



# 1990: Critical geographies and teaching for sustainable development

Nick Hutchinson

*Geographical Education*, Volume 6, No 2, 1990 contained:

*Mapping possibilities for a critical world* by Michael Singh

*THE UNEP state of the environment report* by Dale Boyd

*A sustainable future for Australia* by Lyuba Zarsky

*Ecologically sustainable development: an Australian strategy evolving* by Ros Kelly

*Re-thinking sustainable development* by Ted Trainer

*“What we Consume” the curriculum rationale* by John Huckle

*Aims and choices in development education* by Roger Robinson

*Commonsense geography* by Alec McHoul

In this edition of the journal, the 1990 AGTA awards were recorded. Among the recipients were, *New Wave Geography Book 2* (Stowell & Bentley 1988) in the category secondary school text and *The Geography Teacher's Guide to the Classroom* (Fien, Gerber, & Wilson, 1989), in the category geographical education books for teachers. Both texts signalled a change in philosophical directions that had occurred in geography teaching. Many of the underlying assumptions of humanistic geography were found in the *New Wave* text.

Tony Stutterd, speaking on behalf of the AGTA awards panel explained,

this is one of the most pedagogically sound and exciting textbooks to be found on the market. The strategies are designed to promote talk and discussion, and are based on a belief in the value of cooperative, interactive classrooms (Stutterd, 1990, p. 4).

The second edition of the *Geography Teacher's Guide* saw an addition of seven chapters to the earlier 1984 edition and many of the pre-existing chapters had been rewritten. Again, there is a humanistic feel to the text with its emphasis on the importance of student thinking and inquiry, with a desire to provide learning experiences, which extend and refine the personal geographies of students (Fien, Cox, & Fossey, 1989, p. 7). There was also recognition of so-called radical

geographies (Peet, 1998, pp. 67–111) referred to earlier as geographies of concern.

The two texts indicated how much had changed in school geography and some, if not much, of this transformation was predicated on encouraging changes in academic geography.

Although English and Mayfield (1972) referred to a renaissance in the discipline over the previous fifteen years, in the 1960s much of the discipline was concerned with ‘the fact of area’ or ‘the knowledge of the world as it exists in places’ (Lukermann, 1964, p. 167). It existed ‘as a study because phenomena vary from place to place’ (Minshull, 1970, p. 29). The geometric patterns, where geographers had readily found hexagons, networks and trend surfaces everywhere, (Walmsley, 1984, p. 159) were making room for other geographies in the later 1960s. Many human geographers, along with other social scientists, were asking whether they were contributing towards the making of a better world (p. 160). Walmsley maintained, ‘The spatial analysis school of thought had next to nothing to say about environmental degradation, the black ghetto, poverty and war’ (1984, p. 160).

Radical human geographers in the 1970s began to question the political neutrality of academic geography (Peet, 1977). In so doing they sought to trace the relationship between social problems at the surface and deep societal causes, an emancipatory attempt to allow people to engage in their own theory construction (1997, p. 240).

Neil Smith (2001, p. 6) revealed that geography, in 1967,

was perhaps the least sexy subject, certainly in the English-speaking world. . . . It is difficult to conceive of a discipline more uncool than geography in 1967. And yet, the influence of the anti-war movement in the US, the feminist and environmental movements, the Prague Spring of 1968, the anti-imperialist movement, radicals discovering socialism and Marx – all of these wider social eruptions in the late 1960s and early 1970s completely transformed the discipline.

Academic geographers began to believe in the emancipatory potential of geographic theory (Peet & Thrift, 1989, p. xiii), but it was an altogether new way of envisaging *theory*. It was *theory* as

it was used in other disciplines such as literary studies, cultural studies and European philosophy; it was *theory* shared with these disciplines that was used to challenge common-sense assumptions behind thinking (Cresswell, 2013, p. 7). As Nigel Thrift (1989, p. 264) explained, that by the late 1980s, human geography was integrally involved in developing new theories about space, place and society. The discipline itself was a passenger on a journey towards further engagement with postmodern theory.

Katherine Gibson (1991) remarked on the changing stature of human geography within the social sciences between 1971 and 1991. These changes had come about from influence outside the discipline but also,

it has been produced by changes within the discipline itself, particularly those wrought by the marrying of aspects of Marxist and geographic theory and the incredible burst of vitality and productivity to which this gave rise (1991, p. 75)

Gibson contributed to such changes envisioning alternative pathways through the seeming inevitabilities of capitalist globalisation (Gibson-Graham, 2006a) and providing examples of alternative economic futures from the Latrobe Valley, Victoria and Bohol Island, Philippines (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). She explained that, by the 1990s, some academic geographers were as widely read outside the discipline as they were within. David Harvey's 1990 book, *Condition of postmodernity*, was voted one of the best 100 books of the second half of the twentieth century by the *New Statesman/New Society* (Smith, 2001, p. 10). One suspects, however, that the text is more likely to found on the bookshelves of educators of pre-service English teachers than on Geography educators' shelves.

Another widely read academic geographer, Doreen Massey, explained that there was wide acceptance among *Western* human geographers that space is socially constructed (Massey, 1999, p. 283). One of the achievements of radical geography was to challenge positivist spatial science and to establish that the social and spatial are inseparable (Massey, 1994, p. 255), and to propose that space as the product of interrelationships (Massey, 2005, 9) 'of relations from the unimaginably cosmic to the intimately tiny' (1999, p. 283).

However, Harvey is generally regarded as the pivotal figure of change. He explained,

We can now model spatial behaviour like journey-to-work, retail activity, the spread of measles epidemics, the atmospheric dispersal of pollutants,

and the like, with much greater security and precision than once was the case [and] I accept that this represents no mean achievement (1989, p. 212).

But, more importantly,

There is an ecological problem, an urban problem, an international trade problem, and yet we seem incapable of saying anything of depth or profundity about any of them. When we say something, it appears trite and rather ludicrous (1973, p. 129).

Furthermore, Harvey argues that place is also a social construct and that the only interesting question that can be asked is 'by what social process(es) is place constructed' (Harvey, 1996, pp. 293–294)?

Two of Geography's most fundamental concepts were now seen as social rather than predominantly spatial constructs, although the social, spatial and temporal are intertwined in their assembly. Moreover, these ideas have spilled over into geographical education where space and place are viewed as being socially constructed (Kriewaldt, 2012, p. 15, Morgan, 1998).

By the 1990s, new-found optimism in academic geography, led to the astonishing declaration that geography had become 'the sexiest academic subject of all' (Eagleton, 1997, cited in Smith, 2001, p. 6). Moreover, this fervour had made its way into the *Geography Teacher's Guide* (Fien, Gerber & Wilson, 1989). The authors referred to new goals and perspectives that have been brought to the operation of the discipline, that included not only the development of spatial theories and models, but also, Marxist analysis of people-environment situations, the promotion of social justice and the search for existential understandings of the human experience of particular environments (Fien, Gerber & Wilson, 1989, p. vii).

Nevertheless, the reality in schools could be quite different. Decades earlier David Harvey (1972, pp. 29–41) explained that teaching theory would not be an easy task in the school classroom. Academic geographers, working largely in the universities, had developed these theories. There was a divide between them and many teachers and teacher educators who were asked to grapple with theory in all of its complexity. He saw that there had been some resistance among these groups to the notion of theoretical geography and he regretted the lack of progress in this context.

Again, we need to acknowledge that there are a number of obstacles that confront the

schoolteacher but the efforts to grapple with complexity are rewarding.

Currently, radical geography shelters under the umbrella of critical geographies. In academic circles, critical geographies draw from various perspectives – e.g. Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and poststructural, engage with diverse philosophies, e.g. phenomenology, hermeneutics and critical realism, share ideas from literary theory, anthropology and psychoanalysis – all broadly, and rather loosely, labelled *postmodern approaches* (Marsh, 2005, p. 9). Critical geographies are committed to social justice, in a ‘desire to study and engender a more just world’ (Aitken & Valentine, 2006, p. 339). Their critique, applied to urban geography, examines power imbalance, inequality, injustice and exploitation, within cities and among them (Brenner, 2009, p. 198). Critical geographies sought to expose the ‘taken-for-grantedness of everyday life’ (Barnes & Gregory, 1996, p. 8). They sought to change the ways in which human geography was framed in an endeavour to respond to the changing world of the 1980s and 1990s; to engage with changing structures and challenges emerging from the collapse of communism in eastern Europe, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the political divides in the Middle East, the contradictions contained in globalisation and global inequalities expressed in terms of access to food, water and shelter and the divide between rich and poor (Atkinson, Jackson, Sibley & Washbourne, 2005, p. xi).

Again they are emancipatory in their intent. Translated into geographical education as *Teaching to care* (Fien, 1996b, pp. 77–91), they are enshrined in a positive self-image; acceptance of, and respect for, others; compassion and kindness; open-mindedness; respect for human rights; concern for justice; commitment to sustainable development; and a willingness to be involved.

### Critical geographies in school

*Geographical Education* 1990 contained references to *critical geography*: Michael Singh, (1990, ), then lecturer in social science education at James Cook University; *critical exploration of key ideas* (Huckle, 1990, p. 32), then head of geography at Bedford College of Higher Education; and Ted Trainer, then lecturer in education at the University of New South Wales, was engaged in *critical theory* to the extent that he was providing ‘a critique of the way things are in an endeavour to ‘promote something better – the way things could be’ (Cresswell, 2013, p. 8). To some extent, these positions can be regarded as extensions of the ideas promulgated in the 1986 AGTA conference and 1988 text

*Teaching geography for a better world* (Fien & Gerber, 1988) but they also alluded to other notions of *critical theory* and critical ideas about geographical education.

Morgan (1998, pp. 6–7) saw that critical geographical education was based on a number of assumptions. Firstly, a critique of positivism; secondly, recognition of ideology and subsequent attention to issues of race, gender and Eurocentrism; thirdly awareness of critical social theory; and, finally attention to pedagogy to the extent that ‘the ways in which students are taught is at least as important as, if not more important than, what they are taught’ (p. 7).

Gilbert (1988, p. 170) referred to *critical teaching* where certain perspectives have been ignored and important questions left unanswered particularly those pertaining to categories such as race, class and gender. He espoused the adoption of a critical attitude to geographical texts seeking to examine identifiable priorities and perspectives and reveal ideologies in the geography curriculum (1986, pp. 43–46). Such an approach could be seen as part of an inclination towards *critical literacy*, efforts to decode the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms and reveal them as ‘the preferences and selections of privileged classes, presented as though they had some universal intrinsic value’ (Moore, 2000, p. 87). Further, Moore (2000, p. 168) referred to a *critical pedagogy* that challenges existing curricula and teaching practices as well as the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin them, described by Morgan (2000, p. 274) as what happens when critical theory meets education. Bartlett (1989, pp. 22–34) referred to *critical inquiry*, which involved the type of *critical pedagogy* advocated by Paolo Freire (p. 31), but also sought to ‘unmask the contradictions in our practice and the understandings upon which it is based’ (p. 33).

Similarly, Singh sought to uncover a *socially critical* orientation to teaching geography (1990, p. 8). He advocated a critical examination of teaching resources focusing on the worldview or ideology that they represent. He recommended that teachers should select from a variety of materials in efforts to question ‘if not counter irrationality, injustice and alienation’ (p. 10). He argued that geography resources might be used to develop the *technical*, *interpretive* and *critical* knowledge of students (p. 8). The technical orientation involves acquiring information, facts and concepts, knowledge that will facilitate problem solving. The interpretive orientation is intended to help students understand their values and develop decision-making skills, to discover and inquire, to find out about society and how it is organised. The critical perspective is shaped by

a desire for a better world and its critical intent is evident in 'the search for penetrating insights and new possibilities' (p. 13).

Bartlett (1989, p. 33), (Morgan, 2000, p. 274) and Singh (1990, pp. 13–14) allude to the work of philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a philosopher who has also clearly influenced Huckle's thinking (Huckle, 2002, pp 255–265). Huckle explained that as the 1980s progressed, when structural Marxism and socialism became less accepted in academic geography, radical geographers turned to a type of critical theory espoused by Habermas (Huckle 2002, p. 259). Huckle's reading of this theory saw that critical education seeks to,

assist the learner in reflecting and acting on her or his formation as a person, the society and place that has shaped that formation, and the role of discourse and ideology in masking or revealing the learner's true interests. (Huckle, 2015, p. 81).

In *What we consume* (1990, pp. 31–36) Huckle took from Habermas the notion that education serves to sustain existing social structures and that students should cultivate a critical awareness of the structures within which students live their everyday lives (1990, p. 31). They should, for example understand 'capitalism's need to continually invent and promote new wants, [and] the strategies by which it does this' (Huckle, 2012, p. 9) and the links to economic and ecological crises that ensue. Students should empathise with individuals and groups involved in environmental politics and act as agents of social change with the procedural values that underpin political literacy and sustain democracy (Huckle, 1990, p. 232). Students should have a predisposition to do something about political disputes in a manner that is mindful of the actions and points of views of others and is, at the same time, open to a range of environmental discourses (Huckle, 2001, p. 155).

Trainer's (1990, pp. 24–30) plea to rethink sustainable development amplifies Cresswell's conception of *critical theory*. He sought to construct a better world, to save the ecosystems of planet earth through a long-term reduction of 'what we consume', in efforts to transition to a more sustainable and just world. Radical education theory, developed during the 1970s, revealed that schools were 'predominantly geared to the reproduction of industrial, affluent consumer society' (p. 28) and 'directly and explicitly teach the desirability and truth of many aspects of the growth and greed society' (p. 29). For Trainer, consumer capitalism cannot be redressed by a technological 'fix', it has to be replaced. His critical thinking begins with a

Marxist critique of a capitalist society that reifies growth but, rather than seek to overhaul the state by way of revolution, he adopts an anarchist stance. He envisaged 'a conserver society', based on self-sufficiency, local inputs and control, relatively little trade and transport, in short a frugal and zero growth economy (1990, p. 26). His homestead and educational site at Pigface Point, in southwestern Sydney, has welcomed scores of geography students who have been able to evaluate the practicalities of *The Simpler Way* (Come Hell or High Water Productions, 2014).

## Teaching for sustainable development

The major theme for *Geographical Education* 1990 was *Teaching for sustainable development*. Huckle's insistence in *What we consume* exemplified a way of teaching for sustainability by insisting that the

'treadmill of consumption' that had accelerated in the post war period was ultimately destructive of cultures and ways of life and provided superficial pleasures rather than sustainable futures (Morgan, 2011, p. 117).

Such teaching had its origins at some time during the late 1960s and early 1970s when *crisis* was the watchword, whether it was an ecological, environmental, demographic, debt, food or energy crisis (Johnston & Taylor, 1986, p. 1), or *the environmental crisis* (Shortle, 1973, p. 61), a global problem, a period of rapid change and a crisis that involved the whole environment. Greenhall (1986, p. 9) reminds us that environmental education received formal recognition in Australia at the Australian Academy of Science conference titled *Education and the environmental crisis*. However, at that time, environmental concern still tended to be rather parochial. The primary stimulus for 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm was transboundary pollution in the form of acid rain (McCormick, 1985, p. 35). Sharon Beder (1993, pp. xi–xii) refers to *sustainable development* as being part of a second wave of modern environmentalism, which began in the 1980s.

Federal Environment Minister, Ros Kelly (1990, p. 22) pointed out that by 1980 the World Conservation Strategy emphasised the need to ensure the sustainable utilisation of species and ecosystems. She also highlighted the importance of the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and the Australian Government's endeavour to develop a strategy for ecologically sustainable development (ESD) (Kelly 1990, pp. 22–23). Following recommendations from the Rio de Janeiro

Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, Australian governments saw ESD enshrined in some one hundred and twenty-three pieces of state and federal legislation by the year 2000 (Robin, 2007, p. 176).

And yet, in 1994, a new coal-fired power station was opened in Singleton, New South Wales and a further four were built during the 1990s contributing some 30 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere (Hutchinson & Hirsch, 1996, p. 115). According to Libby Robin, by the first few years of the 21st century Australians had stopped talking about ESD (2007, p. 177) and only *sustainability* survived. ESD had been turned into 'meaningless rhetoric based on naïve understandings or, in some cases, on devious manipulations' (Mulligan & Hill, 2001, p. 11); as mining magnate Lang Hancock proclaimed, in 1979, *capitalism means life, environmentalism means death* (Huckle, 1986, p. 17, Lines, 1991, p. 270).

Arguably, we are now in a third wave of teaching for sustainable development. Education for Sustainable Development had become an important part of the United Kingdom National Curriculum (Lambert & Morgan, 2010, pp. 15–16). English geography teachers see the discipline as an important vehicle for teaching environmental issues. This third wave involves educating for sustainability (EfS), a discourse that started in 1997 and supported by the United Nations Decade for Sustainable Development, 2005–2014 (Delgado, 2007, p. 36). EfS is a more catholic approach seeking to incorporate key themes of sustainability, including poverty alleviation, human rights, equity, health and environmental protection, into education systems. The texts *Teaching geography for a better world* (Fien & Gerber, 1988) and *New wave geography* (Stowell & Bentley, 1988) incorporated these endeavours in the 1980s not only in terms of subject content but also their embrace of active and reflective learning (Tilbury, Coleman, and Garlick, 2005, p. 38).

## AGTA Presidents \*

1967–1969	Don Biddle	New South Wales
1970–1971	Bob Coggins	South Australia
1972–1973	Brian Spicer	Victoria
1974–1975	Ken Sutton	Queensland
1976–1977	Lindsay Francis	South Australia
1978–1979	John Emery	New South Wales
1980–1981	Bill James	Western Australia
1982–1983	Barrie McElroy	South Australia
1984–1986	Warwick Wilson	New South Wales
1986–1988	Peter Wilson	Queensland
1988–1991	Roger Smith	South Australia
1991–1993	Rob Berry	Victoria
1993–1995	Magdelaine Wong	Queensland
1995–1997	Lachlan McKinnon	Western Australia
1997–1999	David Butler	South Australia
1999–2001	Geoff Conolly	New South Wales
2001–2003	Stephen Cranby	Victoria
2003–2005	Emilia Terry	Western Australia
2005–2008	Nick Hutchinson	New South Wales
2008–2013	Malcolm McInerney	South Australia
2013–2016	Grant Kleeman	New South Wales
2016–	Trish Douglas	Victoria

\* from October 2002 referred to as Chairman, Chairperson or Chair following the registration of the Association as a Company