

# Theory — INTO — Practice



## Place, 'Race' and Teaching Geography

**JOHN MORGAN  
AND DAVID LAMBERT**

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# Introduction

This book is about the contribution that secondary geography teachers can make to anti-racism. We take as our starting point the following statement:

'If anti-racist approaches are to be fully effective across a school it is necessary for all subject areas to acknowledge their responsibilities and take advantage of available opportunities. To do otherwise threatens to marginalize anti-racism. All subjects can make a contribution; if subject specialists decide not to reflect anti-racism in their classroom work this can send a powerful message to students: the school's wider commitment to anti-racism may be undermined where students perceive some subjects to be "neutral" or exempt from the need to challenge racism' (Gillborn, 1995, p. 132).

The book has its origins in earlier discussions of the contribution that geography teaching can make to education in a multicultural society. To cut a long story short, the 'post-imperial' curriculum was developed after the Second World War in response to the increased visibility within schools of children whose parents migrated to Britain from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan. Many teachers came to recognise that the school curriculum did not reflect the experiences and perspectives of such groups. One response to this was the development of **multicultural education**, which allowed for the study of different cultures and different 'ways of life' in the school curriculum. This approach can be seen in religious education where, instead of presenting the UK as an exclusively 'Christian' country, children are made aware that it is a country of many religious traditions. In geography education, multiculturalism involved a re-writing of the school curriculum and its texts so that they recognised the 'ways of life' of people of 'other cultures' and avoided the reproduction of crude stereotypes. The emphasis was on providing 'positive images' of people and places.

However, some people criticised multicultural education on the grounds that it presented a picture of cultural diversity without explaining why some people's culture was considered more important than others'. An alternative version was proposed in the form of **anti-racist education**. Students were to be offered an understanding of the 'true' history of colonisation and imperialism. In geography, this meant highlighting the links between present experiences of exclusion and racism and historical patterns of exploitation. The following statement is representative of the anti-racist argument because it stresses the importance of relating the patterns observed by geographers to the processes that create them:

'For example, if we were to study the global distributions of infant mortality, or malnutrition, and to examine the processes which have produced and continue to produce these, we would begin to unpack a world history of exploitation of the poor by the rich, unequal trade relationships, racism, sexual oppression, the exploitation of children; a present in which disabilities are created by poor medical care and the disabled face discrimination; where racism, class inequalities and sexual oppression are woven into the very fabric of the global economy' (Gill, 1999, p. 161-2).



During the 1980s the arguments about multicultural and anti-racist approaches to geography teaching were quite heated. According to Walford (2000), the majority of geography teachers rejected the anti-racist argument because of its political overtones. It is important to note the achievements of anti-racist educators in changing the types of reading matter available to children and in influencing the practices of textbook publishers to pay more attention to the language and images used in school geography books. However, the 'Conservative restoration' of the late 1980s and 1990s saw arguments for a 'national' curriculum which some geography educators saw as harking back to an imagined past of an imperial Britain. More recently, there have been moves to make sure that school subjects are taught in ways that reflect the multicultural diversity of our society. For instance, the national curriculum states that geography provides opportunities to promote cultural development 'through studying the way the school's local environment reflects the cultures of its inhabitants' and 'developing pupils' knowledge and understanding about the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom' (DfEE/QCA, 1999, p. 6). Even this brief history of multiculturalism and anti-racism in geography teaching shows how these terms are highly contested, meaning different things to different people at different times. This book is a product of that context, but is not meant to have the 'last word'.

Having stated our intention to explore the contribution of school geography to anti-racist teaching, we want to point out some potential problems with this. The first is that of time. Issues to do with racism are complex and potentially inflammatory, and it may not be possible to explore them fully given the limited time and resources available in what may be experienced as a strictly regulated curriculum. Second, many geography teachers do not see themselves as having the expertise to be able to deal thoroughly with an issue as complex as racism. Finally, even if these problems are overcome, there is a risk of using anti-racist approaches only if they are seen to 'fit' with the more familiar areas of the geography curriculum (such as 'development').

## **Our approach in this book: a theoretical underpinning**

We are both geography educators who, through our experience in schools and colleges, have become convinced of the need to address issues of 'racism' through geography teaching. The use of the word 'racism' in the previous sentence is deliberate, since we agree with Brown's (1981) argument that:

'white academics with an interest in race must relinquish their self-appointed role as the "translators" of black cultures, in favour of analyses of white society, i.e. of racism' (cited in Jackson, 1989, p. 190).

We do not see challenging 'racism' only as a moral duty, but as a way of understanding how society actually works and how it arrived at where it is today. This is, we think, a crucial task of geography teaching. The arguments and examples we offer in this book are based in our understanding of developments in the social sciences in general, and in geography. For us, an important development in our understanding came when we



began to put 'scare-quotes' around terms such as 'race' and 'racism' and 'black' and 'white'. What these 'scare-quotes' represent is the shift from an **essentialist** position to a **social constructionist** position. A social constructionist position posits that everything that has meaning for human beings is created, and that apparently 'natural' categories such as 'race', 'black' and 'white' are capable of changing their meanings over time and space. In recent years, much of the work done by geographers on issues of 'race' has focused on how different places have been 'invented' through interpretations based on 'racial' difference.

Adopting a social constructionist position in geography teaching suggests that we need to resist any form of teaching and learning that leaves students with the idea that patterns of segregation or inequality based on 'race' are fixed, immutable and unchanging. Instead, we should seek to develop approaches that show students how these patterns have been constructed, and suggest how they might be constructed otherwise. Audrey Kobayashi expresses this idea very well:

'Students need to be firmly theoretically grounded, to develop the concepts they need to analyze a complex social process such as racism. The more important theoretical challenge is to uncover deeply rooted essentialist notions of race, and to clarify the ways in which racialization occurs through social construction. In addition, students need facts, both as a basis for knowledge and to empower them in their antiracist actions. They need to understand the history of racism in our society, and they need to be able to fix racism in terms of the concrete circumstances of life for racialized people' (Kobayashi, 1999, pp. 176-8).

## **About this book: working towards a critical multiculturalism**

In the rest of this book we will attempt to show how we think geography teachers can develop the type of 'critical multiculturalism' described by Kobayashi. We are conscious that these are quite complex ideas, so in what follows we will work through a number of examples that will be familiar to geography teachers, taking care to explain the theory that underpins the practical ideas.



# 1: Unsettled geographies

# 1

One obvious starting point for geography teachers who are looking to teach about 'race' is that part of the subject that deals with the theme of 'migration'. In many approaches, students' understanding of the concept of migration is developed through the use of examples and case studies, and the theme allows teachers and students to conduct the types of 'enquiry learning' advocated by the national curriculum (DfEE/QCA, 1999). Questions of what and where, how and why, with what impact, and what do I think are all identified in the national curriculum as the key questions embodying an enquiry approach to the study of geography. They can all be explored in relation to the study of migration. It is important to point out that while this type of approach is capable of providing 'anti-racist' geography teaching, merely asking questions does not guarantee this.

In order to explore the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, we consider an example of how one geography textbook treats this issue, before suggesting how geography teachers might reconstruct the activities. The textbook is *People, Cities and the Countryside* (1991).

## Analysis of the text

In *People, Cities and the Countryside* the section 'Out and in' starts by defining the terms 'emigrant' and 'immigrant' before informing the reader that the section is concerned with the patterns of emigration from Jamaica and immigration into the UK. There is a map that shows the main destinations of Jamaican emigrants before and after the 1940s. The text explains that Jamaicans have been leaving the island of Jamaica in large numbers since the 1860s. There is a photograph that shows a steep-sided valley that is inhospitable for farmers, and students are asked to look at the photograph to find reasons why the 'rapidly growing' Jamaican population found it difficult to make a living from farming in this area. There is an eyewitness account of one immigrant's experience of coming to the UK. The text then goes on to describe UK government policy towards migrants and points out that: 'To be an immigrant you must ask to be accepted in another country'.



The next double-page spread is titled 'Making a new life'. It considers the experience of Jewish migrants in the UK, focusing on their choice of location upon arrival and subsequent 'dispersal'. In explaining the reasons for the existence of distinct 'Jewish areas' in UK cities, the book strikes a balance between positive reasons (e.g. traditions) and negative reasons (e.g. racism).

This approach offers a number of benefits for learners. The first is the issue of *visibility*. Many school geography textbooks avoid dealing with what some people consider 'sensitive' or 'controversial' issues. The textbook does succeed in providing students with a sense of geography as a 'relevant' subject. Second, the approach taken is *historical and geographical*. Both the examples of migration used attempt to offer students an understanding of the temporal and spatial contexts in which these population movements occurred.

## Further analysis

A further analysis shows that there are some problems with the way in which concepts of 'migration', 'place' and 'ethnicity' are used in this textbook.

The textbook relies on an important feature of migration studies, that of the assumed distinction between some people as 'migrants' and others as 'indigenous'. The implication of this distinction is that some people already 'belong' to a place and others do not – thereby making a distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Taking this argument a step further, we can think about how **places** are conceptualised in this way of teaching about migration. In this version the idea of place is bound up with settledness, enclosure, coherence and boundedness. For example, even the United Kingdom is seen as having a clear identity and unity, populated by an 'indigenous' people. This suggests a static view of places as bounded 'insides' with migrants travelling between them.

Thus, the textbook makes it clear that people 'belong' to certain places – they have origins and 'homes'. In the case of the Jamaicans, the text implies, there is always the possibility of return to the 'homeland'. Similarly, the textbook supports the idea that people belong to distinct 'cultures' that they seek to preserve and maintain. This is evident in the following statement:

'We have seen that Jews have lived in Britain for a long time, and also that many of them wish to retain their strict religious traditions and customs. Newspapers, TV, radio, our friends, MPs and lots of others often talk about such groups as "ETHNIC GROUPS".'

The impression that such an account gives is that Britain was once a coherent, whole community that has been disrupted by the arrival of migrants. As historians have been keen to point out, this is an odd story to tell about the peopling of Britain. As an example, one of the authors (David Lambert) has found that the ancestral story of his family name runs cold in the early nineteenth century, with a knife sharpener in Spitalfields, East London. Almost certainly, the Lambert's were Belgian Huguenots, and the silence preceding the earliest recorded evidence perhaps tells its own story.



## Questions of perspective

We want to pause here to reflect upon how our analysis so far chimes with the idea we outlined in the introduction about the shift from **essentialist** to **social constructionist** approaches. The approach illustrated in the textbook has some commendable features. Students introduced to these examples by a sensitive geography teacher would learn a lot about the historical and geographical context of migration to the UK. They would be alerted to the 'facts' about immigration and be introduced to debates about levels of immigration. They would learn about, and be encouraged to respect, the cultural practices of immigrant groups.

However, from our perspective, there is a danger that students would come away from their geography lessons on migration with essentialist understandings of 'place' and 'culture'. The problem with such an approach is that it tends to rely on a language that covers up or conceals the detail with generalities – for example, with notions of 'hosts' and 'migrants', 'majorities' and 'minorities', 'guests' and 'illegals'. In all cases, newcomers are seen as the source of a problem demanding a solution. A major limitation with constructing our understanding of migration in this way is that it tends to draw distinctions between 'us' (who are already here) and 'them' (who want to come to 'our' country). The challenge, for us, is to find ways of teaching about migration that allow students to go beyond such essentialist understandings. It is to ways that this might be done that we now turn.

## Can we teach an 'open sense of place'?

'I am Indian. To be more accurate, I was raised in England, but my parents came from India ... Indian. What does that mean? At this time, the government of India is testing nuclear weapons. Am I less Indian if I don't defend their actions? Less Indian for being born and raised in Britain? For not speaking Hindi? Am I not English because of my cultural heritage? Or the colour of my skin? Who decides? History tells me my heritage came from the subcontinent – a third world country, a developing nation, a colonised land. So what is history? For me, just another arrogant Eurocentric term. I learned only about Russian, European and American history in my school syllabus. India, Pakistan, Africa – these places were full of people who didn't matter – the enslaved, the inferior' (Nitin Sawhney, *Beyond Skin*).

We are indebted to Emma Wellsted for this example, which comes from the cover of Nitin Sawhney's CD *Beyond Skin*. Emma used this in teaching a unit on the impacts of migration to a group of predominantly white, suburban geography students in a comprehensive school in Essex. She posed the question, 'Why does the writer feel confused?' The students came up with the response that the writer does not know whether to think of himself as British or Indian. Nitin Sawhney's words and music seem to us to be an example of what it means to 'inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them' (Hall, 1992, p. 310). This is typical of the situation in which many of the students who sit in geography lessons find themselves. Nitin Sawhney's answer to the question of where is 'home', and where does he 'belong', is complex. A useful concept in understanding this issue is that of **diaspora**.



Traditionally, 'diaspora' referred to the scattering of peoples of a particular faith or background. However, the term was revived and expanded in debates about 'race' in the 1990s. Diaspora is the term used to capture the conditions and experiences of those individuals (such as Nitin Sawhney) and communities who share multiple belongings to different places or 'homes' in different national spaces. This type of thinking has influenced how geographers think about places. For example, Doreen Massey has argued for an alternative understanding of place 'as a meeting-place, the location of intersections of particular bundles of activity space, of connections and inter-relations, of influences and movements' (1994, p. 154). In this version, places are seen as 'open, porous and the products of other places'. Massey offers the example of a place she knows well – Kilburn in north-west London:

'Take a walk down Kilburn High Road, my local shopping centre. It is a pretty ordinary place, north west of the centre of London. Under the railway bridge the newspaper stand sells papers from every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come from there, still often call the Irish Free State ... Thread your way through the often stationary traffic ... and there's a shop which as long as I can remember has displayed saris in the window ... On the door a notice announces a forthcoming concert at Wembley Arena: Anand Miland presents Rekha, live, with Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Jahi Chawla and Raveena Tandon ... This is just the beginnings of a sketch from immediate impressions but a proper analysis could be done of the links between Kilburn and the world ... It is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history' (Massey, 1994, pp. 152-4).

The concept of diaspora and the 'open sense of place' described by Massey has important implications for thinking about migration. It does this by shifting the focus away from 'source areas' and 'destinations' to the shared locations created by such movements. It forces us to think about and understand the *interconnections* between people rather than the distinctions between them.

## Theoretical reflections

We want to make explicit the position we have outlined in this chapter. If we adopt the language of 'immigration' and 'migration', it is easy to get trapped in the discourse of 'population scares'. This is based on the Malthusian idea (that has certainly not lost its popularity) that the world can only hold a limited number of people, that these people 'belong' somewhere, and that hordes of people are coming 'here', to live in the 'developed' world (and threaten to take what is 'ours'). It is this language that ensures that any movement to the UK, by 'asylum seekers' or 'Kosovans', gets framed in terms of how many 'we' can afford to take and whether 'they' shouldn't stay where they 'belong'.

We have suggested that an alternative approach may be more useful in helping students to understand the **interconnected world** in which they live; one that relies on the concept of diaspora and the more open view of 'place' that this concept allows. This allows for a wider set of ideas than those suggested by the popular discourse on migration; for example, the idea that population movement allows for 'cultural enrichment' (as well as material). The point we want to stress here is that it is the



theoretical choices made by the geography teacher at the level of *planning* that sets the framework in which this topic is taught. We want to make it clear that we are not arguing that one approach is 'right' and the other 'wrong'. But we are arguing that the wider, more open perspectives on population and space described here may generate the type of creative thinking that such complex matters require.

This is an important point because it is not obvious from the national curriculum geography introduced in 2000 that **teacher creativity** in planning is at all necessary. We argue that it is vital. While geography provides opportunities to promote cultural development 'through studying the way the school's local environment reflects the cultures of its inhabitants' and 'developing pupils' knowledge and understanding about the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom' (DfEE/QCA, 1999, p. 6), the *content* of the curriculum does not appear to have changed significantly. As we argue in the next chapter, a survey of national curriculum geography gives few clues as to how geography teachers can develop 'anti-racist' approaches to other aspects of the subject. Student engagement with these issues is clearly dependent upon teachers' creativity in identifying relevant material, seeking out **hidden geographies** and incorporating them into their schemes of work. We hope this book can go some way towards helping geography teachers do this.