Chapter one Introduction

In 2025 DEMOS published a report *Inside the Mind of a 16 year old* (Gamote & Hyman, 2025 (1)) that sought to establish what first time voters thought about social media, politics, the state of Britain and their future. Among the findings were that 'cancel culture' in schools was a problem linked to social media. Students were fearful of expressing divergent opinions and hesitant to navigate controversial issues for fear of public shaming while teachers avoided debating such issues and shut down debate too quickly. The rapid evolution of digital technology, particularly its addictive nature, meant that lumping 28 and 16-year-olds together and calling them Gen Z had little value. The report therefore focussed on 15- to 18-year-olds who were 'growing up with Tik-Tok, hyper interactivity, additive social media, and were using AI like Chat GPT routinely for schoolwork'.

After discussions with young people on such topics as social media use, influencers, democracy and politics, and the state and direction of the country, the report identified five archetypes of 15- to 18-year-olds with their help. These are 'approximations, amalgamations, aggregates of traits and personalities' and most students saw themselves in more than one of the five resulting types: the activist (22.4% of sample), the entrepreneur (11.2%), the critical realist (19.6), the traditionalist (10.7%), and the connector (18.7%). 17.3% of the sample identified with 'none of these'.

What is interesting to the author of a text that seeks to introduce geography teachers to critical realism, is that the label critical realist is being attached to the fictious character Liam rather than the activist Abi who is arguably closer to what a 14–18-year-old, introduced to critical realism through their geography lessons, might become. These two characters and archetypes are compared in table 1.1.

	Liam the critical realist	**Abi the activist**
Politics	Apathetic or anti-establishment, distrusts mainstream parties, often cynical and despondent.	Left-wing, socially progressive, environmentally conscious.
Interests	Memes, alternative media, conspiracies, gaming, dark humour.	Climate change, social justice, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism.
Outlook on life	Feels powerless in a broken system, distrusts institutions, often disengaged from traditional politics.	Optimistic but frustrated with slow political change; believes in radical systemic reform and big changes to the way society is run.
Lifestyle	Spends a lot of time online, sceptical of the news, more likely to engage in passive resistance than activism.	Engages in protests, supports ethical brands, involved in online activism, might vote Labour/Green, or a smaller leftist party.
Beliefs	Laim does not believe everything he reads but he also does not take anything at face value. He questions everything, especially authority. He is more likely to report a meme that captures how broken the world feels that to join a protest about it.	Abi sees the climate crisis, gender equality and racial justice as inseparable. She is not interested in surface level reforms. For her real progress means reimagining the whole system, how we live, how we govern, and who gets heard.

Table 1.1 Two archetypes of 15- to 18-year-olds compared (Gamote & Hyman, 2025)

We will return to Gen Z and the impact of social media on school students outlooks on life in the curriculum challenge at the end of this chapter. For the moment it is sufficient to note what the DEMOS report recommends regarding schools. They should make time and create structure for facilitated discussions and planned repeated dialogue. They should avoid delivering 'sermons', split classes by topic or gender when necessary, and bring groups back together to test ideas in a safe space before they harden online (Gamote & Hyman, 2025, p. 56). Advice that the critical school geography teacher will recognise and welcome.

It would be interesting to know how the researchers commissioned by DEMOS and their subjects arrived at the label critical realist for those subjects who displayed the character traits they associated with Liam. Critical realism is a philosophy of knowledge associated with the philosopher Roy Bhaskar and his followers that I introduced to geography teachers in my previous ebook *Critical School Geography* (2), self-published on my website in 2020. Debates over realism have continued, largely in the context of the GeoCapabilities project (3) that applied the concepts of social realism and powerful disciplinary knowledge to curriculum development (see chapter four).

I have continued to argue that truly powerful knowledge is that offered by critical geography and education that draws on critical social theory underpinned by critical realism. Only such knowledge has the power to develop students' capabilities as radical global citizens who can both understand the world and change it for the better. This book expands on that argument exploring the key features of critical realism and their application to curriculum development in school geography and more specifically its relevance to digital literacy in the form of AI competency.

Critical realism

In 2014, Graeber (4) 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? (5) 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 (6) ought to be avoided, ethical values can be empirically studied.

These features are explored in subsequent chapters of this book that also apply them to curriculum development in school geography, 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 goal of critical realism. Critical realism understands the world dialectically as a complex of interdependent structures and mechanisms driven by internal tensions and contradictions. Free flourishing requires the radical democratisation of social structures (economic, political and cultural) and the associated removal of illusions, false ideas or ideology. Dialectical critical realism, with its focus on structure and agency, suggests how the obstacles to universal flourishing might be removed so that unmet needs are met and human capabilities realised. The philosophy of meta-Reality suggests that humanity's ground state supports ethical naturalism (we are naturally caring, compassionate and co-operative beings at one with others) and that the continued moral evolution of humanity requires us to overcome our current ontological separation from others.

Universal free human flourishing is about developing people's capabilities or literacies, their ability to 'read and write' the situations in which they find themselves. Thus, geographical and environmental educators speak of geographical and environmental literacies, and the associated scientific,

economic, political, media, digital and other literacies. Radical global citizenship is associated with a capability or form of global literacy that enables citizens to 'read' what is happening in the world and 'write' with others a better, more sustainable future. The development of capabilities (flourishing) via education should be free or uncoerced, providing students with options or alternative ways of reading / seeing and writing / acting in the world. It should be universal or available to all in that we share a common humanity and should not keep others in a state or under-development in which their capabilities are not realised.

Critical 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 cultural Marxism of Mouffe (7) that follows Gramsci (8) 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 (9), hegemonic struggle, and agonism (10).

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 radical 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 spheres of political activity (personal, economic, political, cultural) and all geographical scales of such activity form the personal to the global.

Left populism (11) 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 closing.

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, p. 178 (12)). 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 cultural 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 the transition from liberal democracy to radical democracy can be extended to institutions of regional and global governance to produce updated concepts of 'the rule of law, democratic accountability, respect for human rights, freedom of assembly, international cooperation, humanitarian aid, and environmental stewardship. UN reform (13) is central to that process.

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 (14)). Since 2020 the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective has published *Global Citizenship Education Otherwise* (15), and Granados-Sanchez (16) has outlined a critically realist approach to such citizenship.

The wave of AI powered accumulation and Gramsci's morbid symptoms

Critical School Geography (page 8) explained recent world history in terms of long waves of capital accumulation (growth) and decline. It noted that the global economy is currently undergoing change as the sixth Kondratieff wave based on artificial intelligence emerges. The drive to new forms of digital capitalism impacts the global division of labour and the relative powers of nation states. (CSG chapter seven) and is contested by those who seek digital socialism (see chapter three). Gramsci used the term interregnum to describe such periods when 'the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born' and a 'great variety of morbid symptoms (17) appear'.

Economic and political elites, overwhelmingly male, continue to shape global society and the transition to new forms of digital capitalism. On December 24th 2025 Elon Musk's (the CEO of Tesla) net worth was $645bn and this had increased by 49% over the previous year. Other tech billionaires (18) also saw their wealth increase, Larry Page (Google) $270bn & 61%, Jeff Bezos (Amazon) $255bn & 7%, Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) $236bn & 14%, and Jasen Huang (Nvidia) $156 & 37%. Meanwhile the leaders of the world's superpowers (19) had huge personal wealth (Putin $200bn, Trump $7.2bn, Xi $1.5bn).

The greed of a rich minority is the ultimate cause of a global polycrisis that generates 'morbid symptoms' stretching across the four dimensions of critical realism's four planar theory (20).

Critical realism's four planar theory and the global polycrisis

Agents or actors (e.g. corporations, governments, civil society organisations, workers, citizens) have varying amount of power and agency depending on their structural position (economic, political and cultural power or powerlessness) and the practices it allows. They interact with one another dialectically on four analytically distinct yet interdependent planes that together constitute global society. These will now be described with reference to digital technology and its impacts.

1. **Material transactions with nature** that are enacted as human labour, aided by technology, to produce needs and wants. This is both co-operative and competitive but has become increasingly competitive to produce surplus and profit in a global economy that now exceeds the planetary limits of what nature can provide on a sustainable basis. Digital capitalism puts additional demands on natural resources and services (e.g. energy, water, rare earth minerals) and so accelerates such issues as climate breakdown biodiversity loss, and pollution by forever chemicals. Europe is the most rapidly warming continent with 40C summers that encourage widespread wildfires and threaten human health and food security.
2. **Social relations between agents** (e.g. leaders and citizens of nation states, agents of regional and global governance, transnational NGOs) who as incumbents of structured positions and practices within global society have become increasingly authoritarian and antagonistic rather than democratic and co-operative. A new cold war between the US and China who race to acquire artificial general intelligence is reshaping geopolitics and

threatening a financial crisis (21) due to threats to cyber security and the risk of capital over-accumulation. Hot wars in Ukraine, the Middle East and elsewhere are increasingly fought with digitally aided weapons and cyber-attacks, disrupting supply chains and causing inflation. Under the influence of authoritarian, populist right leaders and their tech billionaire backers, a power backed global disorder is replacing a rules based global order and liberal democratic societies and states are at risk of transforming into administrative societies and states (22) governed by digital technology, algorithms, and systems designed to control, predict and forecast human behaviour.

3. **Interpersonal relations** or the interactions between individuals as subjects, rather than the agents of institutional roles, have become more disconnected and antagonistic. The rise of digital technology and administrative societies and states is causing the decline of civil society with politics taking new forms shaped by social media and focussed on identity, At the same time wars, environmental stress, and economic and political turmoil in poor states drive migration to rich states where populist right leaders blame refugees and 'others' for citizens' legitimate grievances about such issues as unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and the cost of living. Interpersonal relations continue to be shaped by such signifiers as class, race, gender and disability, and the rise of identity politics can be seen to distract from the solidarity required by an effective populist left.
4. **Intra-subjective relations** or the psychological structures and mechanisms whereby persons are constituted as mentally well, non-dual beings in touch with humanity's ground state are being eroded. A crisis of anxiety, unhappiness, alienation and mental ill health requires people to be more empathetic and societies to be more caring and co-operative.

As suggested above, critical realism's solution to this polycrisis is to democratise humanity's relations with non-human nature, democratise relations within global society, create solidarity between peoples (interpersonal relations) and foster their psychological well-being by reconnecting them to humanity's ground state. A solution that accords with Mouffe's advocacy of radical democracy and a green democratic revolution (23) and aligns her with those who adopt eco-socialism as their preferred ideology, and those geographers who combine ecology and left political economy as political ecology.

Eco-socialism

Eco-socialism (24) (green socialism or socialist ecology) is an ideology that claims capitalism is inherently incompatible with ecological sustainability and human well-being (flourishing) and that the profit-driven quest for infinite growth is the primary driver of environmental destruction and social inequality. It core tenets include:

- **Anti-capitalism and the critique of growth**. Capitalism's reliance on quantitative market expansion and profit maximisation violates planetary boundaries. Market-based reforms like carbon trading and green taxes (green capitalism) are to be rejected as they cannot solve a crisis created by the system they try to protect.
- **Social Ownership and Production for Use-Value**. The means of production should be commonly owned, taken from private corporations and placed under democratic public control. Production priorities should shift from generating monetary profit (exchange-value) to fulfilling ecological sustainability and human needs, such as healthcare, education, and clean energy (use value). Enclosed and privatised land, water, and resources should be returned to the public domain.
- **Democratic Ecological Planning**. Society's investment and resource distribution priorities should be determined democratically by the population through decentralized assemblies and transparent networks, rather than by corporate boards. Planning allows for the planned downscaling of ecologically destructive industries (like fossil fuels and military complexes) while expanding universal basic services.
- **Healing the "Metabolic Rift**. Drawing from Marx's critique of political economy, eco-socialism addresses the *metabolic rift*—the disruption of the Earth's natural cycles and equilibrium caused by industrial capitalist exploitation. A post-capitalist society must actively transcend extractivism and productivism, acknowledging that human labour and the Earth are the dual sources of all wealth and must be mutually sustained.
- **Intersectionality of Social and Environmental Justice.** Environmental devastation cannot be solved in isolation from class exploitation, racial oppression, imperialism, and gender inequality (**inseparable struggles**). Transitioning away from a fossil fuel economy requires global equity, reparations, the repayment of climate debt to the Global South, and indigenous sovereignty (a just transition).

The journal Capitalism Nature Socialism (25) and the Fourth International (26) have both published eco-socialist manifestos and it finds expression primarily through grassroots social movements, indigenous resistance, autonomous community projects, and intellectual networks rather than as the official governance of a major nation-state. Zack Polanski (27) has transformed the Green Party of England and Wales into an explicitly left-wing, eco-socialist and eco-populist movement since becoming leader in September 2025. Like other parties on the populist left it must confront the rise of the populist right.

The rise of the populist right and the decline of democracy

Oxfam's Resisting the Rule of the Rich (28) states that the number of billionaires surpassed 3,000 in 2025 and that the 12 richest had more wealth than the poorest half of humanity. Since 2020 it has grown by 81% at the same time as there has been no progress in reducing global poverty. Rising inequality is associated with the erosion of citizens' rights and freedoms as rich oligarchs and their political allies erode democracy by, for example, undermining such checks and balances as the judiciary or legislature, restricting civil liberties, manipulating elections, and normalising authoritarian practices. This they do by buying politicians, investing in media and think-tanks that legitimise elite power, and taking over, harassing, or closing institutions that oppose their power, all with the help of digital technology.

Mapping Fascism (29) is a series of nine infographics and a reading list designed to aid understanding of how reactionary (autocratic / kleptocratic) power is built and maintained via elections, religion, repression, finance, the media, and trans-national networks. Applebaum's *Autocracy Inc* (30) documents how autocrats rule the world.

The V-Dem Institute (31) 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 (32) and the Economist Intelligence Unit (33) 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 (34) campaign to give citizens more power.

The fiscal crises of nation states

The world's major powers 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 (35) when investors and bond markets lose confidence in a government and its central bank. The accompanying legitimation crisis (36) sees governments losing citizens' support as public expenditure is cut back (austerity). Then governments may become more autocratic, and citizens increasingly express their grievances either by supporting populist parties who claim to defend 'the people' against elites and / or by withdrawing into hyperpolitics.

Digital capitalism and hyperpolitics

Tech billionaires and their political allies control digital platforms in ways that serve their ends. As Behr (37) explains digital media are designed to capture attention, maximise engagement, manipulate and short-circuit our critical facilities, and turn us into compulsive consumers. 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 (38) where 'politics is everywhere yet nothing seems to change'.

For Jāger (39), hyperpolitics is a modern condition of intense public political engagement and polarization paired with a total lack of lasting institutions, leading to high emotion but few real-world consequences. He views politics in terms of institutionalisation (the strength of civil society, e.g. union membership, church attendance, volunteering) and politicisation (how many people vote, strike, attend protests, lobby politicians), recognising four phases in the development of politics since the 1880s:

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. Political struggle resulted in concreate gains. Politicisation and institutionalisation both high. Neoliberal destruction of political institutions begins in l980s.

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. A period of post-politics.

3. **Anti-Politics/Populism (2010s):** Tea Party in the US, Arab spring, Occupy. Podemos, Syriza. Politicisation came back but institutionalisation hasn't recovered.

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". Intense politicisation with neither institutional roots nor ambitions. Hyperpolitics thrives on the right since it is more ideologically coherent, more strategic, and better funded, than the left (Money talks and gets what it wants).

Key features of hyperpolitics are:

- **Digital Life-Worlds:** Actions mirror social media cycles, relying on fast-paced outrage, digital swarms, and internet cancellation mobs rather than long-term physical organizing.
- **Immediatism:** Movements flare up instantly over specific moral grievances, but they burn out quickly without building deep roots or structural change.
- **Influencer Figureheads:** Political groups often depend on volatile, personality-driven leaders or online influencers instead of organized, democratic internal structures:

Hyperpolitics (40) 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, is intense and fast, but fails to produce real structural power and resistance. It also fragments collective agency leading Jāger 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 (41) cite Mamdani's politics as mayor of New York as an example of such a strategy.

The alternative, global justice and radical global democracy

The *Global Justice Report* (42) argues that the global polycrisis is not inevitable and that bold policies, including wealth taxes on billionaires, sharp reductions in working hours, a change in diets, and a shift of investment from materially intensive sectors like mining and industry, to education and health, could usher in a more sustainable world with the majority seeing their incomes increase and global heating kept below 2C above the preindustrial average. Such policies require a radical democracy as advocated by Mouffe and the populist left and it will need to win the cultural war for hegemony with the populist right that is supported by extractivists, nationalists, and billionaires.

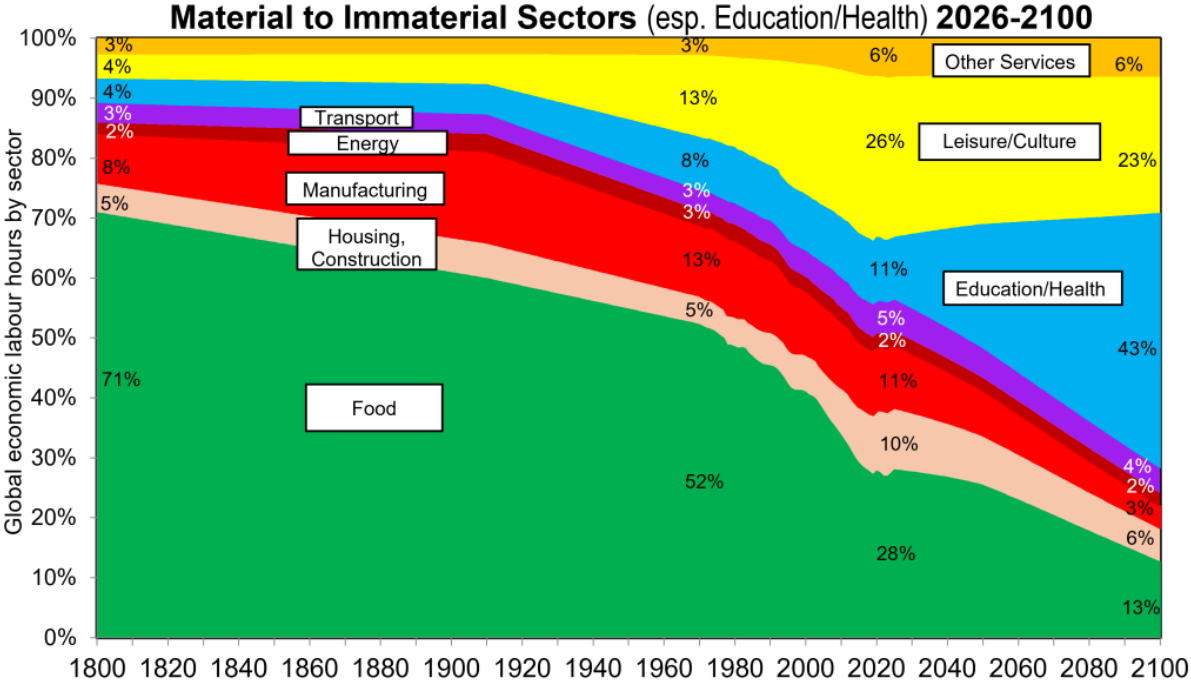
The ideology, which we see with Trump and all the little Trumps that we have all across Europe and all across the world is simply not going to deliver. At the end of the day we'll have to come to this kind of cooperative redistribution of resources and power because the alternative will simply lead to disastrous outcomes both on the environment, on the climate, but also on social grounds. Thomas Pickerty quoted in The Guardian, 04.06.26 (43)

The report's 'plan for equality and prosperity within planetary boundaries' draws on eco-socialism and has the concepts of sufficiency and degrowth at its core. These claim that people can enjoy a prosperous, healthy life without constantly striving to consume or accumulate more material possessions that degrade the natural world on which all life depends. Average working hours would be more than halved, people would eat less red meat (a key driver of ecological destruction), and the economy would be refocussed on low consumption activities (education, health and public services). Average per capital gross national income would be around $5000/month by the end of the century with big gains in the global south. The share of global wealth held by billionaires would fall from 6% to 0.05% while the bottom 50% would see their share of wealth increase from 2% to 30%. Emissions would be reduced as close to absolute zero as possible and a global justice fund would finance the energy transition and oversee an increase in education and healthcare spending from 13% of GDP today to 38%

The transition envisaged by the report is represented in its Figure 1.8 on page 13. Note the vertical axis is global economic labour hours by sector. Digital

technology can be a key driver of this restructuring of the global economy but only if it is democratically controlled and planned in the public interest. It should be used in ways that tackle inequality and planetary habitability together, for green measures on their own are likely to increase support for the populist right who portray them as 'woke' and adding via taxes to the cost of living.

Fig. 1.8. Sustainable Convergence: A Large Shift from Material to Immaterial Sectors (esp. Education/Health) **2026-2100**



Interpretation. Sustainable convergence requires a large shift from material to immaterial sectors (especially education, health and other public services) in the share of total economic labour hours over the 2026-2100 period. **Sources and series** : gjp.wid.world (F1.8)

UK inequality and populism

In the UK, the richest 56 people now hold more wealth than 27 million combined (Oxfam Global Inequality Report) and the UK has the highest level of regional inequality (44) in Europe. Inequality prompts support for populism that shows a strong correlation with income inequality (45). Dorling's 2023 text *Shattered Nation*, the associated slides and his companion text *Seven Children,* (46) paint a picture of this 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 (47), 2023, p. 8

Many UK citizens have legitimate grievances, have lost faith in mainstream politicians, and have joined with the populist right or left to seek change. Politics has fractured and More in Common (48) provides an account of the seven segments of the electorate, what they believe, and their changing party affiliations. The Road to 2029 (49) charts and maps the state of the parties based on quarterly polling of the British public.

Right and left populisms and their geographies

When considering authoritarian geographies, Jones (50) reminds us that authoritarianism is a worldview, a mindset, a mode of governing, a means of control, a logic, a language, and an ethic. A feature of **right populism** (the 'far right') he suggests that it embraces the following themes:

- A populist sense of grievance that the chosen people of a particular place have been displaced or replaced by others who are perceived as outsiders. Othering takes many forms including skepticism towards new cultural norms, new economic relations, and progressive ideas, e.g. 'wokism', 'cultural Marxism', Islam, immigrants,
- An anti-immigrant, anti-women, and anti-gender diversity politics that seeks to 'make our country great again' for a particular 'native' group.
- Hostility towards globalisation and international institutions, a rejection of equal rights for all humanity, and a desire of absolute control of 'our' people, territory and resources. This leads the populist right to oppose institutions such as Unesco and its advocacy of global citizenship education.

Jones continues by addressing the authoritarian turn against globalisation in a series of countries around the world, the surprising authoritarian fixation on digital spaces and crypto-currencies despite the rhetorical reverence of tradition, authoritarian infrastructure, and the importance of nature in emergent ecofascist worldviews.

Asked to compare and contrast the geographies of the populist right and left, Gemini reminds us that they reflect deep-seated economic, cultural and spatial divides and draw their core support from radically different geographic landscapes. See Table 1.2.

Geographic Dimension	Populist Right	Populist Left
Primary Region	Deindustrialised regions, rural areas, exurbs, and small towns	Metropolitan cores, university cities, and economically depressed urban peripheries.
Spatial Density	Low-density, dispersed populations	High density, concentrated populations
Economic Landscape	Stagnant agricultural zones and former manufacturing hubs ("rust belts").	Service-dominated economies, knowledge hubs, and underemployed urban sectors
Demographic Core	Older, less formally educated, and native-born populations	Younger, highly educated but underemployed populations, and diverse working-class groups

Table 1.2 The geographies of right and left populism compared (Gemini)

The European Centre for Populism Studies has a dictionary of populism (51) and an interactive map (52) that scores countries according to their performance in four key areas: fundamental human rights, civil liberties, rule of law, and elections. Each category is scored out of 25 points (using data from Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit) according to whether it meets certain indicators which include:

- the right to life, the right to work, and the right to education without discrimination (fundamental human rights).
- freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion (civil liberties)
- independence of the judiciary from executive powers (rule of law).
- whether elections regularly occur and if recent elections have been free and fair (elections).

The map reveals each countries score (US 80/100, China 19/100, Russia 33/100, UK 85/100), whether its socio-political situation is stable or unstable, the main factors shaping populism, and the regime's character. In the UK these factors are

Euroscepticism, sovereignty, anti-immigration, Islamophobia, and antisemitism, and its regime is assessed as a full (but not a radical) democracy. The PLMR group (53) provides charts and maps showing the changing support for political parties in the UK. The Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics has a reference database (54) on populist parties in Europe.

Malik (55) explains how the populist right despises liberalism and seeks to restore an imagined past whilst claiming that society is 'broken'. Reflecting Burke's conservatism (56), 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. Right populist leaders invest in social media and online culture that portrays them as celebrities. Their appeal to young men is based on virility, hence mob attacks on asylum hotels housing immigrants accused of rape, and right populism's association with misogynist incel ideology (57).

Mudde's writing (58) on the far right divides it into the extreme right that includes fascists who seek to replace democracy with dictatorship and the radical or populist right that accepts democracy but opposes the checks and balances associated with liberal democracy. Seeking to gain power and then essentially do what they want, right populists are a threat to the limited democracy that left populists seek to expand. Both right and left populisms accommodate citizens who do not abide by the principles of agonism (disagreeing agreeably) and engage in hate speech. They are more numerous on the populist right (see State of Hate 2025 (59)) and the National Education Union (60) opposes the rise of the far right, racism and all forms of extremism. (see also Stand Up to Racism (61)).

As regards the populist left, its opposition to digital capitalism and administrative societies and states shaped by AI (e.g. Palantir's role in the NHS, use of autonomous weapons in Gaza and elsewhere, reduced prospects of direct democracy) may be the foundation of a 'techlash' or movement against AI (62) that is joined by those concerned about AI's impact on jobs (breakdown of social contract), the environment (e.g. data centres, pylon lines) and human rights (e.g. copyright violations, facial recognition technology).

The philosophies of populist and mainstream political parties

Having examined the rise of authoritarianism and authoritarian geographies linked to the populist right and opposed by the populist left, it is time to return to philosophies of knowledge, and ask what philosophies underpin populist and mainstream politics? Table 1.3 is Gemini's answer suggesting that each has its own understanding of reality (ontology), how truth is known (epistemology) and finds a related political expression. Clearly school geography can be developed in a framework provided by one or a combination of these philosophies and the purpose of subsequent chapters is to explore what that means for geography teachers while focussing specifically on digital technology and AI.

Political spectrum	Ontological Foundation (What is reality?)	Epistemological Foundation (How is truth known?)	Core focus / political expression
Far / populist right	**Essentialism & Primordialism:** Reality is defined by fixed, natural hierarchies, distinct national/racial identities, and immutable human nature.	**Particularism & Intuitionism:** Truth is found through cultural intuition, historical myth, or the lived experience of a specific "in-group" rather than universal reason.	Protection of the nation-state, cultural preservation, and rejection of globalist or universalist frameworks.
Mainstream – liberal centrism	**Social Realism & Pluralism:** Reality is an objective, stable system of individuals, institutions, and markets that can be balanced and managed	**Rationalism & Empiricism:** Truth is discovered via objective science, technocratic expertise, consensus-building, and pragmatic data analysis.	Incremental policy reform, upholding the rule of law, and maintaining capitalist democratic institutions
Far / populist left	**Materialism & Social Constructivism:** Reality is shaped by material economic conditions (class) and socially constructed power structures.	**Critical Theory & Standpoint Epistemology:** Truth is uncovered by analyzing power dynamics; knowledge is viewed as a tool of the dominant class to maintain control	Systemic revolution or radical restructuring to dismantle capitalism, class divides, and institutional oppression

Table 1.3 The philosophies of knowledge underpinning populist and mainstream politics (Gemini)

To assess the current prospects of the populist left and its eco-socialist ideology, we should consider the UK economy, the 2024 general election and the subsequent impact of Burnham's rise to power on support for the Greens.

The UK economy and the 2024 general election

After 2020, the UK economy continued to suffer from low growth, productivity, and investment that resulted in declining living standards for the majority, 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 (63) (MMT). This 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 (64) to that offered by the Labour chancellor in 2025.

The Labour party under Corbyn lost the 2019 election, after which the thinktank Labour Together (65) 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'. Books that analyse recent Labour history include *Death of the Left* (66) and *Left Out* (67). SERA (68) and the Fabian Society (69) are two groups affiliated to Labour than promote eco-socialism.

Labour in power and the fate of Kier Starmer

In 2025 Perryman edited *The Starmer Symptom* (70), a 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 its 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 Britian; 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.

While Starmer's government carried out some significant reforms (71), it failed to communicate these effectively, to develop an alternative political economy (72), or to persuade voters that it was delivering the change it had promised. Damaged by U-turns on such issues as winter fuel payments to pensioners and poor decisions such as the appointment of Peter Mandelson as US ambassador, it was constrained by its chosen fiscal rules (that all day-to-day spending must be paid for out of revenues AND debt must be falling as a percentages of GDP within a five-year horizon). Hoping for growth and increased tax receipts, it adopted supply-side reforms (planning reforms, infrastructure projects, cuts to red tape) that favoured property developers and infrastructure investors (notably those linked to AI) but failed to tackle the unaffordability of everyday life.

Burnham and 'normie populism'

Burnham took over from Starmer determined to end the neoliberal consensus of the past forty years and spread the success he had had in Manchester to the rest of the country. 'Manchesterism' (73) draws on ideas from the foundational economy (74), the productive state (75), community wealth building (76), and alternative fiscal frameworks (77) and manifests in such policies as taking utilities back under public control, devolving powers to regional authorities ('place based politics'), building more council houses, re-industrialising with a focus on AI, reviving technical education, and tackling such issues as constitutional reform and a national care service that have long been considered too difficult to fix. The state is to become an investor, builder, and shaper of markets, and realising Burnham's twelve year plan for national renewal (78) will require an increase in tax revenues (79) or borrowing. Rather than government being controlled by fiscal rules, markets and capital should be controlled (80) by governments and O'Brien (81) is one commentator who questions whether Burnham is prepared to be sufficiently radical to effect the change he proposes. Davis (82) outlines his political economy.

Ball (83) describes Burnham as a 'normie populist' based on his display of . . .

- ***Aesthetic and Tone:*** *Relies on regional inflections, smart-casual or high-street attire, pictures with pints, and football references to project a "one of us" persona rather than an elite, distant establishment image.*
- ***Cultural Posture:*** *Combines a pragmatic, sometimes rightward tilt on social or security issues with populist signalling against remote metropolitan elites.*
- ***Economic Messaging:*** *Contrasts the perceived failures of past market liberalism with a focus on regional distribution, public-sector accountability, and local manufacturing revival* (Google Gemini).

These elements shape Burnham's political strategy and electoral appeal as he attempts to reconnect the Labour Party with working-class voters disillusioned by Westminster politics, but they may remain superficial unless he adopts the kind of progressive policies that Compass outlines (84).

The Green challenge

After Polanski became leader, Green Party membership soared and they won seats in local council elections and parliamentary byelections. Their messaging shifted to cost-of-living pressures, wealth inequality, and public services in addition to environmental protection, with Warfield (85) describing the party as like a watermelon, green on the outside but red on the inside. Polanski positioned the Greens as the true alternative to Labour and captured many former supporters of Corbyn whose attempts to form Your Party (86) had stalled. Its Policy Platform advocated economic transformation via wealth taxes, the nationalisation of key utilities, heavy investment in public transport and home insulation, pro-migration policies, robust trans rights, the ending of UK arms sales to Israel, and potential withdrawal from NATO. On education (87) it advocates for a comprehensive restructuring of the UK education system, increased public funding, the abolition of Ofsted and high-stakes testing, and the integration of academies back into local authority control. The 'Burnham bounce' in autumn 2026 led to a reduced support for the Greens and Polanski failed to win the byelection in Starmer's seat of Holborn and St Pancras. He had failed to speak on the motion 'Zionism is racism' passed at the party conference held the week before, and the issue of antisemitism, linked to Israel and the Gaza genocide (88) that infected Corbynism, now infected the Greens.

Schooling in England also shows morbid symptoms

On coming to power in 2024, the Labour government imposed VAT on private school fees and introduced legislation that would require all academies to teach the national curriculum. It commissioned a review rather than a reform of the national curriculum and assessment for England. To inform that review (chaired by Becky Francis), the National Education Union commissioned a report *A design for a different future* (89) in which the author updates arguments for a broader and more empowering curriculum that I reviewed in chapter two of *Critical School Geography*.

Ready for life' must involve a broad general education, relevant to lives that will be lived under the pressures of climate change. 'Ready for work' must not be taken to mean that schools are dominated by the need to prepare students for a divided and unequal labour market. From the report summary

The report's account of the 'morbid symptoms' affecting English schooling in 2025 is far ranging: a narrow and over specialised curriculum, academic outcomes valued over social, cultural and creative outcomes, the pervasive impact of testing and teaching to the test, dismissed progressive and radical curriculum frameworks, a lack of attention to curriculum aims and purposes, reduced teacher autonomy / professionalism and related problems of teacher retention, a failure to acknowledge and build on students' interests resulting in student unhappiness with school and unplanned absence, and standardised curricula developed by multi-academy trusts with the help of AI.

Schooling clearly needs to prepare students for a different future at a time when the social contract appears broken with schools and universities no longer offering routes to secure futures. Around one million 16 to 24 year olds are not in education, employment or training and the Milburn report on young people and work (90) insists the problem is structural with disparities in wealth, background, geography and ethnicity playing key roles. The problem is not about laziness, or a generation unsuited to work but it does reflect a difficult labour marker and does affect young people's outlooks as revealed by the DEMOS survey referred to above.

Geography plays its own part. People with identical backgrounds will face more barriers to work or education in some places. This can also cover areas such as

transport – London, which has both plentiful public transport and free or discounted youth travel, has a notably low level of Neets, the report notes, adding that this is just one factor. Walker, The Guardian 26.05.26 (91).

The final report of the curriculum review panel is available here. In After the Review, Reimagining Curriculum and Assessment (92) Bolt and Duckett argue that the report is too complacent about the current situation and fails to follow through its own analysis in important areas. They outline areas in which the review should have done better. Those relevant to geography include digital and media literacy, climate change and environmental education, critical thinking and problem-solving, and global citizenship and international perspectives. Cross-curricular themes and dimensions as introduced by the previous Labour government failed to re-appear and while citizenship was given attention along with media literacy and climate and sustainability education, there is too little attention to learning politics and sustainability through doing politics and sustainability. The Geographical Association responded to the final report along with other subject associations (93).

Burnham's revival of technical education

On becoming PM, Burnham announced his wish to expand the Manchester Baccalaureate (94) nationwide. This aims to guarantee every young person 'a clear path and line of sight to the good jobs and training opportunities' available in their region. At the same time, he appointed Lucy Powell (95) as education secretary who in her previous shadow role had argued for all academies and free schools to be returned to local authority control and warned that education was becoming overprescribed and micro-managed.

While Burnham seeks parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes for older school students, the SEA warns (96) that this is unrealistic unless the GCSE/A level route is also reformed. All students should be able to mix academic and vocational courses as they work towards a school leaving diploma, a recommendation that requires the 'binning of the Francis Review which accepted the status-quo'. All vocational / technical courses should consider the social context of that work area as well as critiques of existing provision. It reminds government that most education is currently semi-privatised, is not organised locally and is therefore under no obligation to offer the changes the new PM wants. Linking vocational / technical education to local economic development requires genuine local democratic accountability.

Just before Burnham announced his proposed education reforms, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Schools, Learning and Assessment published its report *Empowering students as democratic citizens: How schools and colleges can prepare young people for votes at 16* (97). This features in chapter six and here it is sufficient to note that it recommends that student voice should be embedded in learning beyond school councils; that young people should have meaningful opportunities to engaged in governance and decision-making, and a National Union of School Students should be created.

Mention of student voice brings us back to Abi and her standpoint or outlook on the world. Having introduced critical realism and reviewed global and UK events since *Critical School Geography* was published in 2020, it is now time to turn to critical realism's features in ways that will enable you to evaluate their relevance to the geography curriculum and assess whether I am correct in labelling Abi the true critical realist.

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:

Tom Fryer's *A short guide to ontology and epistemology: why everyone should become a critical realist* (98),

Critical realism in a nutshell, an introduction to the philosophy of critical realism, Mervin Hartwig (99)

Critical Realism, Basics and Beyond, Hubert Buch-Hanson & Peter Nielsen (100)

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 (101), liberal democracy, UK government (102), international law (103), and European (104) , and global governance (105). A level geography revision notes (106) can be helpful.

Read the eco-socialism manifesto (107) of the Fourth International and relate its analysis of global problems to critical realism's four planar model. Is it realistic to propose that such ideas be introduced into geography classrooms (along with populist right and mainstream ideas)?

Watch Anton Jager (108) talking about hyperpolitics.

Read Mould (109) on planetary thinking in geography. What are the implications of his four propositions (materiality, human as praxis, antinational, and safeguarding) for school geography?

Simon Tormey (110) provides a beginners' guide to populism. Lizotte & Kello (111) introduce the geographies of populism and populist geographies and a series of articles that focus on right populism.

Read Jones (112) on authoritarian geographies. How can you introduce the themes he covers to students at KS4 and KS5?

Watch the Oxford Union debate (113) on the motion 'The West is right to be suspicious of Islam'. Is this a good example of disagreeing agreeably? How is it relevant to agonistic debate in the geography classroom?

Fetzer, Edenhofer & Gorg (114) examine populism and high street / retail decline. Use their ideas, and those of others, to rethink how you teach about 'run down', 'forgotten' or 'deprived' places and why populism may appeal to their inhabitants.

Electoral geography is a branch of political geography that deserves to feature in the curriculum at KS4. How can teachers use such resources as 'cartographical perspectives of the 2024 general election' (115) in developing relevant curriculum units.

Read this report (116) 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?

The Tomlinson Report (117) recommended vocational education alongside academic education in 2004. Do Burnham's proposals simply revive its recommendations? What are the likely impacts of these proposals on secondary school geography?

Is there a danger that political impartiality (118) in schools serves to support an undemocratic status-quo (119)? How should teachers deal with the three versions of truth presented in Table 1.3?

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?

Can schools accommodate the concept of radical democracy? How can you use such reports as *Empowering students as democratic citizens* (page 20) to make the case for a more critical school geography?

How can school geography address critical realism's four planar model of the global polycrisis without inducing feelings of despair?

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

Does school geography 'steer clear' of inequality? Does it teach about the rich as well as the poor? How should Oxfam's report on inequality and the Global Justice Report feature in the curriculum?

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?

What are the main issues in current culture wars between the populist right and left? How does each side view global heating, AI, globalisation, global citizenship, identity, schooling, etc?

Is renewed attention to technical and vocational education a threat or opportunity for school geography?

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 One Older school students and their standpoints

Standpoint theory (120) argues that a person's standpoint or outlook on the world (what they know and consider to be true) is shaped by their social position and that marginalised groups often have a clearer view of power and how it works. Race, class, gender and other social signifiers shape how we see the world and out standpoints evolve as we reflect and act on the world.

The Loneliest Generation (121): what it is like to grow up in England today, a report from IPPR reveals that the foundations of a good adolescence are broken, transitions to adulthood are blocked, and teenagers are disconnected from themselves, from each other, and from wider society (see four planar model, pages 7 & 8). Teenagers are emerging into adulthood in a society where the social contract between the generations is broken. 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, 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 (122). Digital technology and media shape young people's lives, politics, agency and geographies. including the discourses, including those of right and left populism, to which they are exposed and how they respond. In is in this setting that their standpoints are formed.

This chapter introduced the DEMOS report *Inside the Mind of a Sixteen Year Old.* A similar survey and report were produced in January 2025 by Channel Four: *Gen Z, Trends, Truth and Trust* (123), a survey of Gen Z's (born between the late 1990s and early 2000s) beliefs. This curriculum challenge requires you to produce a curriculum unit exploring students' standpoints or beliefs based on one or both, of these publications.

Gen Z, Trends, Truth and Trust suggested that the 13 – 27 years suffered from information overload and were more inclined than an 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.

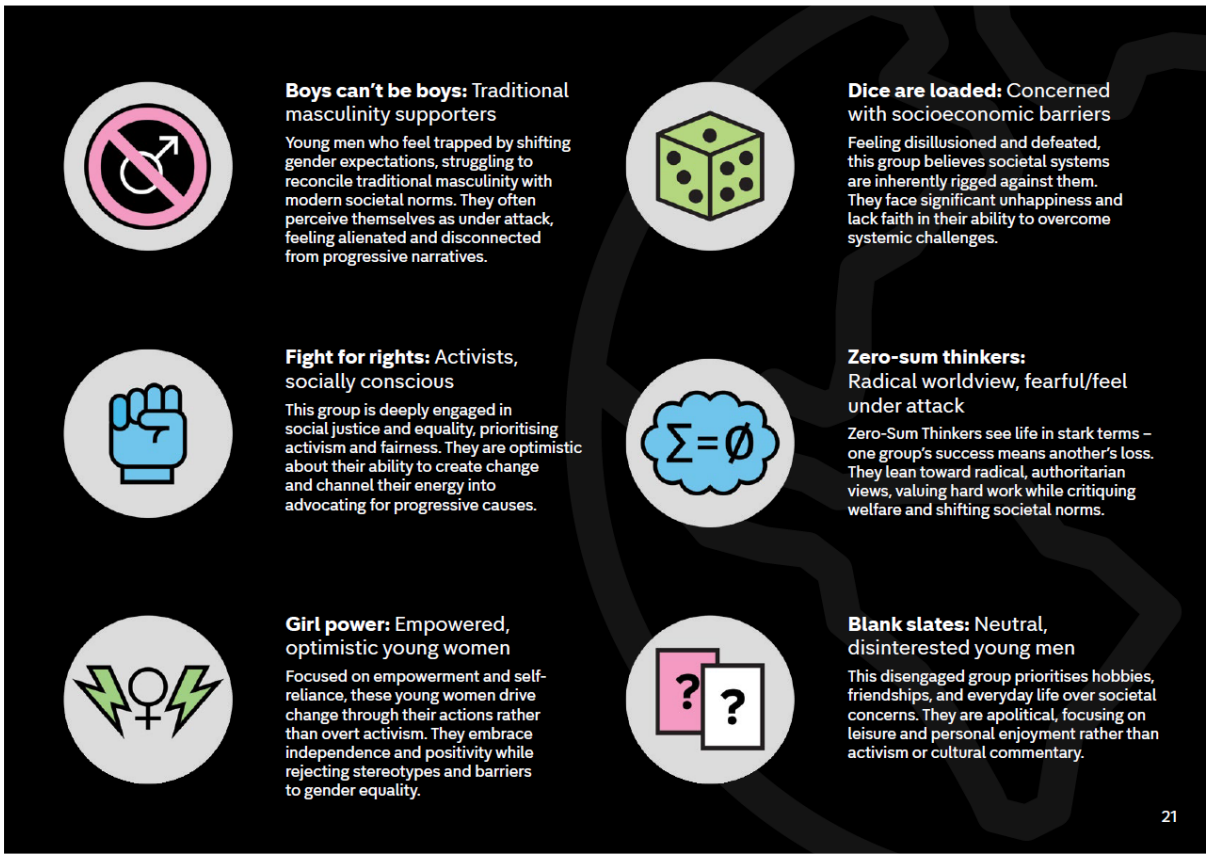


Figure 1.1 Gen Z worldviews *Gen Z, Trends, Truth and Trust*

Further analysis of the GenZ survey results revealed that the generation is not monolithic but, like those surveyed by DEMOS, holds diverse attitudes, values and beliefs and adopts various responses to the rapid technological and social shifts associate with digital capitalism and hyperpolitics. Figure 1.1 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 the DEMOS and Channel Four reports raise questions of validity and reliability, but such surveys do provide a foundation on which teachers can explore the everyday knowledge and worldviews of their students.

In developing your curriculum unit you may wish to follow the format adopted by the units in *Critical School Geography*. But rather have the key idea, inquiry

question, key understandings, key concepts, key values, key skills, and learning outcomes, learning activities, assessment task, and possible links to Unesco guidance on ESDGC, provided for you, you now have to develop these for yourself based on what the chapter provides and what you can find. Such curriculum making is a theme of chapter four on epistemology.

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