternative and new possibilities'. The paper then suggests that there are three elements of 'knowledge-rich' curriculum content: **substantive knowledge** (established facts, information, concepts and core principles drawn from academic disciplines and specialised fields that enables students to understand and interpret the world, enabling them to participate and function in society); **disciplinary knowledge** (specific ways of knowing and reasoning – e.g. what it means to know and reason in geography – how its guiding conceptions and narratives – both their promises and limitations – shape ways of knowing, interacting and inquiring about natural, social and cultural phenomena – together with methods and canons of reasoning and generating and verifying knowledge; and **knowledge for personal, social and cultural practices** that meets citizens' practical needs by showing how substantive and disciplinary knowledge can address real-world challenges. School subjects in the NC are to be seen as 'the embodiment of intellect, ways of thinking, wisdom and values, and thus possessing the potential to develop human capabilities, including life skills.'

Will the NC review produce a socially just curriculum?

In the light of this chapter's discussion of knowledge and Zipin & Brennan's advocacy of a socially just and socially critical curriculum, the review would seem to offer mixed messages:

- **Redistribution** Yes, all students require access to academic knowledge but this needs to be built on everyday knowledge. in ways that reveal and question both the knowledge of the powerful and the knowledge of the powerless. Global realities now require that such knowledges include those of the populist right and left. A clear statement of ethics is needed to guide teachers in the selection of such knowledge and their curriculum making. This should prompt development of social literacy along with responsible citizenship and holistic development, all with reference to

global society, the challenges it faces, and possible, probable and desirable global futures.

- **Recognition** The interim report seeks to deliver 'a curriculum that reflects the issues and diversity of our society' and ensures 'young people can see themselves in what they study'. It is regrettable therefore that everyday knowledge and funds of knowledge are not recognised and valued and the knowledge / curriculum making agent is seen as the teacher rather than the teacher AND the student working together. Greater attention to the 'problems that matter' in students' lives would be welcome.
- **Representation.** The panel's practical approach that rules out theory-based reform would appear to rule out a socially critical curriculum and poses the question of who will make decisions during Schwab's phases of investigation, deliberation and improvement and whether such decisions can be purely pragmatic rather than theoretical? His approach also risks an emphasis on evolution rather than revolution merely sustaining the curriculum status-quo. The model points to a democratic curriculum shaped locally by students, teachers and the community yet the panel's adoption of subjects and powerful knowledge is likely to reduce representation and democracy. The three elements of the 'knowledge rich' curriculum (substantive, disciplinary, and practical) are open to a wide variety of interpretations but with greater professional autonomy and appropriate guidance on the politics of school knowledge, teachers may be able to apply them to curriculum making in ways that extend democracy in and through schooling.

David Harvey's epistemology

Castree, Charnock and Christophers [111] summarise Harvey's epistemology;

- The process of analysis must represent a dynamic, unified yet contradictory capitalist reality by identifying key processes and relationships.
- Such analysis can reasonably focus on any part of the wider capitalist system because the key processes and relationships are 'contained' in that part.
- Dialectical logic mirroring a dialectical reality allows the analyst to track where and how 'moving contradictions' manifest in a system

that's growth orientated and looking to 'entrain' presently non-capitalist phenomena.

- This dialectical tracking forces the analyst to extend and modify their understanding of a capitalist-infused world, so analytical closure is only ever temporary. Castree. Charnock & Christophers, 2023, p. 47 & 48

Nancy Fraser analyses a dynamic, unified yet contradictory capitalism (Figure 2.8, page 46). This chapter focuses on the geography school curriculum as a part of that system with its own processes and relationships. It argues that students should engage in dialectical logic, debating different knowledges and recognising the ongoing contradiction between the knowledges of the powerful and powerless and the populist right and left. Such critical pedagogy encourages them to extend and modify their understanding of the world and recognise that such understanding is always provisional and never final.

Further reading

This article [112] by members of the History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group offers a critical appraisal of institutional knowledge production and exchange on the history and philosophy of geography in the UK. It examines broad epistemological trends over the period 1981 to 2021 showing how organisational, sociocultural and epistemic changes were coproduced, Epistemically, the group's events in the 1980s shaped contextualist, constructivist and critical approaches and coproduced new cultural geography, but the emphasis shifted from historical, sensitive biographical, institutional, and geopolitical studies of geographical knowledge, via critical, postcolonial and feminist geographies of knowledge-making practices in the 1990s, to more-than-human and more-than-representational geographies the early twenty-first century.

If a research group on the history and philosophy of school geography were to write a similar article what key organisational, sociocultural and epistemological changes might it outline? To what extent, if at all, has geography in secondary schools followed the epistemological trends in the parent discipline? What accounts for divergence if detected?

In his introduction to an article on Gramsci and Geography, Jordan Camp [113] outlines its contents:

It traces Gramsci's development as a spatial thinker in his speeches, political writing, and journalism as a leader of the Italian Communist Party. It describes how his attention to issues of space developed alongside Fascism's rise as a state form. It considers how his unfinished 1926 essay, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," offered a historical and geographical method for analysing the dialectics of class, region, and political economy and culture—including the articulation of race and class. Though this article includes "The Southern Question," as well as critical engagements with it, it does not limit his contributions to geography to this one piece. It specifically foregrounds Gramsci's method of conjunctural analysis articulated in the Prison Notebooks. It features an array of geographers who have engaged with his work and also includes spatial thinkers across the disciplines who approach Gramscian concepts and categories. Amid a global resurgence of white nationalism and neofascism, and what, following Gramsci, we might call an "organic crisis" of US hegemony and global capitalism on a world scale, engagements with Gramsci's spatial insights are warranted.

Read Camp and maybe Gramsci on the Southern Question [114] and consider Gramsci's relevance both to the rise in support for Reform in 'left behind' towns and regions of the UK and to the crisis of US hegemony under President Trump. How should the geography curriculum respond?

Read Esther Vernon' article The Structure of Knowledge, does theory matter? [115]. How do Bernstein's forms of knowledge and their structures relate to the types of knowledge and the debate over social realism explored in this chapter? Does Bernstein follow critical realism in seeking to hold together both/and realist ontology and social epistemology? (Vermon, p. 103).

Puttick & Cullinane [116] suggest that a reconceptualised family resemblance approach to the nature of science can hold together tensions within geography in ways that can be applied to the selection of teaching resources, curriculum research, and teacher education. The approach sees geography consisting of an inner core (aims and values, methods and methodological rules, practices, and knowledge) existing with an academic / geographical community (scientific ethos, social values, social certification and dissemination, and professional activities) that is located within the wider society (social organisation and interactions, financial systems, political power structures). Can this approach hold together unresolved tensions within the subject, including epistemological tensions, as the authors suggest?

Paulo Minoia & Jose Castro-Sotomayor [117] consider pluriversal education – an 'educational approach that embraces the diversity of ways of being, knowing, and acting, rooted in historical contexts and ecological interconnections'. They contest a westernised geopolitics of knowledge, promote epistemological pluralism, and advocate the revalorisation of subaltern knowledges. What can geography teachers learn from the 'experimentations of activism' in pluriversal education they outline?

The 2025 review of the national curriculum for England is opposed by those who seek more radical reform. See for example Oli de Botton [118], section 5 of the SEA's manifesto for education. [119], or the alternative proposals considered in chapter two of *Critical School Geography.*

Theory of Knowledge [120] asks school students to reflect on the nature of knowledge and how we know what we claim to know. It is part of the International Baccalaureate core curriculum. Should such study be part of every curriculum?

Discussion

Scientific knowledge neither can nor should be entirely value - neutral. Indeed, those who study the social world should use their knowledge to formulate social critique, hereby contributing to bringing about progressive social change. Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020, [121] p17

Does this assertion also apply to those who teach about the social world? If so, what are the implications for geography teachers?

The chapter seeks to oppose dualisms or binaries. To what extent is your work as a geography teachers shaped by dualist thinking, for example nature vs society, facts vs values, powerful vs everyday knowledge, academic knowledge vs everyday knowledge, curriculum vs pedagogy. What and who encourages /discourages such thinking? Have you or should you move to both / and ways of thinking?

What is the balance between types of knowledge in the curriculum you have devised or are required to teach? What degree of autonomy do you have as a curriculum maker and how does this affect your knowledge selection and production and that of your students?

Given the rise of the populist and racist right, does the geography you teach address who migrants are, why they come to the UK, what percentage arrive on small boats, the economic and social contribution that migrants make, and European and international laws that protects migrants who are under attack? GeoCapabilities Phase Three [122] addressed migration and you may wish to consult the case studies it published.

Do you recognise the three curriculum framings outlined in Figure 2.6 on pages 44 - 45? Take a topic you are currently teaching. How would it be approached within each framework? Are they mutually exclusive or can each contribute a different perspective with a different kind of knowledge? Are there dangers in excluding a socially critical framing?

How does the curriculum your department has made or is required to teach measure up on Fraser's three dimensions of social justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation? How does it rate when judged against Zipin & Brennan's recommendations on page 42 & 43?

How should the Geographical Association respond to the concept paper published by the panel reviewing the national curriculum for England?

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John Huckle 2025

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