

Chapter One Introduction

Critical realism is a philosophy of knowledge that focuses on the bio-physical and social structures and processes that shape the geography of the world. The dominant social structures are those of digital capitalism and these are controlled by a powerful minority. The result is a multidimensional global crisis. Radical democracy and radical global citizenship, as proposed by the populist left, are necessary to resolve this crisis and promote universal human flourishing. Digital capitalism underpins the wealth and power of tech billionaires and their political allies on the populist right who are opposed by the populist left, a growing number of whom support digital socialism. These populisms are engaged in culture wars or a struggle for hegemony that seeks to render the knowledge of the powerful or that of the powerless, the taken-for-granted common sense of the majority. Digital media are key sites of this struggle which shapes the nature of politics, the ongoing fiscal crises of nation states, and the worldviews of older school students. The review of the national curriculum in England and the prospects for a more critical school geography should be viewed in the context of the culture wars: the rise of Reform-UK on the populist right, the Labour government's failure to support the populist left, and the rise of the Greens as an eco-populist and socialist alternative.

In 2020, I self-published an ebook *Critical School Geography* that demonstrated how approaches to geography and education based in critical social theory can be combined to produce the content and pedagogy of a critical school geography. That book referred to critical realism in chapter four on knowledge where I repeated an argument I had developed earlier regarding the [GeoCapabilities](#) [1] Project and its advocacy of powerful disciplinary knowledge. I argued that such

knowledge was critical knowledge (critical geography) underpinned by critical realism. Only such knowledge has the power to develop students' capabilities to understand the world and change it for the better.

Debate with key advocates of GeoCapabilities has continued and this book is an attempt to bring added theoretical rigour to my earlier argument. It examines critical realism's claims regarding the world that exists (ontology, chapter two), the knowledge of that world we can gain (epistemology, chapter three), and how we can gain such knowledge (methodology, chapter four). As a philosophy of science that under-labours for critical social theory, critical realism sees the world as dialectical and seeks to close such false dichotomies or dualities as those between fact and values, individualism and collectivism, scientific analysis and moral criticism, and structure and agency (chapter five). By taking a spiritual turn, it also under-labours for religion, suggesting in its philosophy of meta-Reality (chapter six) that spiritual experience should be considered a constant feature of everyday life that has the potential to connect us to our ground state of creativity, freedom, and non-conditional love of others.

Roy Bhaskar and his followers

In 2014, [Graeber](#) [2] wrote an obituary notice for Bhaskar the founder of critical realism. In this he notes that Bhaskar was one of the most influential voices in the philosophy of science and a political revolutionary. Bhaskar wanted to understand society's problems in a deeper, structural sense than that provided by mainstream social science and offer ideas for putting them right. He and his followers developed their ideas in three phases: basic critical realism, dialectical critical realism, and the philosophy of meta-Reality.

[In a 2016 article What is Critical Realism?](#) [3] nine prominent critical realists note and expand on its four main features:

- **Ontological realism.** Critical realists assert that "much of reality exists and operates independently of our awareness or knowledge of it", including social reality.
- **Epistemic relativism.** Our knowledge of reality is limited and fallible.
- **Judgmental rationality.** It is possible to judge that some accounts of social reality are better than others.

- **Cautious ethical naturalism.** Although the [is-ought fallacy](#) [4] ought to be avoided, ethical values can be empirically studied.

These features are explored and applied to the teaching of school geography in the chapters of this book, but ethical naturalism deserves attention here. Bhaskar believed that values are objectively grounded in what is good for human nature or what he saw as ‘universal free flourishing’. Caring, kindness, and solidarity with others (including other sentient species) are inherently good because they facilitate human well-being. Such values are not subjective, can be discovered through reasoning and experience (empirical study), and provide grounds for critiquing existing social structures, false beliefs, and unmet needs.

Universal emancipation or the free flourishing of all people along with the rest of nature, is the ultimate goal of critical realism. Dialectical critical realism, with its focus on structure and agency, suggests how the obstacles to such flourishing might be removed so that unmet needs are met. The philosophy of meta-Reality suggests that humanity’s ground state supports ethical naturalism and that the continued moral evolution of humanity requires us to overcome our ontological separation from others.

School geography and radical global citizenship education

Critical School Geography is subtitled *Education for Global Citizenship*, and it remains my view that radical democracy and citizenship are the keys to ‘universal free flourishing’ and that the development of radical global citizens should be the over-arching aim of a critical school geography. In that earlier text, I drew on the post-Marxist theory of [Mouffe](#) [5] that follows [Gramsci](#) [6] in complementing Marx’s attention to economic production, class, and labour militancy, with attention to culture, identity, and social movements. Such theory links radical democracy and citizenship to [left populism](#) [7], hegemonic struggle, and [agonism](#) [8].

A radical democracy is one in which citizens have popular control over all realms of social life, the economy, politics, and culture. Applied to global society, it requires all actors, citizens, corporations, states, and NGOs, to act as global citizens who exercise responsibility for others (including other species and peoples distant in time and space) in return for universal rights. Radical global citizenship is global in two ways: it embraces all aspects of a citizen’s lives and all geographical scales of political activity from the personal to the global.

[Left populism](#) [9] promotes the needs of ‘the people’ over those of economic and political elites. Hegemonic struggle allows left populism to become the generally accepted ‘common sense’ view of the world, while agonism regards political opponents not as enemies but as adversaries whose ideas one may disagree with but who’s right to defend those ideas one does not question. Agonism, or disagreeing agreeably, allows diplomacy in international relations and is essential at a time when free speech is used to defend hate speech, political violence is a feature of culture wars between right and left populisms, and spaces for democratic debate and public discourse are becoming rarer.

Mouffe defines citizenship as ‘political activity involving a struggle for hegemony possible at any site from an engagement with the state, in the economy, or in everyday practices of identity formation’ ([Mouffe, 2000](#) [10], p. 178). She compares actual existing democracy with what democracy should or might be and suggests that it is possible to use features of liberal democracy (e.g. division of powers, civil rights, impartial administration, and checks on government) to advance democratic demands. As a post-Marxist, Mouffe does not give the working class a privileged role in anti-capitalist struggle but echoes intersectionality theory in recognising many sites of identity formation and subordination from which citizens struggle in ways informed by their situations, beliefs and affects. Her argument regarding liberal democracy can be extended to institutions of regional and global governance Should the UN, for example, recover its purpose by abandoning universality, rejecting those states that refuse to abide by charter values, and refocus on delivery of those values (see [Malloch-Brown](#), [11])?

Critical School Geography drew on several critical educators to explore the theory and pedagogy of radical global citizenship education in chapter nine. Among the recommendations they make is that it should explore how movements and parties develop solidarity across space, time and species, why it is justifiable to feel anger on behalf of those (including other species) who suffer injustice, and how proposals to reform global governance would give global citizens greater voice (see [Global Citizens Initiative](#) [12]). In this book radical global citizenship is set in the context of the rise of digital capitalism, its impact on dominant and counter-hegemonies, and the need to subject big-tech to democratic control so that it becomes a means of delivering ‘universal human flourishing’ or the full development of people’s capabilities.

Digital capitalism and digital socialism

Since 2020 when *Critical School Geography* was published, digital capitalism has grown in significance and is now, arguably, the major structure shaping geopolitics, the hegemonic struggle between right and left populisms, and citizens' lives. Digital geography is now an established branch of the subject with its own [texts](#) [13] and [journal](#) [14]. [Bork-Hüffer and Ergler](#) [15] introduce a special issue of *Digital Geography and Society* on young people's digital geographies in which they examine the entanglements between the digital and material realms and the ways in which young people use cyber geographies, internet geographies, and virtual geographies to actively shape their own sense of agency and solidarity, and their lifeworlds.

Over the past 15 years, digital geographies have increasingly emphasised the role of digital technologies not only as enablers but as entities with agency, reflecting a posthuman perspective that challenges traditional notions of human-centred agency. Scholars have conceptualised how (big) data, code, algorithms, and machine learning, autonomy and robotics, and artificial intelligence, shape, steer, surveil, and control (discourses about) human life and society. These perspectives hold significant potential for children and young people's geographies, offering new avenues to explore the techno-social complexities of contemporary youth experience. Bork-Hüffer & Ergler (references omitted)

[Fuchs](#) [16] sees digital capitalism as a special dimension and organisational form of capitalist society:

Digital capitalism is the dimension of capitalist society where processes of the accumulation of capital, decision-power, and reputation are mediated by and organised with the help of digital technologies and where economic, political and cultural processes result in digital goods and digital structures Digital labour, digital capital, the digital means of production, political online communication, digital aspects of protests and social struggles, ideology online, and influencer-dominated digital culture are some of the feature of digital capitalism. p. 155

Fuchs proceeds to consider the economic, political and cultural-ideological dimensions of digital capitalism, suggesting that it is an antagonistic dimension of society in which the economic class antagonism and the social relations of domination are shaped by and shape digitalisation. He sums up antagonisms it produces in the different realms of society in a table:

Realm of society	Underlying antagonism in capitalist society	Antagonisms in digital capitalism	Examples
Economy	capitalists VS. workers	digital capital VS. digital labour, digital commodity VS. digital commons	The monopoly power of Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, etc.
Politics	bureaucrats VS. citizens	digital dictators VS. digital citizens, digital authoritarianism/fascism VS. digital democracy	Donald Trump's use of Twitter and other social media
Culture	ideologues and celebrities VS. everyday people	digital ideologues VS. digital humans, digital hatred/division/ideology VS. digital friendship in culture.	asymmetrical attention economy in popular culture on social media: the cultural power of online-influencers such as PewDiePie (> 100 million followers)

Figure 1.1 The antagonisms of digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2024, p. 155)

Fuchs looks at four approaches to analysing digital capitalism (as privatised mercantilism, as distributive-force capitalism, as data extraction, and as immaterial production) preferring himself to follow Fraser (see chapter three) in seeing it as a digital society that is much more than a digital economy. In this regard, he reviews its characterisation as knowledge and digital media in Marxist theory, and as [network society](#) [17], [surveillance capitalism](#) [18], and [platform capitalism](#) [19]. His lengthy overview also contains sections on violence, including digital fascism and violence, and concludes with ten ontological premises for the critical analysis of digital capitalism and a warning that the world is at a crossroads faced with a choice between digital socialism or digital barbarism.

Democratic digital socialism is the alternative that is needed to global digital capitalism and its escalating antagonisms. Democratic socialism is a societal formation that sublates the antagonisms between classes, political rivals, and ideological enemies. It is not a land of milk and honey without problems, but a society where everyone leads a decent life, mutual benefits are maximised while mutual harms are minimised and the lifeforms of individuals, groups, cultures and societies are compatible so that they co-exist and do not destroy each other (Fuchs, 2024, p. 192).

Further insights into digital capitalism can be gained from Marxists who either regard it as a new form of capitalism (Dyer-Witherford & Mularoni) or a new mode of production with a new ruling class (Varoufakis).

The Cybernetic Circulation Complex and Biocommunism

While Varoufakis claims that the growth of big-tech results in the end of capitalism and its replacement by technofeudalism, [Dyer-Witherford and Mularoni](#) [20] refute this idea and building on the work of theorists of platform capitalism, suggest that what lies at the heart of the dominance of such corporations as Google, Meta, and Amazon, is their innovations in the realm of circulation rather than the realm of production or rentierism. They use digital technology to annihilate space and time, speeding up the sale of commodities and hence increasing the revenues and profits gained from production.

The cybernetic-circulation complex (CCC) is made up of corporations, startups, and nonprofits that have captured not only the markets but the means of value transactions. The companies that make up the CCC control payment platform sites where information is stored and the infrastructure to apply that information to enhance advertising. This limits competition and allows the CCC to dictate the rhythms of labour (such as that in Amazon warehouses) and the users of these platforms. Meta will guide users to certain news sites, Netflix towards certain viewing options, and Amazon to certain products. All seek to maximise time spent on their platforms. In February 2026, the list of [the largest corporations in the world](#) [21] by market value was led by a group of trillion-dollar tech giants, primarily based in the United States and Asia. NVIDIA currently holds the top position, followed by Apple, Alphabet, and Microsoft

Like [Hao](#) [22] whose ideas from [Empire of AI](#) [23] are considered in chapter two and three, Dyer-Witherford and Mularoni argue that the CCC operates as a form of digital colonialism. The tech giants exercise surveillance of online populations and exploit workers and the environment, in countries far from their headquarters. Their global reach multiplies and intensifies the resultant antagonisms, including geopolitical tensions and those in Fuchs' table (Table 1.1). Hence the CCC not only speeds up the circulation of commodities but also the circulation of political conflicts such as those between the US and China (who compete for global technological dominance) and those between left and right populisms. It also speeds up biospheric circulations as crises of pandemics, climate change, and

biodiversity loss are now deeply entangled with capitalism's technological systems (see chapter two).

Biocommunism is Dyer-Witherford and Mularoni means of restructuring the CCC to promote democratic digital socialism. It combines elements of redistribution and degrowth and employs a 'planning stack' of institutions engaged in democratic and cybernetic planning to transition societies towards sustainability and 'universal human flourishing'. With the 're-coding of capitalism's CCC under new non-capitalist management':

Google would become a data collection and processing agency of the planning stack Amazon fulfilment centres would dispatch emergency deliveries of the basket of goods that cannot be locally produced. Uber and Lyft would be converted into public transport facilities. Apple would host apps for communist work brigades. Facebook, Tik-Tok and the platforms formerly known as Twitter would be converted into advertising and surveillance free zones. Microsoft's data centres and AIs would be appropriated to redistribute global wealth to the wages and un-waged workers who created them. We could even imagine 'a reverse [Palantir](#)' [24] a digital platform whose task would be to welcome, assist and provision, rather than expel, climate refugees. Dyer-Witherford & Mularoni, 2025, p. 138 & 9.

Technofeudalism

Varoufakis explains that in the late 1990s, the internet developed as a commons or capitalist free zone. Subsequently it was privatised by emergent 'big tech' owners who took the money printed by central banks after the 2008 financial crisis and invested it in hardware (e.g. server farms, submarine cables) and software (e.g. AI driven algorithms. Amazon's Alexa). These 'cloudalists' who charge rent for the use of software hosted on their cloud storage, have become the new ruling class with power based on command capital that grabs our attention, manufactures desire, sells to us directly outside the market, commands or directs proletarian labour inside workplaces, and elicits free labour from us as we provide it with the data on which their power and wealth is based. Capitalism has mutated to [technofeudalism](#) [25] in which profits have been replaced by rents and markets by trading platforms.

We sustain or reproduce this mode of production as we supply it with our reviews, ratings, uploads, videos, posts, and photos. The former capitalist system survives alongside technofeudalism but Varoufakis insists that the latter is a new mode of

production and not simply monopoly or rentier capitalism. Cloud capital and the rent it produces is now key to economic power so the task of left populists is to unite cloud serfs (citizens who use platforms and provide data) with cloud proles (workers exploited by cloud capital) and cloud vassals (business owners paying rents to cloudalists) in a political movement that seeks to convert cloud based assets from a means of behaviour modification to a means of human collaboration and emancipation. This aim is shared with advocates of biocommunism, [fully automated luxury communism](#) [26], and radical democracy along with critical realists who seek universal human flourishing.

Digital capitalism and hyperpolitics

Mention of [Palantir](#) [27] on the previous page, a US technological surveillance company with links to authoritarianism and contracts with the NHS, prompts further consideration of the role of tech oligarchs or ‘cloudalists’ in controlling digital platforms in ways that serve their ends. As [Behr](#) [28] explains digital media are designed to capture attention, maximise engagement, manipulate and short-circuit our critical faculties, and turn us into compulsive consumers and conformist citizens. They confine us in ‘silos’ of like-minded users, shrink the pool of widely agreed ‘facts’, and reduce our capacity to empathise with alternative perspectives and ‘others’. In these ways they disrupt the democratic operating system of liberal democratic society, promoting a [hyperpolitics](#) [29] where ‘politics is everywhere yet nothing seems to change’.

[Jäger](#) [30] suggests that hyperpolitics is characterised by **extreme polarisation** (private life, culture, and individual identities all politicised), **lack of consequences** (despite ‘viral outrage’ and mass mobilisations, political energy fails to translate into lasting institutional change or durable political power), and **the ‘lonely crowd’** (a mix of intense social isolation and high political excitement). He recognises four phases in the development of liberal democratic politics:

1. **Mass Politics (1880s – 1980s):** Defined by strong, long-term institutional ties (unions, mass parties). Politics was a lifelong and structured one's entire social life.
2. **Post-Politics (1990s – 2000s):** An era of technocratic governance following the "End of History." Politics was evacuated from the public sphere and became a private, low-stakes matter.

3. **Anti-Politics/Populism (2010s):** A short-lived "populist moment" (e.g., Brexit, Corbyn, early Trump) that challenged technocracy but often lacked a coherent alternative.
4. **Hyperpolitics (Mid-2010s – Present):** A "re-enchantment" of the public sphere where "the personal is political" has flipped into "the political is only the personal”.

Hyperpolitics fails to build power and effect social change because traditional bodies (e.g. trade unions, local party branches) that mediate between civil society and politics have been hollowed out leaving citizens to seek immediate, often fleeting recognition online. Digital activism is low cost / low value in that it has low entry and exit costs, intense and fast, but fails to produce real structural power and resistance. It also fragments collective agency leading Jäger to argue that to win hegemony in the era of hyperpolitics, populist movements should aim to rebuild ‘total institutions’ that can link disparate struggles into a unified and durable vehicle. [Some](#) [31] cite Mandani’s politics as mayor of New York as an example of such a strategy.

Debt, the fiscal crises of states and the rise of authoritarianism

The world’s superpowers are currently running at a loss. In 2025, global public-debt was approaching \$100 trillion and the vast majority of this was owed by major powers (US \$38 trillion, China \$19 trillion, UK \$4 trillion). Five countries (US, China, Japan, UK, France) accounted for approximately 67% of total global government debt. While governments are not generally focussed on paying off these debts. rolling them over’ by issuing new bonds to pay for old ones that mature, together with increased borrowing, renders them subject to interest rates controlled by bond markets. Failure to match government spending to tax receipts can lead to [a fiscal crisis of the state](#) [32] when investors and bond markets lose confidence in a government and its central bank. The accompanying [legitimation crisis](#) [33] sees the government losing citizens’ support as public expenditure is cut back (austerity). Then citizens increasingly express their grievances either by supporting populist parties who claim to defend ‘the people’ against elites or by withdrawing into hyperpolitics. Their agency is limited by the decline of democracy associated with rising authoritarianism.

Digital capitalism is part of a global system controlled by the rich and powerful and their knowledge or hegemony. They are mostly men and who look after their own interests and largely disregard and disrespect others. The [V-Dem Institute](#)

[34] assesses democracy through seven key principles: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. Its 2025 report on 179 countries shows the number of autocracies had risen from 88 to 91 (56 electoral and 35 closed autocracies) and surpassed the number of democracies which fell from 91 to 88 (29 liberal and 59 electoral democracies). Two other reports, from [Freedom House](#) [35] and the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) [36] also suggest that democracy is in decline.

V-Dem's assessment suggests that liberal democracies continue to be the rarest form of government in the world and in these, as in the UK, economic, cultural, participatory and deliberative democracy are severely limited. Such NGOs as [Unlock Democracy](#) [37] campaign to give citizens more power.

Digital capitalism and geopolitics

The rise of autocracies is linked to the crisis of [neoliberalism](#) [38] (see chapter three), and the subsequent rise of digital capitalism, nationalism, and [right populism](#) [39]. China competes with the US for power and its standing in the world continues to rise based on an autocratic form of state capitalism that seeks global supremacy based on digital technologies. It is expanding its informal empire based through the Belt and Road Initiative and an alliance with the BRIC countries that include Russia. Putin weakens Russia by attempting to reclaim parts of its former empire in Ukraine while Trump has adopted trade policy and a security strategy that reflects his Maga (Make America Great Again) agenda. This seeks US hegemony over the Western Hemisphere ([the Donroe doctrine](#) [40]) and the further erosion of the rules based global order, its institutions and value systems. The US has withdrawn from the United Nations that now faces a [financial crisis](#) [41] and has set up a rival [Board of Peace](#) [42] to rebuild Gaza and solve conflicts elsewhere. Trump's seizure of Maduro in Venezuela, his attempt to claim Greenland, and his threats regarding the future of NATO, alarmed the EU and UK leadership in early 2026 and were followed by Trump's illegal war on Iran which caused alarm among his electoral base. The threats to Greenland and NATO led Canadian prime minister [Carney](#) [43] to outline a new role for middle-ranking powers designed to counter the coercive economic strategies of the superpowers (tariffs, financial infrastructure, and supply chains) that were impacting on their populations. Jones summed up the emerging new world order:

It is one where increasingly authoritarian powers use brute force to subjugate their neighbours and steal their resources. What once might have sounded like

dystopian fantasy is being assembled in plain sight. The question is whether we have the means, willingness and ability to fight back, [Jones, 2026](#) [44]

Gramsci used the term interregnum to describe a period when the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born' and a 'great variety of [morbid symptoms](#) [45] appear'. The American-led international order is in a state of terminal crisis, 'monsters' include authoritarianism, reactionary movements, 'monstrous' political forces, and escalating environmental and development issues and military conflicts. The world is a 'messy patchwork' of regional powers most exerting their own national interests over universal values. At the same time AI threatens existing labour, political, cultural, and educational power structures and may result in an economic downturn should digital capitalism fail to deliver what it promises (see [The 2028 Global Intelligence Crisis](#) [46]) Tech giants like [Amazon](#) [47] are the targets of [Progressive International](#) [48] that has drafted a revised New International Order outlining a democratic left vision of the fight back that Jones invites. Its aims are shared by political parties on the democratic left and radical social movements.

Culture wars between right and left populisms

The rise of digital capitalism, linked to neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and the populist right, has intensified a multidimensional global crisis (environmental, economic, political, cultural and existential) that explains the continuing failure of many states to meet the UN's [sustainable development goals](#) [49]. [Malik](#) [50] explains how the populist right despises liberalism and seeks to restore an imagined past whilst claiming that society is 'broken'. Reflecting [Burke's conservatism](#) [51], its notions of society and the common good is restricted by nationalism that excludes 'others', particularly migrants and Muslims. While seeking the support of the working-class, it considers them incapable and ill-disposed to governing themselves. Government is for the servants of rich and powerful elites while citizens remain essentially ballot fodder motivated by nationalism and hate speech and required to be obedient. As we will see in chapter three, neoliberalism, austerity, Brexit, the Covid pandemic, a 'cost of living' crisis, and the failures of recent governments, have left UK citizens with legitimate grievances, but the solution to these is not to turn to the past, nationalism, division and obedience, but to look to the future, cosmopolitanism, empathy, and solidarity enabled by new forms of democratic digital socialism as Fuchs, Dyer-Witheford and Mularoni, and others suggest.

Figure 1.2 (page 14) sums up the culture wars or divisions between the populist right and the populist left or those supporting the hegemony of digital capitalism and those supporting a counter-hegemony focussed on digital socialism or biocommunism. It is intended as a heuristic device to focus thought, bring together the themes that are explored in this book through the lens of critical realism, and aid curriculum theorising and development in secondary geography.

Clearly the rise of autocracies and the erosion of the multi-lateral global order based on [international law](#) [52] undermines the foundations of global citizenship education as promoted by [Unesco](#) [53]. I applied its guidance on education for global citizenship and sustainable development when writing *Critical School Geography*, albeit in ways that see radical rather than liberal democracy as the solution to the world's problems. What are the prospects for critical school geography six years on? What is the current state of the culture war in the UK in 2026? How has the rise of hyperpolitics affected older school students? And what does the review of the national curriculum for England offer in terms of a more critical school geography?

UK politics, Labour in power, and the prospects for left populism

The UK economy continues to suffer from low growth, low productivity, and declining living standards, all linked to fiscal crisis. Fourteen years of coalition and Conservative governments (2010 to 2024) failed to solve this crisis as they clung to austerity and failed, like their Labour successor to draw on [modern monetary theory](#) [54] (MMT) that states that a government issuing its own sovereign currency is not constrained like households and cannot 'run out of money'. Governments should spend money into existence, use it to restore public services and promote sustainability, and use taxes to control inflation by removing money from circulation. Murphy's videos explaining MMT include one outlining an [alternative budget for the UK](#) to that offered by the Labour chancellor in 2025.

The Labour party under Corbyn lost the 2019 election, after which the thinktank [Labour Together](#) [55] purged the party of left populists before it won the 2024 election under Starmer taking 63% of the seats in the House of Commons with 34% of the votes cast and a turnout of 60%. Its share of the national vote was barely larger than that in 2019 (32%) and lower than that achieved by Corbyn in 2017 (40%). In 2024 votes on the right were split (Conservative 24%, Reform 14%) enabling Labour's 'landslide'.

	Right populism	Left populism
Slogan	'Take back control'	'For the many not the few'
Interests served	Claims to support 'the people' but really supports the rich.	Supports the people including the precariat and immigrants
Source of citizens' grievances and anger	Lack of jobs, housing, public services and run-down towns etc. Blame placed on migrants, globalisation, centrist and left politicians, human rights law, all things woke, etc.	Similar grievances but blamed on capitalism that 'cannibalises' workers, people in the South, carers, the rest of nature, and democratic governments (see Fraser, chapter three)
Ideology	Disaster nationalism (Seymour, chapter three) Conservatism	Green socialism. Biocommunism.
Global outlook	Nationalistic	Cosmopolitan
Global heating	Denial	Acceptance
Democracy	Authoritarianism, proto-fascist Pretence of liberal democracy.	Radical / agonistic democracy
Style of government	Conservative / Autocratic / Chaotic / Top down	Participatory / Bottom up and top down
Examples of leaders	Trump, Putin, Farage	Ocasio-Cortez, Navalny, Polanski
Social theory	Mainstream	Critical
Social class	Favours the ruling class.	Promotes class consciousness and equality
Race and coloniality	Racist. Rejects decolonial theory.	Anti-racist. Draws on decolonial theory Rejects migration myths.
Identity politics	Nativist. Can foster hate for foreigners	Multi-cultural but cautious regarding identity politics.
Knowledge	Knowledge of the powerful Prone to post-truths, conspiracy theories, and relativism	Knowledge of the powerless. Truth arrived at by testing knowledge in action (praxis).
Pedagogy	Didactic, mainstream, closed	Participatory, critical, open
Philosophy	Positivism. Ontologically dualist and epistemologically objective.	Critical realism. Ontologically holist and epistemologically relative.
Citizens' capabilities	Seeks to keep most citizens in a state of dependency, false consciousness and under development	Seeks to develop the capabilities of all to their fullest extent including those relating to global citizenship
Powerful curriculum knowledge	That which enables one to have a chance to get rich.	That which fosters radical global citizenship.
Schooling	Class based	Comprehensive

Figure 1.2 A summary of the culture wars between right and left populisms

Books that analyse recent Labour history include [Death of the Left](#) [56] and [Left Out](#) [57]. Dorling's 2023 text *Shattered Nation*, the associated slides and companion text [Seven Children](#), [58] paint a picture of growing inequality and a failing state whose human landscape, after fourteen years of Conservative austerity . .

. . . can best be described as shattered people feeling shattered. Hopes shattered. Much of the fabric of society shattered. The ability of our schools to educate our children well, of our social housing system to cope with need, of the National Health Service to care for us, and so much else – all shattered. Many of those previously just coping can no longer cope. Food banks are proliferating. Levels of debt have increased for millions of people, while a very few of the extremely wealthy have seen their riches soar. So many people are feeling shattered by all this. [Dorling](#) [59], 2023, p. 8

A major influence on Labour after Corbyn's 2019 defeat was McSweeney, Starmer's chief of staff and main actor in [Labour Together](#) [60]. A supporter of the old Labour right ([Labourism](#) [61]) and a defender of workers' interests, he also drew ideas from [Blue Labour](#) [62] and opposed Blair's global progressivism. Faced with the rise of the populist right, McSweeney and others shifted Labour to the right, believing in the need to maintain the support of older socially conservative voters in 'red wall' seats and that progressive voters had nowhere else to go.

[McTague](#) [63] accuses the Starmer and McSweeney alliance of failing to develop an alternative political economy that might replace Blairism. *There was no theory of political reform or coherent critique of British state failure, no analysis of Britain's future place in the world or any kind of distinct moral mission.* Hence policy was essentially pragmatic. *Britain could thrive if it could only begin to live within its means, attract more foreign investment, reassure the bond markets, and return a sense of 'service' to government. After years of chaos, mere stability would be change. And this could be enough.* (McTague, p. 24)

In February 2026, polls from [You Gov](#) [64] showed Reform ahead on 26%, Labour, Conservatives and the Greens all around 18%, and the Greens on 48% amongst 18 to 24 year olds. Labour in power, without ideas and without a mandate for Starmer and McSweeney's pragmatism, was affected by pre-election promises not to raise taxes, U turns on issues designed to address the fiscal crisis (cuts to winter fuel payments, maintaining the two-child benefit cap, and welfare

reform), a strong need to restore growth that led to planning reforms that were critiqued by NGOs concerned for [nature](#) [65] and sustainability, and a failure to oppose the genocide in Gaza. Rebalancing the country in the interests of ordinary citizens was proving difficult, but the government had carried out [some significant reforms](#) [66] that it had failed to communicate effectively. There remained a need to reform the state and electoral system, modernise the constitution, rethink the UK's place in Europe and the world, and create the change and economic stability promised.

The appointment of Mandelson as US ambassador and the subsequent scandal over his links to [Epstein](#) [67] prompted a crisis in the Starmer and McSweeney alliance and the resignation of McSweeney. The files revealed the reality of modern power and its abuse of women and girls and prompted further support for populism amongst voters who recognised that the system was corrupt and unfair, and that social democracy had failed to democratise economic power through the ballot box. The strengthening of such democracy is key to exerting political control over the market, protecting the interests of citizens, and prompting change toward the kinds of radical democracy and digital socialism outlined above.

Much was happening domestically and internationally in spring 2026. UK politics had fragmented into a seven party system, [Polanski, the new leader of the Greens](#) [68] had emerged and labelled himself and the party eco-populist and democratic socialist. Corbyn and fellow independent MP Sultana's attempt to launch [Your Party](#) [69] had stalled. Having abandoned the progressive, populist left coalition (younger graduates in professional jobs, poorer public service workers, and ethnic minority communities), Labour lost the [Gorton and Denton byelection](#) [70] to the Greens, coming third after Reform.

A Gramscian analysis of Labour's prospects

In 2025 Perryman edited [The Starmer Symptom](#) [71], an edited collection that adopts a Gramscian standpoint to focus on the 'symptoms' of a party that had undermined its own potential for change. It showcases the soft left thinking that lies behind left populism, its counter-hegemony, and attempts to revive social democracy as a route to socialism. This includes Perryman on the limits of labourism; Gilbert on Starmerism and its failure to challenge financiers, the managerial class, and landlords; Wainwright on an independent left and community organising; Dorling of how to transform an unequal Britain; Simms on climate emergency; and Gall on how the unions make us strong. Among the

policies considered are a wealth tax, community wealth building, rent controls, greater investment in the green transition, electoral reform, citizens' assemblies, and a pluralist coalition of progressive parties and movements. The UK needed to find new forms of co-operation with Europe, seek new forms of global security that would prevent a renewed arms-race, and support the UN's revival and reform.

Older school students and their worldviews

Critical realists follow [Marx](#) [72] who made it clear that 'life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life' or that consciousness is rooted in human activity not the other way round. The consciousness and worldviews of teenagers in the geography classrooms of a 'shattered nation' are the everyday knowledge foundations on which critical geographical knowledge and radical global citizenship should be built.

Teenagers emerging into adulthood face multiple challenges that can be summed up as a breakdown of the social contract between generations. Many are growing up in poverty and most face a precarious future. Student debt, the transition into work as AI displaces many entry jobs, available housing to own or rent, a healthy environment free from pandemics, additive media, and the threat of nuclear war, are some of the major challenges they face that are linked [to a crisis of teenage mental health](#) [73]. As we saw when considering digital capitalism, digital technology shapes young people's lives, agency and geographies, shaping the discourses, including those of right and left populism, to which they are exposed and how they respond.

In January 2025, Channel Four, aware of the growing impact of digital media on young people, published [Gen Z, Trends, Truth and Trust](#) [74], a survey of Gen Z's (born between the late 1990s and early 2000s) beliefs. It aimed to help young people 'develop the tools and confidence to sort fact from fiction, and to believe truth still matters for them and society'. The results of the survey of 2000 13 to 27 year olds, and 1000 28 to 65 year olds revealed eight macro themes among the younger group including declining happiness, a crisis of identity among some young men, confusion as to what and who to trust, support for democratic principles but doubts about Britain's fairness and its democratic system, confusion as to which political party to support, a belief that 'the winner takes it all', and the prioritising of an individualistic view of the world (wanting to control what they can – themselves).

The survey suggested that the 13 – 27 years suffered from information overload and were more inclined than the older group to trust advertising and social media influencers. Only 35% closely followed UK politics; 52% thought the ‘UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections’; and 47% thought ‘the entire way our society is organised must be radically changed through revolution’. These views, seeming to support populism, were widely reported, queried and commented on.

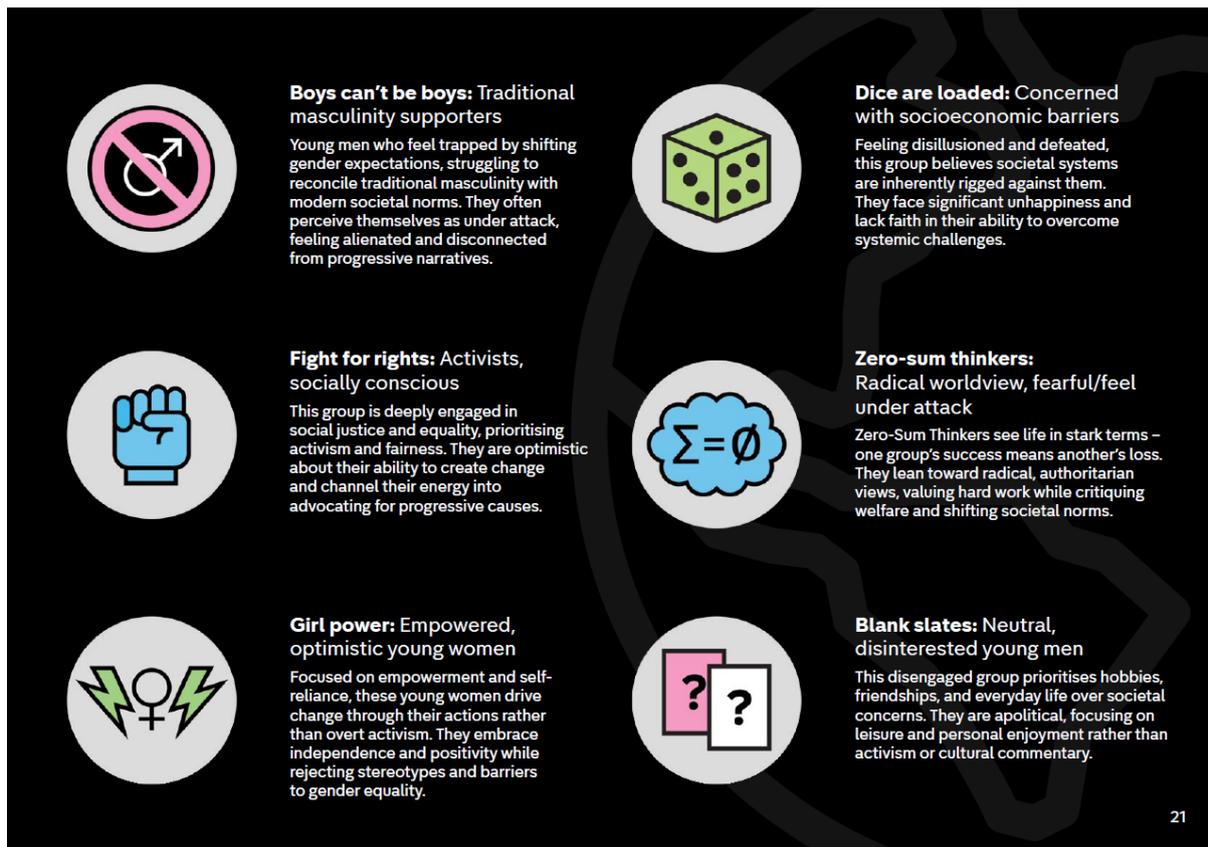


Figure 1.3 (page 15) Gen Z worldviews [*Gen Z, Trends, Truth and Trust*](#)

Further analysis of the GenZ survey results revealed that the generation is not monolithic but holds diverse attitudes, values and beliefs and adopts various responses to the rapid technological and social shifts associated with digital capitalism and hyperpolitics. Figure 1.3 summarises the six worldviews the younger respondents displayed and each is likely to prompt a different response to a critical school geography focussed on global citizenship. Fight for rights activists (12% of the 13 to 27 years olds sampled), zero-sum thinkers (18%), dice are loaded believers (15%) and girl power young women (21%) are likely to be engaged learners, while boys can't be boys (14%) and blank slates (20%) may be reluctant or resistant. Readers are likely to realise that such results as those in

GenZ, Trends, Truth and Trust raise questions of validity and reliability, but such surveys provide a foundation on which teachers can explore the everyday knowledge and worldviews of their students.

School geography and the review of the English national curriculum

On coming to power in 2024 Labour appointed Bridget Phillipson as education secretary and she led [reforms](#) [75] that among other measures, imposed value-added tax on private school fees, required academies to follow the national curriculum and employ only qualified teachers, limited middle-class access to the best-performing state-funded schools, but failed to return academies to local authority (democratic) control. Described as a ‘class warrior’ on the cover of the [New Statesman](#) [76], she launched a review of the national curriculum for England and the [final report of the review panel](#) [77] was published in November 2025. The role of the philosophy of knowledge in shaping this review is considered in chapter three and here I will consider only the Geographical Association’s 2022 [Curriculum Framework](#) [78] and its response, and [that of other subject associations](#) [79], to the review outcomes. Whilst the GA’s framework contains much sound analysis and guidance, its main weakness is not to recognise social systems alongside earth systems and so fail to address what kind of society and geography may avert the planetary crisis it recognises in its introduction (see [Huckle, 2024](#) [80])

As regards school geography the final report of the panel followed recommendations from the GA and proposed only minor refinements of programmes of study and GCSE content. The [English Baccalaureate](#) [81] performance measure is to be abolished by 2028 and this is likely to reduce the number of students taking GCSE geography. Disciplinary knowledge is to be embedded more explicitly at key stage 3 (11 to 14 years) and geography is to share with science the main responsibility for climate and sustainability education. Physical geography, geographical applications and human geography sections of the curriculum, are to ensure early, coherent and more detailed engagement with climate education, without risking curriculum overload. Whilst climate is a key aspect of the [global polycrisis](#) [82] that this book highlights, it is concerning that other aspects of this crisis appear to warrant less attention.

As regards citizenship, the review extends this to primary schools and expands and strengthens provision to include media and financial literacy, human rights, climate education, democracy and government. Schools will be required to

provide a core entitlement curriculum that includes civic engagement, nature and adventure, and wider life skills. The Government has confirmed its intention to lower the voting age to 16 and such an entitlement, together with a whole school ethos that promotes civic and political knowledge and support for democracy while respecting [guidance on political impartiality](#) [83] is designed to improve young people's political literacy and engagement with politics.

Computing At School welcomed the review report's attention to digital literacy at a time when such skills are 'the backbone of the global economy' and 'vital for participation in society'. Its definition of such literacy supports increased attention to digital capitalism and socialism in the geography curriculum.

Digital literacy encompasses the knowledge, behaviours and confidence required to use technologies and computer systems creatively, safely and effectively. It also involves the ability to make well-informed critical judgements about the implications, risks and impact of how digital technology is used. Being digitally literate empowers children and young people to adapt and thrive in a technology-driven world, use technology safely, and fully engage with learning across the whole curriculum. (CfSA, 2025 [84] section 1.5)

While the review report offers no overall statement of values there is much within it to support the notion of schooling as an aid and route to universal human flourishing. Disadvantaged students are viewed through a 'social justice lens'; citizenship education is to nurture compassionate and responsible community members; religious education is to develop empathy and the understanding of diverse worldviews; whilst the review maintains the statutory, and somewhat controversial requirement for schools to promote fundamental British values (democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect).

Overall, the revised curriculum is one to be expected from a centrist Labour Government that finds itself unable to effect real change. The other nations of Britain adopt different paths (e.g. the [Curriculum for Wales](#) [85]) regarding the school curriculum and chapter three considers whether an integrated and / or project-based curriculum might better meet student and community needs. The rise of AI poses [major challenges for school-based learning](#) [86] and [teacher professionalism](#) [87] and these are addressed in chapter four.

To conclude this introductory chapter, we should note that critical school geographers in England have a revised curriculum that while not ideal, is one they can work with. There is scope to co-operate with colleagues teaching citizenship,

computing, science, religious education and media studies, and assist school leaders with school ethos in ways that promote radical global citizenship and universal human flourishing. How critical realism can assist them in this work is the focus of the chapters that follow.

Further reading and viewing

The literature of critical realism can be abstract and demanding. Here are some guides to help you if you wish to prepare yourself for what is to come in subsequent chapters:

A short guide to ontology and epistemology: why everyone should become a critical realist, [Tom Fryer \[88\]](#).

Critical realism in a nutshell, an introduction to the philosophy of critical realism, [Mervin Hartwig \[89\]](#)

Critical Realism, Basics and Beyond, [Hubert Buch-Hanson & Peter Nielsen \[90\]](#)

Radical global citizens require a sound understanding of how the world currently works before they can consider reform or transformation. This means that in the absence of adequate economic and political education elsewhere in the curriculum, geography teachers need to address the basics of [capitalism \[91\]](#), liberal democracy, [UK government \[92\]](#), [international law \[93\]](#), and [European \[94\]](#), and [global governance \[95\]](#). A level geography [revision notes \[96\]](#) can be helpful.

[Bork-Hüffer & Ergler \[97\]](#) provide references to a wide range of research on digital technology and young people's geographies. Read for example [Ships \[98\]](#) study of how young workers in Vancouver's restaurant and catering sector navigated a complex web of digital and physical spaces and relations to challenge abuses in the workplace.

Critical School Geography concluded in 2020 with a consideration of the alternative future offered by Yanis Varoufakis in *Another Now*. He has updated his ideas with his 2024 book on technofeudalism. Read his [2023 talk to the Progressive International \[99\]](#) and consider to what extent your working conditions are increasingly those of a cloud serf (receiving and delivering curriculum from / to the cloud) and a cloud prole (having your work evaluated by management algorithms)?

[Taylor Lorenz \[100\]](#) argues that social media bans won't help young people. Should young people's (under 16's) use of social media be banned, restricted, or

subject to further regulation? How? What are the implications of a ban for geographical understanding? For political literacy? For young people's mental health?

[Simon Tormey](#) [101] provides a beginners' guide to *Populism*. [Lizotte & Kello](#) [102] introduce the geographies of populism and populist geographies and a series of articles that focus on right populism.

In *Critical School Geography* (pages 18 and 19), Curriculum Unit One focussed on Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and its Impact on Healthcare (pages 37 to 47). In 2026 US forces seized President Maduro and threatened war on [Venezuela](#) [103], How might Unit One be revised or replaced with an alternative to reflect the current fortunes of 21st Century socialism in Latin America?

Read [this report](#) [104] on how the UK is performing on meeting the UN's sustainable development goals. Are the conclusions consistent with Dorling's description of the UK as a 'shattered nation'?

The chapter focuses on the fiscal crisis of the major world powers. In the UK local states (authorities) face a fiscal crisis linked to the increasing costs of caring for the elderly and those school students with special educational needs. How should school geography address the funding crisis shaping local services?

Is there a danger that [political impartiality](#) [105] in schools serves [to support an undemocratic status-quo](#) [106]? Should teachers be committed to truth and / or radical democracy and / or universal flourishing rather than impartiality?

The Socialist Educational Association will publish *After the Review: Reimagining Curriculum and Assessment* in 2026.

Discussion

What are your initial reactions to critical realism's aim of universal human flourishing and its four main features? Can you see how this aim and these features might be helpful in shaping the purpose, content, and pedagogy of a critical school geography?

Is the author correct in suggesting that digital capitalism is now the major structure producing the events and experiences shaping the lives of the students you teach? Does such capitalism deserve a more prominent place in the geography curriculum? And digital socialism?

Does hyperpolitics help to explain the political behaviour of the students you teach including their use of social media?

To what extent do the geographies of populism feature in the curriculum you teach? Does it cover the geography of elections and the distribution of support for left and right populism in different areas of the UK? Does it involve students in seeking explanations for such distributions?

Do the students you teach possess the worldviews in Figure 1.3? How can you explore the impact of digital media on students' everyday geographies and the discourses these media encourage / discourage students to adopt?

As a geography teacher would you rather teach geography in the subject based English national curriculum or in the integrated Curriculum for Wales?

How has UK and global society changed since this chapter was written? Are the prospects for radical democracy and radical global citizenship education improving or deteriorating?

Curriculum challenge

Digital technology has the potential to foster a digital democracy with [netizens](#) [107] exerting greater power over elected members. Use such websites as Australia's [GetUp!](#) [108], [change.org](#) [109], and the UK's [They Work for You](#) [110] to develop a curriculum unit exploring how citizens can petition politicians and so have a greater voice in shaping decisions affecting their lives, for example [GetUp!'s project on the cost of living](#) [111]. Develop the unit to explore the changing nature of politics in digital society and the ways this affects young people.

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