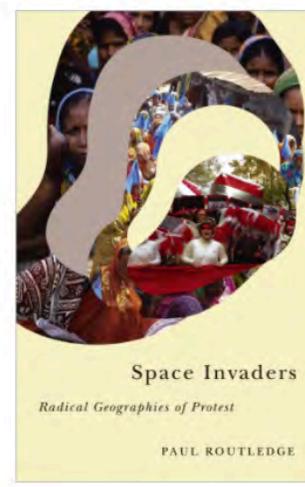
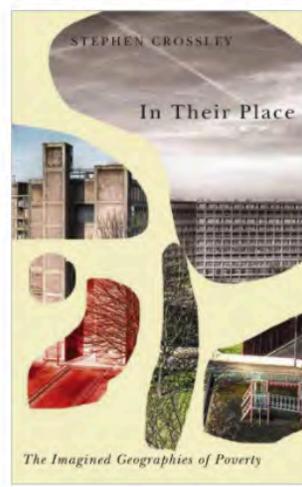


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What is Radical about Geography?

by Danny Dorling



From the history of the Cold War, to the peril of the 2008 financial crash, what can a radical perspective on geography teach us about the world? Danny Dorling, one of the editors of the *Radical Geography* series, recognises the need for a reclamation of geography, from its imperialist past, showing how geographical knowledge and thinking could play a key role in radical social and political activism.

Last year marked the hundredth anniversary of the Russian revolution. Half a century before 1917, radical thinkers had believed that a communist revolution was not possible in a place as ‘backwards’ as Russia. Radicals ignore geography or make presumptions about it at their peril; there is much more to society, categorization and experience than class or intersectionality.

Geography, in its modern-day form, grew out of German, French and British imperialism. It was about justifying exploitation as the supposed natural order and explaining away the hierarchy of races and places. All that bigotry and racism was presented simply as knowledge, knowledge that you had to learn to recite at school. Yet even back then, at the heart and height of the British Empire, there was an awareness of the power that geographical knowledge could unleash.

In 1879 in testimony to a Select Committee of the British Parliament one petitioner was in no doubt about the threat: '*Geography, sir, is ruinous in its effects on the lower classes. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are comparatively safe, but geography invariably leads to revolution.*'¹ That petitioner may have been overestimating the potential rebellions that would ensue when school children began to be taught what was where and where was what. However, we must not underestimate the power that comes from understanding the present and the future and how everything is connected to everything else, by its very nature geographical knowledge and understanding can be used to oppose the forces that want to maintain the status quo and pacify resistance.

From when Ptolemy constructed his gazetteer of place names and locations, but never drew the maps, right through to when the cartographers of Venice and Lisbon charged a fortune to illicitly sell the greatest secrets of the age, geography has been about power, knowledge and conquest. The Americas were possibly named after an explorer funded by exploiters, the man who first determined they were not part of Asia. Chinese geographers did not venture far-a-field because they

¹ Ron Cooke: 'We must assert the importance of geography in the curriculum' From the president's address at the Royal Geographical Society's annual meeting, *The Independent Newspaper*, 10th June 2002, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/sir-ron-cooke-we-must-assert-the-importance-of-geography-in-the-curriculum-179715.html>

had worked out there was little worth travelling to. India began to be triangulated in 1802; simultaneously it was de-industrialized. Africa was first cut up on parchment (both before and after Cecil Rhodes died in 1902). There was always a geographer there; but geography changes. As hurricanes increase in intensity and frequency and climate warming further accelerates; as people's votes depend more and more on where they live and who pays the target-marketers to geo-market their social media feeds; inequalities between neighbourhoods and countries rises and falls more rapidly today; and again, we are reliant on our geographical knowledge to know, to talk and listen about what appears to matter most.

The most famous example of geographical determinism was Halford Mackinder's pivot theory, put most succinctly in 1919 as:

*‘Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island;
who rules the World-Island commands the world.’*

Belief in there being a logic behind the theory eventually resulted in the Cold War. Policy makers in the USA came to believe that simply through the Soviet Union's control of Eastern European countries that that entity had an unusual, unnatural geopolitical advantage and that without proper caution (encirclement by nuclear armaments and a long and bloody series of proxy wars) it would take over the entire planet. Growing up in the shadow of the bomb, precipitated by this geographical determinism, was also part of what galvanized radical thinking and action. If mutually assured destruction was mad then surely there had to be a better way to think about, see and heal the world?

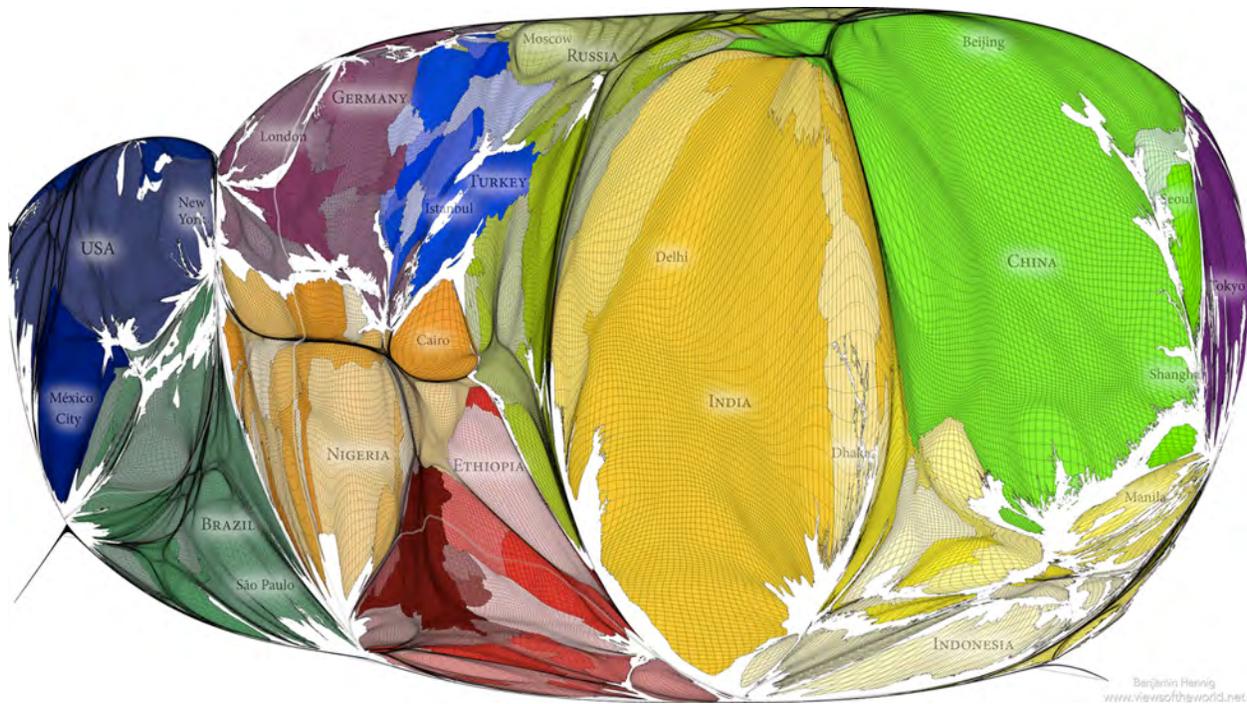
The 1970s saw the beginnings of a realisation that the natural environment was in great peril even if nuclear war was at that time averted. The great economic recession of the 1980s and first large rise in economic inequality for decades around the world showed that contemporary capitalism really wasn't working. In the 1990s and 2000s victories on sexual liberation and the gaining of many other rights showed that radical politics could be very quickly very successful. Then came the great economic crash of 2008, and all the reaction to that and a decade of austerity in much of the rich world. This is the context in which we are working.

The *Radical Geography* series uses geographical perspectives to understand issues of current social and political concern. In just a couple of the first books to be published Stephen Crossley explores how understanding of space is manipulated to degrade disadvantaged people, while Paul Routledge explains the geographical logic to protest. These books continue a tradition that stretches back at least to the 1960s of actively seeing geographical knowledge and thinking as potentially of great use in viewing the world differently, of departing from the traditional understanding and of helping to affect and effect fundamental change. The series is biased towards the rich world where most of its authors and readers will be based, especially to the UK and USA; but that also partly reflects the contemporary geography of academic geographers.

The books critique existing government policies and alternatives to staid ways of thinking about our societies. They feature stories of radical social and political activism, will in future include guides to achieving change, and arguments about why we need to think differently on many contemporary issues if we are to live better together on this planet. When climate change and social inequality are the two key issues of global policy it is not hard to explain why radical geography now matters.

A geographical perspective involves seeing the connections within and between places, as well as considering the role of space and scale to develop a new and better understanding of current problems. By deliberately targeting issues of political, environmental and social concern, we can showcase clear explications of geographical approaches to social problems, and undertake positive change that is radical, achievable, real and relevant.

We are always interested in seeing things in a new light, in not being told the same old stories but instead having our eyes opened up to different ways in which old or unclear information can be viewed. From radical action and cartography through to radical bio-geography and zoology there are hundreds of ways in which geographers around the world are becoming more active and more engaged in the idea of fostering change for good and change for all. Below is a new world map, one drawn by Ben Hennig, a geographer based now in Iceland.



In the map everyone in the world is given equal space and the oceans are greatly reduced in size to reflect how they don't have as much impact on our lives as their vast sizes would imply. India is to be found at the heart of this world. It is where the centre of humanity now lies. Around it are places the peoples of the world. And sometime very soon now a majority of them will be women not men. For the first time every a majority of the planet's human inhabitants are now (or very soon will be) female. A radical geography will also not be a geography that is still so dominated by men. There is some distance still to be travelled.

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, Oxford. He writes for the *Guardian*, *New Statesman* and other papers. He advises government and the office for national statistics. He is the author of *Inequality and the 1%* (Verso, 2015) and *All That Is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster* (Allen Lane, 2014), among others. He is the series editor of *Pluto's Radical Geography* series.