

1-1-2008

Critical Geographies: Preface

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Recommended Citation

Bauder, Harald and Salvatore Engel-di Mauro (2008) Preface: Free Critical Geographies. In Harald Bauder and Salvatore Engel-di Mauro (eds.), *Critical Geographies: A Collection of Readings*. Kelowna: Praxis (e)Press, p. ix-xvi.

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Preface

“Free Critical Geographies”¹

Compiling key works of critical geographies is an impossible task. We began this task by conducting a survey among the editorial board members of the journal [*ACME: An E-Journal of Critical Geographies*](#), asking their opinion for the three most important texts of critical geographies. We anticipated a few key works to emerge from this survey, which we would then include in this collection. However, the survey revealed that no consensus existed among *ACME* board members and other colleagues we consulted on what the key texts in the field are. In fact, not a single text was even mentioned twice by the survey participants.

Furthermore, the idea of compiling “key” texts of critical geographies is highly problematic. Initially, we intended to call this collection “A Reader in Critical Geographies.” A colleague, who heard about our intention, remarked that a “reader” suggests “authorization and authority” and cynically added: “Not exactly the natural positions of ‘critical geography’...”. We began to realize the impossibility of our project. Yet, we decided to continue with it because critical scholarship to us means precisely to engage with the contradictions of our discipline at the practical level.

Our above-mentioned colleague suggested the title of “Free Critical Geographies,” which would have suited a non-authoritative book and our aims to deliver critical geographies for “free” in an open-access format to audiences around the globe. This title, however, would have been dishonest to our audience because the authority of the editors could not be avoided and, in the end, did shape the contents. The current title *Critical Geographies: A Collection of Readings* does not deny this editorial authority and, at the practical level, still appeals (we hope) to the audiences we seek to reach.

Most importantly, the title reflects the processes by which we selected the chapters. This selection processes was guided by several factors. First, we included texts that were mentioned in the survey. Second, we attempted to maintain a balance and range of geographical themes and topics. Third, we depended on the copyright

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owners for the rights to republish the texts. If we did not obtain these rights, we searched for alternative texts to be included. In the end, we obtained a “collection of readings” based on the input by fellow geographers, restrictions imposed by institutional gatekeepers as well as our editorial authority.

Although *Critical Geographies* may represent a compromise in the manner in which its contents were selected, it does translate important principles of critical geographies into practice. The primary purpose of this book is to implement these principles:

First, the book makes critical geographies accessible to new audiences. It is not only a book for the “converted” but also for students who are interested and less familiar with critical work in Geography. The “model” reader we had in mind when editing the texts is a typical student at one of our own universities who asks important questions about the geographic discipline, space and society, people and environment, and representations of Earth, but who has little prior exposure to critical geographies. This book is thus intended as a modest contribution to an infrastructure that enables teaching critical geographies in the classroom and beyond. We fully realize the lack of accessibility of this book for people whose language is not English. It is beyond our abilities and means, however, to include critical geographical work unavailable in English or to provide translations into other languages. It is therefore our hope that this initiative will be replicated by others for speakers of other languages and for other cultural contexts where such an initiative makes sense.

Second, as teachers at institutions of higher education, we believe that education should be democratic and free. However, due to the lack of free textbooks, we have found ourselves often in the situation of assigning textbooks in our classes that were too expensive for many students. Moreover, the ever accelerating publication of new editions has undermined the used-book market and literally sucks money out of students’ pockets. Once a book is available as a new edition, charities ask us to donate the old books to be shipped to poorer countries, where students are apparently expected to learn using the texts no longer used in the wealthier countries. To address this problem, *Critical Geographies* is freely available from anywhere in the world. Although we realize that speedy internet access – a prerequisite for downloading the chapters contained in this book – is still exclusionary along the global digital divide, we believe that open-access is a model of textbook distribution that corresponds with the roles and responsibilities of higher education.

Third, as educators we have been uneasy with the idea that the education we deliver in the classroom is used by corporate publishers to accumulate capital (Bauder and Engel-Di Mauro, forthcoming). It would be cynical, in our eyes, for example, to compile a textbook on *critical* geographies and then collect royalties from a corporate publisher to print the book and sell it at a high price to privileged university students who can afford it, while it remains inaccessible to potential readers who do not possess the means to buy the book. *Critical Geographies* cuts out the corporation that stands between the authors who wrote the chapters reprinted in this book and their audiences.

Fourth, *Critical Geographies* intends not only to educate students but also to challenge instructors and researchers to modify their teaching practices and knowledge production. Similar to teachers who must recognize the political economy of textbook publishing, researchers must be aware of the consequences of where they publish their work. We could not include many excellent papers in this book because publishers demanded (sometimes outrageously) high copyright fees. After briefly considering paying the fees for some copyrighted material, we decided to make a point of republishing only work for which publishers and copyright owners permitted republication without charging us anything. Our intention was to stimulate authors' awareness of how the copyright to their texts and research will be administered, who will be excluded from access to their work and who will profit from it. Our experience in compiling the copyrights to this book is that a few publishing houses are becoming the gatekeepers of geographical knowledge and they have little interest in sharing this knowledge in a democratic manner (see also Blomley, 2006). At the same time, we appreciate and acknowledge those publishers and copyright owners who support the free and open-access circulation of geographical knowledge and let us republish the work they own in this collection.

We recognize that this book only makes a very small contribution towards realizing these ambitious principles. If you continue reading some or all of the following chapters, our intentions will have been more than realized.

Harald Bauder, Stuttgart
Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, New Paltz

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How to Use This Book

Critical Geographies caters to several audiences. First, we envision the primary audience to be upper-level undergraduate students at English-speaking colleges and universities. Second, the collection may provide interesting discussion material for graduate students. Third, we hope to attract readers outside of the university classroom, who are interested in critical geographies.

We designed this book to appeal to these three audiences. Accordingly, the individual chapters reflect varying levels of difficulty. We do not anticipate that many people will devour the collection chapter-by-chapter, from cover to cover (more realistically, we will also be glad if students will read any of it). Rather, most students and instructors will likely read and assign individual chapters according to their needs and interests.

The chapters in this collection represent an edited version of original texts. We organized these chapters based on broad themes (critical reflections, space and society, people and environment, and representing Earth). Although we briefly introduce these themes, we do not claim any authority in categorizing and subdividing the discipline. In fact, readers may find it more useful to read across the themes and follow their own path through the collection. To instructors, in particular, we propose to select individual chapters and help their students to situate these in the context of the given course and the geographic discipline through discussion and/or by providing additional information. The url (*uniform resource locator*, or simply: internet address) of the book and the chapters can be posted directly into the course syllabus and permit instructors to redesign the sequence of individual chapters. In addition, posting the url in the syllabus or course homepage makes the material easily and directly accessible to students.

We edited these texts with several objectives in mind. First, copyediting ensured that the individual chapters conform to a common style of citation, referencing and other editorial details. We intended to make the collection more reader-friendly while maintaining the idiosyncrasies of language use by each author. Second, by explaining some terms and ideas, we attempted to make the texts accessible to an audience unfamiliar with the worst jargon used by critical geographers. In cases when individual terms or concepts are still incomprehensible, we encourage readers to consult a dictionary or [Wikipedia](#). Third, in some cases we cut text that was not immediately relevant to convey the central argument and/or which obstructed the flow of the text. All alterations from the original are marked in [square or box brackets], omissions are marked [...]. In a few instances we converted square brackets in the original text into {curly brackets or braces}.

Finally, please remember that this book is free and may not be sold!

Acknowledgements

We thank the [ACME](#) Collective who encouraged us to produce this edited collection. In producing the book, we depended on Marie Puddister who typeset the entire collection, designed the front and back covers and helped us with practical matters. Carelynn Loopstra at the University of Guelph and Christine O'Loughlin at SUNY New Paltz have been wonderful student assistants. All remaining editorial errors in the texts are ours. Lawrence Berg performed the final steps and uploaded the book to the *Praxis (e)Press* server. In copyright matters, we received consultation by Chabriol Calebach, the copyright officer of the University of Guelph. Our colleague, Pamela Moss, provided additional information on copyright acquisition. We are also grateful to Heather Martin of the University of Guelph library. In selecting the collection's individual chapters, we thank the many geographers who participated in our survey. Finally, we thank the Department of Geography at the University of Guelph, the Department of Geography at SUNY New Paltz, Dean Gerald Benjamin of the College of Letters and Science at SUNY New Paltz, Wolf Gaebe at the Institute of Geography at the University of Stuttgart and the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation.

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