

Review Essay

Global Perspectives in the Geography Curriculum, Alex Standish, Routledge, London, 2009, 210 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-47549-5.

I trained to teach geography in 1988¹. One of the books that influenced my development as a geography teacher was John Fien and Rob Gerber's edited collection *Teaching Geography for a Better World*. In the introduction, Fien and Gerber (1988: 7) state that:

'Teaching geography for a better world involves making conscious decisions to challenge the ideology of conservative approaches to education, in general, and to rethink our goals, content, resources and methods in geography teaching, in particular. It also challenges many aspects of the liberal-progressive ideology of education that sees schools as a way of improving society through the education of well-meaning individuals who will be tomorrow's skilled and active citizens'.

Fien and Gerber go on to explain that liberal-progressive educational ideology overemphasises the role of individuals in causing social, environmental and economic problems, and the ability of individuals to solve them. Many chapters in *Teaching Geography for a Better World* adopt a 'socially critical' approach which sees 'the present society as characterised by inequities and injustices which result from the exercise of political power in the hands of a minority who control the world's capital' (1988: 183). From this perspective, schools should help students to recognise this condition and encourage students to be 'consciously and constructively critical of it' (1988: 183).

Teaching Geography for a Better World is best understood as representing a form of educational discourse that emerged from and responded to the economic, social and environmental crises of the 1970s and 1980s: an increasingly globalised economy which led to concentration of wealth in the elites of 'economically developed' nations challenged the models of development proposed in school geography which placed their faith in the free market to lead to 'trickle down'; the advent of 'Second Wave' feminism and the growth of moves to recognise the rights of indigenous peoples led to questions of **whose geography** was being taught; and the

heightened awareness of a series of environmental problems challenged the assumptions of continued economic growth through the exploitation and rational management of nature resources. In this context, the chapters in the book made it clear that what was taught in schools was not innocent of politics. As John Huckle's chapter in *Teaching Geography for a Better World* concluded:

'As the study of people's active construction and transformation of their physical and social environment, geography can become a collective exercise in reclaiming our stolen humanity and reconstructing society' (1988:30).

Re-reading *Teaching Geography for a Better World* in 2009 it is striking how far the 'liberal-progressive ideology of education', which Fien and Gerber saw themselves as opposing, continues to dominate curriculum thinking. As a geography educator who remains interested in the question of what it might mean to 'teach geography for a better world' it is striking to read a text so innocent of the themes of post-modern and post-structural geographies that have dominated human geography since 1990. These approaches, with their focus on discourse, representation and difference have challenged any simple notion of the possibility of 'education for transformation', and the past two decades saw the appearance of 'post-development' geographies which challenged the very notion of development strategies; feminist geographies that highlighted the tensions that existed between actual women; and geographies of nature that challenged the assumptions of a social-nature binary on which much environmental thinking was based. This is not to downplay the importance of the 'socially critical' approach to teaching geography, but to recognise the need for a productive and continual engagement with the discipline in the context of schools and classrooms.

Alex Standish singles out *Teaching Geography for a Better World* in his book *Global Perspectives in the Geography Curriculum: Reviewing the Moral Case for Geography*. He argues that the book influenced geographical education across the English-speaking world and that it signalled geography's 'ethical turn', which, 'while making teachers more aware of the values systems they bring into the classroom, served to undermine the notion that teachers should take a neutral approach to their subject' (p.39). Whereas, he asserts, for much of the twentieth century teachers were expected to remain impartial or present alternative perspectives on political issues, this position has been reversed, with the result that the 'floodgates' have been opened 'for geography to become subservient to various social and political causes' (p.39).

The central argument of Standish's book is that since the 1990s educational policy makers and subject leaders have been seeking to fundamentally change geography teaching in UK schools, from a subject which encourages students to explore spatial concepts, ideas and skills, to an ethics-based subject concerned with the promotion of environmentalism, cultural diversity and social justice. This, he argues, represents a blatant politicisation of the geography curriculum. Standish enlists the argu-

ments of Bill Marsden (1997), who suggests that at any point in time school geography reflects a balance between educational, social and geographical goals and that at certain times these can get out of balance. According to Standish we are in one such period of imbalance, where the social goals of governments are shaping the agenda for the school curriculum.

It is important to note that for Standish, it is not politics *per se* that is the problem, but the particular form of this politics. He argues that the dominant political culture at the turn of the millennium is one that views people as the problem rather than the solution. This culture has set about decentring humanity from most areas of life: people must be subservient to the natural environment, cultures have become objectified as exhibits to be preserved rather than as a process of human advancement, developing countries are viewed as inherently backward and unable to advance of their own accord, people cannot be trusted to develop into independent moral citizens, and humanity cannot accurately know its world.

This is a broad argument about the characteristics of a political culture, and it is one that is pursued by a variety of recent writers associated with the libertarian 'think tank', the Institute of Ideas. Thus, Austin Williams (2008) (who cites Standish as 'educational theorist') has argued that environmentalists are 'the enemies of progress'; Jim Butcher (2005) (whose book Standish reviewed positively and who in turn provides an approving quote on the cover of Standish's book) has argued that contemporary forms of tourism require people to adhere to a strict 'moral code' and see 'other' cultures as relicts or museum-pieces; Frank Furedi (2005) (who is a leading figure in the Institute of Ideas and who contributed an over-arching chapter in a recent collection to which Standish contributed (Whelan, 2007)) has argued that contemporary politics is characterised by a loss of faith in the ideas of progress and advancement; and Dave Clements et al (2009) (whose book is endorsed by Dennis Hayes who was Standish's academic supervisor and who provides yet another approving quote for Standish's book) have seen moves to develop community cohesion as attempts on the part of governments to tell people how to live their lives. This is a network that shares a common cause of arguing against the state's interference in people's lives. Standish's own contribution to this literature is to assert that 'The whole curriculum in the US and UK has been influenced by this dehumanised political culture, but geography in particular has experienced rapid change, especially in the UK' (p.30).

According to Standish, this politicisation of the geography curriculum and the de-based view of people's capacity to develop the natural and social world is a retreat from geography's liberal tradition, in which 'geography's role has developed as one of mapping and comprehending spatially related phenomena' (p.5). For Standish, there has only been one period during which geography threw off its moral agenda and this was the period after the Second World War when geography became a spatial science:

'Geography's place in the curriculum was increasingly justified by its *intrinsic educational benefits for students*: it taught them about location, place, regions, natural systems, human-environment interactions, movement, and how phenomena are spatially related' (p.29).

This then, is the standard which Standish sees as in need of upholding, and his book is concerned to outline the unsavoury consequences of geography's ethical turn. In many ways, this is a fair point. I share his concern about the way that school geography can, if we are not careful, be enlisted to promote the idea that individuals are responsible for the state of the world rather than the powerful structural forces (e.g. capitalism, patriarchy) that shape and limit our worlds. Indeed, over two decades ago, writers such as John Huckle and Rob Gilbert made similar arguments:

'Lessons on environmental problems tend to blame purely natural causes, or regard them as universal problems attributable to such causes as overpopulation, resource scarcity, inappropriate technology, overconsumption or overproduction...Blame is effectively transferred; the crisis is attributed to nature, the poor, or inappropriate values' (Huckle, 1988: 64)

'Images in the present subjects are remnants of the past, related to social structures of the time. In geography...the abstract models of location analysis, the market and functionalism are associated with positivism and the 'end of ideology' faith in technocratic planning' (Gilbert, 1984: 229).

The problem is that this episode in school geography was not a moment of triumph for neutral objective science, but reflected particular ideologies about progress and economic management of the physical and social worlds. Standish, though, is remarkably unreflective about this. The turn towards geography as a spatial science was prompted by geography's low status in academia where it was seen as a descriptive regional approach. Those involved in the new geography were seeking to realign the subject as a rigorous science. It also reflected the spirit of the age in that it was concerned to promote technocratic solutions to the problems of modern living. As Ogden and Smith pointed out at the time:

'Stepping back from the battleground, we can now see that the quantitative revolution closely reflected the contemporary reverence with technological gymnastics, reverence for cybernetics, and the sense that human ingenuity in an era of prosperity would automatically generate solutions to our problems. It was the geography of the decade of space exploration – the era of what Eliot Hurst has aptly described as "the geographer as mechanic" (1977: 50).

Contrary to Standish's argument that this 'paradigm shift' simply reflected better ways of doing science, it was strongly linked to the interests of particular groups. Similarly, its adoption in schools was part of a move to improve the status and standing of geography in schools (Goodson, 1983). In any case, the new geography was quickly subjected to critique and its failings exposed (Lee, 1983). In school geography, influenced by ideas from the new sociology of education, the new geography was challenged as promoting particular ideological views of people-environment relations (Gilbert, 1984). The references offered in this paragraph are part of the accepted literature of geography education, and it is surely revealing that Standish has either not read them, or has decided not to deal with the implications of their arguments. So it is important to state what it is that they imply: it is that *the*

version of geography that Standish favours, and urges us to return to, was itself part of a politicisation of the curriculum, albeit from a different perspective – concerned with the ‘politics of school knowledge’. The result is that Standish is unable to be reflexive about the version of geographical education he is advocating. Once we recognise that geographical knowledge is a social construction, the question becomes one of how we make decisions about whose geography should be represented in schools. At this point, we can make the link with the earlier discussion of *Teaching Geography for a Better World*, since this book came from a perspective that was reacting to the positivist spatial science that had come to dominate geography teaching in schools. The contributors were pointing out that space is not a neutral backdrop against which economic, social and political life was conducted, but that geography matters. To isolate space and imbue it with ‘causal power’ was to fetishise space (see Eliot Hurst (1985) for an elaboration of this argument). And this is exactly what Standish does, as the final section of his book calls for geography educators to return to the idea of geography as a spatial science, based around concepts of location, links, place and region.

In this review essay I have placed some importance on the relationship between Fien and Gerber’s book and Standish’s contribution because they are both responses to the question, to paraphrase David Harvey’s (1974) essay: what kind of geography education for what kind of society? In a broader historical perspective, both books can be read as a response to the prolonged ‘crisis’ associated with the breakdown of the post-war consensus and the ‘brief history of neoliberalism’. *Teaching Geography for a Better World* emerged as a response to the realisation that the world as represented in school geography and the models that were used to explain that world were no longer suited to ‘a world in crisis’ (Johnston and Taylor, 1986). It responded to the ways in which market-forces were reshaping places and environments. *Global Perspectives in the Geography Curriculum* was published amidst signs that this ‘brief history’ was coming to an end, and can be read as a critique of government’s attempts to use the school curriculum to promote ‘active citizenship’. Unfortunately, Standish’s book ignores much of the important work that has taken place in geography (and related subjects) over the past decade that might be used to reinvigorate the subject in schools, and instead harks back to a ‘mythical golden age’ free of politics, conflict and power. Children growing up in an uncertain world deserve better, if we are to avoid the disappointment of school geography:

‘Education is a continuing process, replacing outmoded and obsolete concepts and ideas. It must be based on a sound base at school...The school and university I attended were perfectly respectable, yet the geographical framework which they provided has proved of little use in my continuing battle to keep up-to-date’ (Johnston, 1977:5).

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Note

¹ Standish's book is concerned with school geography, so this review responds to his critique in that subject. However, readers of this journal will, I think, recognise the relevance of my essay since school geography has at times been linked to arguments within development education. Indeed, I suspect that Standish's argument that 'leading geography educators' have embraced the anti-modern view of development and presided over the 'politicization' of the curriculum could also be made of the field of development education.