

Alison Blunt and Jane Wills (2000) *Dissident Geographies: An introduction to radical ideas and practice* (Pearson Education, Harlow)

Reviewed by Mick Charlton

Dissident Geographies is an ambitious project. In the space of 212 pages Alison Blunt and Jane Wills introduce no less than five radical traditions: mapping the significance that anarchism, Marxism, feminism, the politics of sexuality and post-colonialism have had within and beyond academia. The book lives up to the necessary challenge of being concise whilst not shirking from complex issues. Given the wide remit of the book, it is of course possible to quibble about some of the finer detail and point to areas of neglect. However, an over zealous critique of this nature would detract from the book's many strengths.

The achievement of the book is that it provides a clear and concise text that students will find approachable and an excellent introduction to dissident ideas, their geographies and how these have been dealt with by geographers. At a time of a resurgence of radical action against the structures of economic and cultural power - highlighted by the protests at Seattle and Prague - the book is particularly timely. Alison Blunt and Jane Wills pull together ideas and practice from the past that can help the present generation of geographers to place current political developments within the perspective of earlier dissident traditions.

The style, form and design of the book make it a useful teaching resource. The ease to engage with the ideas in the book is enhanced by its many illustrative photographs, cartoons, boxes and tables. The book manages to have the clear presentation of a text-book whilst maintaining a free flowing style. Indeed so fluid is the writing that I found myself reading the book from front cover to back, something rarely attributed to academic texts.

The book is divided into the following five chapters: 1. The Fire of Liberty: Anarchism and Geography, 2 Class, Capital and Space: Marxist Geographies, 3 Embodying Geography: Feminist Geographies of Gender, 4 Sexual Orientations: Geographies of Desire, 5 Decolonising Geography: Postcolonial Perspectives. Each chapter is divided loosely into three parts: an introduction to the philosophy and main thinkers of the chapter's subject, a section where the tradition is mapped and finally an exploration of the influence of the ideas within the discipline of geography.

Probably the most original contribution of the book is the material that examines the influence of *Dissident Geographies* within academia. For example the chapter on anarchism illustrates that a radical tradition can be traced back to geography's nineteenth century origins. This in itself is a revelation - there is a tendency to identify all geography and geographers of the period with imperialist projects - yet the authors tell of a different tradition where some geographers shared revolutionary visions. Whilst other encyclopaedia and atlas adventures were, by and large, concerned with mapping the earth's resources for the benefit of European colonial powers, the anarchist Elisee Reclus undertook the 19 volume *La Nouvelle Geographie Universelle* to show how the world's resources could be distributed to improve social wellbeing. 'Reclus sought to use geography as a means to improve understanding,

and empathy, across borders- eroding the power of the imperialist state by fostering universal humanitarian spirit between the peoples of each nation and territory' (p5).

We also see that Kropotkin, like Reclus, argued that 'the subject of geography is ideally suited to teaching young people to have respect for the natural world and empathy with the peoples of other cultures in other parts of the world. In his eyes, geography could be a political weapon, undermining the ideology of imperialist domination prevalent in his day' (p37). We are then reminded of the reawakening of radical geography in the 1960s, as young geographers became radicalised by student protests that swept campuses and flowed onto the streets of many Western Europe and North America cities. This makes us think of how times change and radicalism from beyond the ivory towers can have exciting and welcome traumatic influences on the practices of 'contented' geographers.

The anarchist tradition tends to get a very sympathetic hearing by Alison Blunt and Jane Wills. Whilst the material that shows the influence of anarchism within the origins of geography in the nineteenth century and within radical geography from the 1960s onwards is welcome, some of the introduction to anarchist thinkers is perhaps romanticised in places. For example the joint authors write: 'In addition, Bakunin, in common with other anarchists, sought influence amongst a wide range of social groups beyond the working class, involving peasants, racial minorities and the unemployed...all were welcome to the ranks of the anarchist tradition...' (p16). However, this obscures a darker side to Bakunin that should not be ignored. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that far from welcoming all racial minorities that Bakunin played his part in creating the myth of a Jewish conspiracy of capitalists being in league with the supporters of Marx. Further evidence of Bakunin's racism is his 1869 claim that 'the Jews are devoid of all moral sense and all personal dignity' (Wheen 1999:340). Equally sinister was the fact that Bakunin's tirades against Jewish people were based not on Jewish capital or Jewish men of influence but on 'blood Jews', regardless of their religious belief, political and social or ideological leanings Jews were categorised in racial terms and as evil.

My unease towards Bakunin should not distract us from the overall contribution of *Dissident Geographies*. There are many other dissidents that are introduced that provide great examples of the courageous, free thinkers that struggle so frequently produces. Women like Sojourner Truth (1795-1883) who was born as a slave and spoke about her position in society as a black woman. Truth was able to bridge different struggles through linking together the struggle of all black people with the struggle of all women. Her influence at the First National Woman's Rights Convention (1850) helped secure the resolution describing the million and a half women still enslaved in the USA as 'the most grossly wronged and foully outraged of all women...we will bear in our hearts of hearts the memory of the trampled womanhood of the plantation, and omit no effort to raise it to a share of the rights we claim for ourselves' (Cited on p96).

The chapter titled Sexual Orientations: Geographies of Desire makes a challenge on 'squeamish' geographers. The introduction to the ideas explores the dominant position of heterosexuality and the way this dominance is taken for granted and assumed to be natural throughout society and within geography. The geographies of gays are then explored with particular reference to the US experience and the

development of a gay culture around Harlem in the 1920s. This shows again the links and shared geographies of different struggles against oppression. Again, as with many of the other chapters, I found the most intriguing sections to be the ones that dealt with geographers attempts to engage with and understand social movements.

The best feature of this engaging text is its ability to create interest and a desire to find out more about *Dissident Geographies*. The book should be on all module reading-lists that deal with the philosophical and historical development of the discipline.

Reference

Wheen, F (1999) *Karl Marx* (Fourth Estate, London)