A Different View Thinking geographically: Skateboarding and Fashion and a bit more besides!

Geography opens our eyes to the world around us. In the rush of modern life, the subject forces us to stop and consider other people’s circumstances in the context of global changes. Currently 1 billion of the world’s population are undernourished and 1.5 billion are without access to safe water. This year alone (2010) 9 million tons of toxic chemical have been released into the atmosphere, over 100,000 animals have become extinct and 10 million hectares of forest have been lost. Add to these the constant net increase in the global population (Worldometers, 2009) and we can see the pressures the world is under.

Geography allows us to explore a vast range of issues and behaviours such as poverty, climate change or the global impact of the fashion industry and consider the simple, yet also complex question, ‘Why?’ – Why are there still hungry people in the world? Why is a child in a developing country over 13 times more likely to die before the age of 5 than a child in a developed country? (United Nations, 2008); Why are glaciers melting? and Why has overseas aid to economically developing countries declined for the second year since 2007? Geography uses the concepts of space, scale, distance and relational thinking as a basis to address all issues and theories. Geographical languages allow us to analyse and investigate complex global issues that may be neglected without both the concepts and the language that are ‘geography’.

In seeking to consider some of the questions above geography can be seen somewhat like philosophy: a defiant force, essential in opening up debate and questioning modern life. The very breadth of the discipline means that it is possible, post-school, to study and range of seemingly obscure fields such as the commercialisation of sport or the geographical distribution of clothing production. As my passion lies in human geography this essay will focus specifically the fashion industry and also skateboarding. I hope to illustrate both the breadth of the subject and also the ways in which geography can help us to understand the everyday.
One of the distinct advantages that geography has over other disciplines is how it enables us to understand scale. Learning about processes at different scales allows us to understand how everything is interlinked. An almost invisible example of this is the impact of our use of sunscreen on the physical world. On an individual scale we use it to protect ourselves from the harmful effects of the sun; however, sunscreen in the sea leads to the production of a deadly virus in coral reefs, and with 6,000 tons of it washing off into the sea every year this adds to the obliteration of coral reefs worldwide (Goleman, 2009).

The fashion industry – a different perspective

A good example of this the fashion industry and what geography research refers to as disposable fashion. This can be examined in terms of its local effects on Bangladeshi sweat shop workers or on a global scale at the impacts of pollution due to the increased transportation of consumer goods around the world. On a local scale a recent study of Bangladeshi sweat shops that provide goods for Primark, Asda and Tesco, workers reported physical, sexual and emotional harassment at the hands of their employers (War on Want, 2008). However, geography also allows us to consider the effect that the fashion industry is having on the world as a whole. Environmentalists claim that consumerism is one of the three main contributors to climate change, together with technology and population (Robbins, 1999). William Rees has calculated that to maintain current levels of consumption the average person in an economically developed country requires 4-6 hectares of land. Yet, he claims, there is an enormous deficit in productive lands and so western developed countries manage to maintain their high consumption lifestyle by exploiting developing countries, often draining their resources and producing toxic pollutants and waste. As consumerism underpins the basis of capitalist societies, any attempt to restrict it could lead to economic crisis and unemployment (Robbins, 1999). It seems that Western governments and their associated media do not focus on consumption of goods such as those produced by the fashion industry as being a major influencing factor in climate change.
Geography allows us to see the effect that technology has had on both place and distance. Technology has aided the prevalence of globalisation and has led to the shrinking of distance, with all aspects of production often spread over huge geographical distances. Fashion designers, sweatshop workers and customers are now all bound together over distant geographies by the transportation of goods (Crewe, 2008). In addition technology has significantly influenced the organisation of social, economic, political and cultural activities. The International Division of Labour is increasingly becoming the norm in today’s seemingly borderless world with companies using cheap foreign workers to gain competitive advantage over their rivals. This exploitation has led to huge geographical disparities in wages, rights and working conditions (Crewe, 2008).

Geography at a local scale:

Geography also helps us see the different ways in which space is humanised and given meaning. This can be seen perfectly in relation to skateboarding. Skateboarders show how space in cities is not just a place for working and shopping but also a place to have fun and be expressive. Borden, (2001) argues that skateboarding can be seen as a rebellion against the very fundamental nature of society and capitalism itself. Skateboarders claim that their fluid, effortless use of space and appearance of freedom changes our view of the body and ownership of certain city spaces. Skateboarding questions the customary use of space and place; as handrails, steps and benches all become the sites of social demonstration. Geographical analysis of this behaviour shows the effect of politics and societal conventions on everyday life and how any spaces within the city are able to be used as sites of rebellion (Borden, 2001). In addition, skateboarders have a playful sense of space, they see the city as a playground and a place for enjoyment and expression instead of work and conformity. Skateboarders define the space they are in rather than being defined by it: space flows outwards from their body and mind rather than being imposed by architecture (Borden, 2001).

Geographical understanding: being connected
A geography degree allows you to have a brilliant understanding of the world and how it functions as a whole. Geography is all about connections: without connections the subject would be a list of meaningless facts. Instead, as geographers, we are concerned with the connections between places, people and the environment and how these are constantly being restructured in ever changing societies: how the space and the world we are in dictates what we do and also how our actions affect the world. We are always connected and dependent upon our surroundings (Brunn and Leinbach, 1991). Geography as a subject allows us to see the interconnectedness of the world and the relations between places and societies. This understanding of how the world is linked and how consequences of our actions affect others is part of being a responsible citizen. For example we are often advised to investigate the ethical status of products before we buy them as our choices in what we buy have serious implications to others worldwide. Because of pressure put on suppliers by multinational companies to meet unrealistic targets sweatshop workers in Bangladesh are forced to complete overtime of 50 hours a week, on top of 12 hour days, for as little as 7p an hour. However, while it seems that it is the multinational companies applying the pressure it can be argued that this is in turn driven by the social zeitgeist of contemporary society which leads to the public’s constant drive to obtain the newest trends at the cheapest prices. Every commodity has a hidden price tag including the environmental consequences because of the materials, production costs, transport and the human labour that has gone into producing it.

Conclusions

And so Geography can challenge our thinking and push us out of our comfort zone. Geography investigates people’s different views and perspectives on the world questioning the power-bases that make important social-cultural and political decision. Geography is a vital, vibrant subject that helps us to understand how our day-to-day lives are inherently connected to those of others. Geography is relevant to everything around us and is a subject that covers the past, present and future. It stems from the dawn of creation, deals with the issues of today’s modern society and looks
beyond this to the likely impact of current trends on the human and physical environment of the future. A geography degree allows you to think ‘geographically’ about the world around you and consider the geography behind aspects of life which otherwise may go unquestioned.

References


