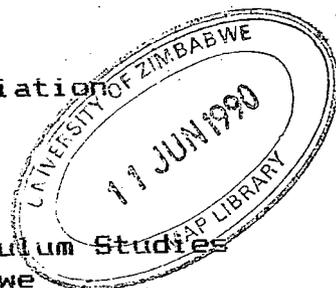


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Edited by: O. Namasasu
Department of Curriculum Studies
University of Zimbabwe
P.O. Box MP 167
MOUNT PLEASANT
Harare
Zimbabwe



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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

- D. NAMASASU is a lecturer in geography and geography education in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Zimbabwe.
- E. SHAMILUPA KALAPULA is a senior lecturer in geography and head of the Geography Department at the University of Zambia.
- T.N. TAPELA is a research fellow in urban geography attached to the Department of Geography at the University of Zimbabwe.
- C.M. NAMAFE is a lecturer in geography education in the Department of Education at the University of Zambia.
- A. SEKE heads the Geography Department at Makumbi Mission.

Authors alone are responsible for views expressed in GEM.

by

O. Namasasu
University of Zimbabwe

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point however, is to change it.

Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach.

INTRODUCTION

Non-conventional approaches to southern African geography are a recent phenomenon forming a tiny portion of contemporary research (Beavon and Rogerson 1981; Smith 1982; Crush and Rogerson 1983) and the call for a 'decolonization of the existing colonial geographies concerning southern Africa' (Crush, Reitsma and Rogerson 1982, p. 197) deserves serious consideration by the region's geographers. Southern African geographers, like many other scholars in the region, have traditionally tended to be 'mere imitators and burglars of other people's methodologies and research techniques' (Ayandele 1982, p. 172). In decolonizing southern African geography, a departure from this tradition is required for not even a mechanical transfer of radical geography as it has emerged in the West will do; a critical perspective which leaves room for independent reflection and avoiding the rigidity and theoreticism threatening radical geography as a whole is necessary; and ultimately the region's geographic lore has to be authored and acted in southern Africa.

THE ONSLAUGHT AGAINST STATUS QUO APPROACHES IN GEOGRAPHY

Given one of the world's most unequal development patterns evidently linked to the region's political economy the onslaught against status quo approaches in geography could arguably have been launched much earlier and even been started in southern Africa itself. However, to consider the currently fashionable disenchantment with orthodox perspectives in the region as an autonomous development - desirable as this may be - would be misleading. The attack began in the West.

In the seventies, Western mainstream geography, increasingly came under criticism for mythologizing the uneven development of capitalism while neglecting or at most trivializing the social conflicts generated (Bunge, 1971; Harvey, 1973; La Coste, 1976; Castells, 1977; Peet, 1977; Smith, 1979). The radical critique argued that under a banner of scientism and positivism, geography had joined the ideological arsenal of bourgeois social science by forging an unholy alliance with neoclassical economics, cybernetics and mathematical models culminating in the so-called quantitative revolution. Earlier themes such as the relationship between the environment and

human action and regionalization were hurriedly discarded. Admittedly they had been overly descriptive inventories and tedious catalogues of facts with minimal explanation. Nonetheless, in the cleansing process, the baby - the 'variable character of the earth's surface' (Hartshorne, 1959) - was zealously thrown away with the bathwater.

Spatial organization became a fetish and process was largely neglected for 'techniques often outstripped conceptual thinking and even threatened to be a weakness as method sometimes became an end in itself' (Jones, 1979, p. 215). Patterns, flows, trends and systems more amenable to statistical testing and representation in interaction models became the sole focus of inquiry. On the other hand, the study of conflict-ridden social issues and their causes became an unnecessary complication involving value judgements which did not lend themselves to scientific analysis.

As in Western countries, this deceptively apolitical geography gained ascendance in southern Africa and other Third World areas. Since spatial organization generally brushed aside questions linked to uneven distribution of wealth, power and access to resources it promised minimal social agitation and was a welcome gift to ruling classes in the region. It also had an apparent technological appeal and mesmerized those policy makers and advisers who saw underdevelopment as a technical problem which could be solved through planning and the manipulation of appropriate variables. Significantly, trend setters in the West who produced leading textbooks and effectively influenced curricula had defined human geography in terms of neoclassical economic theory. It was this type of geography with which Western and Western-trained local geographers were familiar. The perpetuation of neoclassical approaches through training abroad was (and in many respects still is) considerable for:

during training at postgraduate level typically in the U.S.A., or Australia, or western Europe, Third World students ... are carefully indoctrinated for the task. This indoctrination does not necessarily take the form of outright scholarly propaganda for 'freedom' and free enterprise: orthodox economic courses, and as part of them orthodox economic development courses, embody quite enough built-in biases to guarantee in the majority of graduates, at least, a fairly enduring internalisation of received economic science 'wisdom' (Caldwell, 1977, p. 60).

It is thus a small wonder that the concepts and models used in Western geography found (and still find) a ready market in southern Africa. Nobody, at least before the clarion for 'new' geographies was sounded in the West, dared question the utility of Loschian landscapes or Christaller's isotropic plains in mountainous Lesotho, Burgess' concentric zoning in apartheid cities, von Thunen's landuse model in bantustans, Newtonian gravity models in the context of a notorious migrant labour system, as well as a host of other mystifying concepts. Even those who made the lack of development in some areas their focus still looked to the 'wisdom' embodied in bourgeois economic theory. Southern African society, it was assumed, had

no other reality and its geography was studied as if it was void of historical and social characteristics. Disciplinary boundaries, particularly with areas not sharing a common neo-classical base, were too sacred to be crossed. Hence important findings of Arrighi (1970), Bundy (1979), Legassick (1974), Magubane (1975), and others were eschewed as insufficiently geographical. Intellectually, southern African geography remained moored to Western conventional geography. The neo-classical version of the world was writ large in many works concerning the regions such as Davies and Cook (1968), Browett and Fair (1974) and others which borrowed heavily from Rostow's 'Stages of Economic Growth' (1960) in describing the 'geography of modernisation'. However, as these approaches have been attacked by some of their leading proponents in the West (de Souza and Porter, 1974; Slater, 1973; Soja, 1979; Brookfield, 1973; Riddell, 1980) similar reassessments can be expected in southern African geography to the extent that its universities are exposed to Western currents.

The preceding section has stressed the intellectual reliance of southern African geography on its Western counterpart as contributing to its general conservatism and the time lag taken by radical approaches which themselves occupy fringe positions in the geography departments of Western universities - to surface in local geographic discourse. This point deserves further elaboration. Upcoming and lesser known academics, both in the West and elsewhere, have often concentrated on assimilating a discipline's accumulated wisdom rather than launching an attack on its premises, even when they do not agree with them. This is perhaps inevitable for a variety of reasons such as obtaining placement, recognition, promotion and security of tenure. It is, however, unfortunate as it leaves the onus for breaking new paths to established scholars who tend not to be interested in change. Further, in a hierarchical world academic order linked to an even more differentiated world economy, the much lesser known thinkers of peripheral regions tend to shirk away from taking it upon themselves to blaze new trails, even with regard to problems specific to their areas. While the attack on bourgeois geography in the West included - to extend the metaphor - lower rank academics, it received an important boost from the active support and participation of recognized scholars like David Harvey and William Bunge, as has been accurately noted by Lavrov, Preobrazhenskiy and Sdasyuk (1980).

Although the way for leftist discourse has been cleared by Harvey et al., the task facing radical geographers is not a simple one of joining the bandwagon. Imaginative work on how to address issues from a radical viewpoint still needs to be done. Vigorous and often sectarian debates exist. Not a few geographers have been bogged down in semantics and sterile exchanges. But the issues remain in need of attention, more so if we are to transform the world and not only to interpret it. It is to an examination of some of the inner controversies in radical geography that attention is now directed, not as a partisan exercise but as an attempt to point out the dangers of dogmatism and to underline the need for creative flexibility.

CONTROVERSIES IN RADICAL GEOGRAPHY

The adoption of radical approaches is not unproblematic. Following the cogent advice of E.P. Thompson (1978) and others who share his insistence on 'the dialogue between social being and social consciousness' (p. 9) the radical geographer has to be wary of 'correct-line' interpretations of marxism, and undue reverence to classic texts for, while marxist thought began with Marx, it certainly did not end with him and can only benefit from contemporary elaboration and refinement in the context of examining real problems. Thus, in this view, marxism is a mode of inquiry which is highly insightful, yet very much a product of the historical setting in which it evolved and continues to evolve. There is therefore nothing like the marxist approach (Kalokowski, 1979; Walmsey and Sorensen, 1980).

A narrow reading of Marx has brought some radical geographers in the West perilously close to rejecting inquiry into spatial aspects of society as these are not 'fundamental' contradictions. While there is an evident lack of utility and conceptual clarity in terms such as 'spatial dialectics' which Peet (1977, 1978, 1981) and others have at times used there is little justification to go to the extreme of seeing 'no such thing as geography in general' (Slater, 1977, p. 50) or ridiculing the concern - as opposed to preoccupation - with space under labels like 'spatial interactionism and radical eclecticism' (Smith, 1981).

Words such as eclecticism are vulnerable to abuse in radical criticism and can negatively impact research by discouraging daring but unorthodox positions. Charges of eclecticism can easily be used to camouflage puritan parlance intended to counter supposed heresies. But marxism is not a body of thought a *tout faire*, let alone a religion! The incorporation of the significance of spatial configurations along the other factors which the founders of marxism overlooked, would be a much welcome contribution to contemporary marxian social theory. After all the 'masters' themselves displayed considerable flexibility. Duncan and Ley (1983) capture this aspect with remarkable persuasiveness for:

... indeed to many people Marx's own attempted synthesis of British political economy, French socialism and German social philosophy would appear highly eclectic. Such is often the norm with creative thinkers. (Duncan and Ley, 1983, p. 149).

And as Amin (1980) has also aptly remarked, 'the best of Marx's successors, Lenin and Mao, did not so deprive themselves; for a rigid dogmatist, what could be more heterodox than the combinations of Leninism and Maoism to Marxism?' (p. 206). The self-declared marxist's fear of being eclectic is thus questionable and fetters needed searches for methodological sufficiency.

While non-orthodox leftist views such as those associated with Recluse and Kropotkin did feature in the early stages of Western radical geography, its development has been strongly influenced by a rigid interpretation of marxism by philosophers

such as Althusser. Instances of Althusserian-inspired reifications have been noted by a growing number of observers (Agnew and Duncan, 1981; Smith, 1984; Duncan and Ley, 1982, 1983; Gilbert, 1983; Walmsey and Serensen, 1980). Duncan and Ley, for instance, basing themselves on a sample of radical geographical literature (Walter, 1978, pp. 168-69; Harvey, 1978, p. 14; Santos, 1977, p. 5; Harvey, 1972, p. 10; Harvey, 1975 p. 54) are on firm ground when they cite this tendency to argue that:

the mode of production makes demands, capitalism devises solutions, capital throws its weight, social formations and modes of production write history, the market mechanism is the culprit, and history victimizes people. (Duncan and Ley, 1982, p. 36).

Substance, power and activity thus become the attributes of abstract concepts in dramas where human beings are a little more than spectators.

On reflection, the transition from mainstream positivism has not been particularly difficult for geographers, given their neoclassical background. After all, it has involved substituting one set of eternal and self-regulating axioms for another - a change which scientism can accommodate as a mere 'paradigm shift'. The term 'paradigm' is associated with Kuhn. While useful for broad categorization it is imprecise and can be misleading. It is more suited to the natural sciences but clearly problematic in the social sciences and humanities where not every latest challenging idea represents a new paradigm and the contemporaneous existence of strongly competing views makes more than one paradigm possible at a given time. The persistence of neoclassical conceptions of the world under radical guises is well portrayed by Smith (1984) for surprisingly 'some accounts of the skill with which capital extracts the last unit of surplus value from labour bestow on *Homo Marxicus* a degree of skill and rationality reminiscent of economic man in neoclassical theory' (p. 81). It is possible to argue that, on the contrary, the transition has not been easy for it has involved considerable reading and absorption of the writings of Marx and other early thinkers. However, this is precisely the problem. Seeking verification of approaches through textual exegesis is tantamount to turning radical research into a Marxology. It can be no solution and only leads researchers to 'indulge in theorizing out of thin air' and to 'nest in Marxological disputation, to continue the interminable variations on how much surplus value will fit on the head of a pin or the depths to which opposites interpenetrate' (Dowd, 1982, p. 14).

To the extent that its point of reference is what Marx actually meant, the dependency/marxist dichotomy is, as Foster-Carter (1979) has ably demonstrated also a futile exercise, of value only to those who 'seek to associate themselves with the right thinkers' (Gilbert, 1983, p. 595). The weaknesses of absolutizing 'development of underdevelopment' approaches inspired by Frank's (1967) work were debated and pointed out in the seventies (Warren, 1973; Emmanuel, 1976; Palma, 1978). Instead of dwelling on how to provide additional insights some geographers have chosen the less demanding task of

pontificating. Yet pontification has not always been backed by adopting radical perspectives. Browett (1981a, 1981b) for example urges geographers to avoid the cul-de-sac of 'dependency theory' while retreating to a reformed diffusionist perspective. The erection of watertight categories, whether as boundaries between subjects or marxisms, is indeed contrary to the spirit of geography as an integrating discipline. Gilbert (1983) has spelt out the problem:

What is depressing is that so many academics are acting like party politicians during an election; listening to "the other side" only to criticise it, preparing ammunition to attack at all costs. The difficulty is that a fundamental feature of academic inquiry is neglected: the interchange of ideas and information (Gilbert, 1983, p. 4).

Hence criticism becomes much less a means of furthering knowledge but degenerates into a formation of cliques characterised by more-marxist-than-thou exchanges 'in which each outbids the other in adopting ferocious verbal postures' (Thompson, 1978, p. 3). The all-too-familiar features of bourgeois scholarship such as careerism, prestige-seeking and even downright arrogance are often retained by protagonists under banners of marxism leaving many radical works 'almost indistinguishable from (avowedly) non-marxist specialisms' (Jacoby, 1984, p. 203). Indeed some writers compete among themselves more vigorously than the capitalists they claim to despise. At the same time, the truly pro-capitalist orientation of mainstream geography remains - hardly threatened by such a squabble-ridden left.

As trends in Western geography have historically found ready acceptance in southern Africa, albeit with a time lag, the emergent radical geographer in the region is well advised to learn from the pitfalls of doctrinaire, intellectualist and factionalist tendencies which plague radical geography as a whole. Preoccupation with scoring debating points in a region so much in need of change is even more meaningless than in North America or Western Europe.

Yet Dowd's (1982) comments on the American left have an even greater ring of truth when applied to patterns which have so far emerged in southern African geography for:

The marxists, mostly out of, or still connected with, universities, tend to function like a suburban swimming pool: self-contained and self-purifying. Meanwhile, oozing like a poisonous oil spill over the entire social landscape is the right. (Dowd, 1982, p. 14).

The nascent radicalism in southern African geography is our focus in the next section.

NASCENT RADICALISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN GEOGRAPHY

The appearance of radical perspectives in southern African geography during the past few years is a great improvement over

the previously unchallenged reign of neoclassical approaches. Concerns previously 'terra incognita' (Beavon, 1982) for geographers are being opened and include among others: the common folk of black townships (Maasdorp, 1981; Beavon, 1981; Lea, 1982; Oavesport, 1980) servants' quarters in white suburbs (Preston-Whyte, 1981) 'informal sectors' (Beavon and Rogerson, 1982) bantustans (Smith, 1982; Lemon, 1982) the historical geography of the region's migrant labour system (Crush, 1982; Lincoln, 1979), and contemporary rural rehabilitation outside South Africa (Zinyama, 1982; Namasasu and Crush, 1985). While some of the contributions to this literature are from Western researchers most of the literature is from southern African geographers based in the region. However, the current radicalization is so far mainly limited to a few isolated pockets in 'liberal' universities within South Africa. Herein, lies its major weakness: it is not reaching the oppressed black majority. It is largely a geographical discourse among a privileged tiny minority, and unwittingly reflects the apartheid social structure in which it is located. Although the efforts of the few South African geographers who have dared to be radical is commendable, much wider participation of southern African geographers is essential and the handicap of the current offensive should not be lost sight of. Contrary to the expectations of Beavon and Rogerson (1981), there is reason to wonder if indeed, the South African state does 'permit the conduct and appearance of critical social science studies' (p. 161). Even when not necessarily harassing radical academics, it generally keeps them under police surveillance and shows hesitation in limiting them only as long as they are what Mercer (1978) has dubbed 'philo-marxists' that is those 'who study Marx's writings intimately yet remain uncommitted to the political action necessarily contained in the message' (p. 542). A radical scholarship can still blossom under these conditions but it would be deficient in the most potent characteristic of marxism: praxis.

The point is not to discourage South African radical geographers but to indicate the need to make radical geography permeate the educational institutions of the entire region. Indeed in the final analysis, the region's geographers outside South Africa should not remain uninvolved, but take the major offensive for it is in the neighbouring states where, as Beavon and Rogerson (1981) have far-sightedly pointed out, 'the greatest prospects lie for the acceptance of new and liberating methodological perspectives' (p. 175). At present South African radical geographers seem to have greater links to counterparts in the West than in the region. This is regrettable as it may lead them to stick too closely to Western trends without developing a radical geography for southern Africa.

Turner (1982) has noted that 'the subject matter of geography should be approached via the intentions, experiences and perceptions of the people germane to it' (p. 177). Yet much geographical analysis of southern Africa is still the preserve of outsiders. As Mkandawire (1986) has accurately observed, 'one of the most humiliating experiences of African scholars is witnessing intellectual "debates" on their countries in which nationals are only marginally engaged, if at all' (p. xi).

Nonetheless, the call for a southern African oriented theorising in decolonizing the region's geography should not lead to possible misconceptions that the development of a more praxis-based radical geography in independent states neighbouring South Africa will be easy. Intellectual decolonization has not kept pace with political decolonization. Courses, syllabi and textbooks used in geography education are largely mirror images of what is offered in Western countries. Geographic training in the region is mostly up to undergraduate level. For post-graduate training (which has greater room for developing critical perspectives) southern African geographers still rely on Western universities which are themselves biased in favour of mainstream approaches. Universities in the region have also been 'concerned about international certification of their academic standards' (Ayandele, 1982, p. 167) and have become affiliated to Western universities through external examiners, staff recruitment and training programmes.

This contact with the West will undoubtedly lead to the percolation of radicalism in the universities of these states. It is very possible that this radicalisation could still remain limited to leftist rhetoric on universities, as appears to be happening in South African geography, for many of southern Africa's universities show a significant separation from the wider society, reflecting their colonial origins when:

miles of sanitizing forest physically isolated (students's) modern campuses from daily African life. Servants waited upon them at every turn doing their laundry, making their beds and cleaning their rooms. Stewards served their meals and porters kept unwanted visitors out of campuses and halls of residence. (Owomoyela, 1981, p. 85).

While their potential is much greater than that of their South African counterparts, educational institutions in non-apartheid southern Africa still need to abandon their colonial image and play a prominent role in decolonizing the mind.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A geographic lore of southern Africa covering such pertinent social issues as poverty, unemployment, housing, land reform, transport, epidemics, drought, famines and floods still has to emerge. No ready blueprints for such a lore exist. Not even a mechanical extension of radicalism as it has emerged in the West will do. Apart from the characteristically excessive theorizing noted in this discussion, it is mainly a distinctive discourse of 'advanced' capitalist societies which still needs to be complemented by existing socialist traditions of countries like China, North Korea and the Soviet Union (Lavrov, Preobrazhenskiy and Sdasyuk, 1980) as well as the experiences of southern Africa's people in their struggle for liberation and socialism.

Every society faces challenges regarding the interpretation and utilization of spatial configurations in its environment. Only those who directly experience these challenges can sufficiently address them, and consequently make and write their

geography. Southern African geographers should cease contenting themselves with being mere *tabula rasa* for trends emanating elsewhere. They have to question what for too long they have taken for granted - the relevance of their work in bringing about a more just division and utilization of space in the region.

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