Let me begin somewhat obliquely. The 1980s and 90s were decades of truly momentous change for Western higher education in general and British universities and colleges in particular. As Slaughter and Leslie (1997) show in their comparative analysis of four English-speaking countries, the tertiary sector has had to cope with pressures to sharply increase both student numbers and research output at a time of equally sharp reductions in levels of public finance. Not surprisingly, these changes in the political economy of higher education have gone hand in hand with changes in institutional culture. As Readings (1996) argues in his polemic The University in Ruins, over the last twenty years older notions of the university’s raison d’être have been almost totally eclipsed by a new academic and administrative culture dedicated to the competitive pursuit of “excellence” in teaching and research.

In Britain, where student numbers and research output have increased with breathtaking speed, these political economic and cultural shifts have issued in a series of acute contradictions and ironies. One concerns pedagogy. As part of the British government’s desire to measure and assess anything that moves in higher education, a regular national teaching quality assessment system has been put in place, along with a new Institute of Teaching and Learning designed to train and accredit new faculty across all disciplines. Both form part of New Labour’s commitment to providing “world-class” education for today’s students and for the 500,000 more Prime Minister Blair wishes to see enter higher education by 2003 as part of a wider British “learning society.” At first sight this all seems well and good. Who, after all, would want to question increasing access to higher education or the raising of teaching standards? But the reality is that a set of powerful forces are undermining British universities’ ability to deliver on access and standards, forces emanating from the same government demanding their delivery in the first place. One is the decline in resources per student coming from central government. A
second, stemming from the first, is the worsening of staff-student ratios. And a third—the most ironic—is that because the money university departments receive from government is heavily tied to their national Research Assessment Exercise ranking, research is, de facto, routinely prioritised over teaching, which seems to be becoming something of an afterthought in many institutions.

What has all this got to do with Porter and Sheppard’s *A World of Difference*? A great deal, I think, because for me reading this introductory tome raises a series of wider questions about the educational role of textbooks in contemporary English-speaking geography. *A World of Difference* is published by Guilford in New York. This is far from incidental, because the book is part of a genre much more central to education in North America than to education in the UK or the Antipodes: namely, the “big,” comprehensive, do-it-all undergraduate textbook designed to reach a mass audience of first- or second-year students. I’ve long been equivocal about such textbooks. On the one hand, they are useful and necessary since they endeavour to present, in a structured and understandable way, large amounts of material students might not otherwise have access to. On the other hand, the idea of undergraduates relying on just one or two texts has always been anathema to me. Among other things, I worry that it feeds into a “Learning Manual” view of education in which students believe that, if they use the “right” book, the world’s Truths can be served up more or less unproblematically. Still, whatever reservations one might have about introductory textbooks they are here to stay in North America and are likely to become much more central to higher education teaching elsewhere. This is already becoming clear in British university and college geography, where the increased class sizes I referred to above have coincided with a veritable explosion of textbook production in the last five years. Quite simply, it is becoming harder to refer large numbers of students to journal articles, monographs and other original sources when only one or two copies of each exist in the library. The question thus becomes not whether we should use textbooks as teaching tools—the fact is many of us increasingly do use them—but what kind and to what purpose?

Neither question can be answered in the abstract, of course. The pedagogic effects of using textbooks to teach large classes are underdetermined by the content and form of the textbooks themselves. However well produced and written they are, textbooks’ success depends upon the circumstances of their reading and reception. Nonetheless, the content and form of textbooks obviously does matter. And it is here that the elusive question of quality arises. At a time when textbooks are more central to higher education teaching than perhaps ever before, it seems to me vital that geographers think hard about producing texts of the highest educational quality. But what is “quality”? How are authors to achieve quality when, as I believe is presently the case, both they and the publishers have only a rather hazy understanding of how our student audiences “consume” textbooks? And how is quality to be achieved when, as also is presently the case in geography, there is so little debate in our journals and at our meetings about the nature and role of textbooks in modern mass education? It is with these questions in mind that I approached *A World of Difference*.

The book’s authors, both geographers at the University of Minnesota, combine their very different expertises and experiences to fashion a distinctive text written explicitly for an undergraduate audience. I say distinctive because, while the subject of *A World of Difference*—the less developed world—is hardly foreign (no pun intended) to introductory textbooks in geography, Porter and Sheppard’s take on this subject is. This is true in three senses. First, the book strongly stresses global
interconnectivity and the authors firmly insist throughout that the nature of the developing world simply cannot be understood outside its relations with the developed world. Second, where many texts on the “Third World” (a term which Porter and Sheppard rightly subject to critical scrutiny in the “Introduction”) focus on socioeconomic issues, *A World of Difference* is deliberately synthetic, structuring the discussion around cultural, resource/environmental, and socioeconomic themes. Finally, as the title suggests, the central idea running throughout the book is that of “difference.” Porter and Sheppard want to persuade their student audience that the countries of the developing world are not so many examples to be slotted into Rostowian development categories but are instead remarkably distinctive and diverse, varying according to culture, ethnicity, nationality, resources, economic systems, and so on. This celebration of difference is far from glib, because Porter and Sheppard argue: (i) that some differences are far from salutary, particularly differences in standards of living within and between the developing and developed worlds; (ii) that some of these less salutary differences are in part relationally produced by processes which link North to South and advantage the former; and (iii) that some differences are thus the product of relations of power and inequality and ought to be criticised rather than embraced.

As a result of this threefold approach, *A World of Difference* presents an impressive range of theoretical and empirical material for students seeking an introductory understanding to the developing world. In the “Introduction” Porter and Sheppard introduce the theme of difference in relation to the developing world and situate their efforts between an “Enlightenment” desire for progress, universality and rationality and what they call a “counter-Enlightenment” desire to contest the Western instrumentalities of Enlightenment and to celebrate “localism and community; egalitarianism; ecological sustainability . . .; pride in local culture, ethnicity and tradition” (p. 2). Part I, “The World as Social Differentiation,” kicks things off with an analysis of social and cultural issues, beginning with a critique of racial stereotypes (ch. 2), moving on to an account of culture, kinship and gender in the developing world (ch. 3) and ending with two chapters on how Western economic theory has made sense of the South (Rostow, Myrdal, etc.) and on counterviews from the “periphery” (Frank, Amin, etc.). Part II, “The World as a Differentiated Resource,” is unusual in a book of this sort in that it goes into some detail about the variegated physical resource base of the developing world (there are chapters on atmosphere and hydrology, the carbon cycle, soils and vegetation and the earth’s crust), with chapters on demography, disease and health and a case study of the Pokot of Kenya tagged on uneasily at either end. Part III, “The World as a Differentiated System,” takes the reader into the realm of economic issues with a set of well-written and well-organised chapters on colonialism and its consequences (chs. 14–16), on primary commodities, peripheral industrialisation, and urbanisation and migration (chs. 17–19), and on transnational corporations (TNCs), money and finance, and debt and structural adjustment (chs. 20–23). I thought that placing a chapter on tourism near the end of the book indicated a wry sense of humour, since the kind of differences Porter and Sheppard wish to celebrate are precisely those Western tourists typically do not see or else unthinkingly assimilate to the cultural and national stereotypes the tourist industry itself promotes. The final chapter, “Toward a Different World,” points hopefully to a future where inequality and exploitation might be removed to allow differences not based on inequality and oppression to flourish unhindered.

Is, then, *A World of Difference* exemplary as an introductory text? Speaking from outside the North American context, is it indicative of the kind of textbook that will
(or should) become increasingly central to first- and second-year university and college geography in the UK and the Antipodes in years to come? Let’s begin with length, style and presentation. At over 600 pages the book is intimidatingly long. I doubt whether many students can or would want to make their way through such a mountain of material. Yet *A World of Difference* is typical of the kind of introductory text publishers and authors seem happy to produce for 18- and 19-year-old students. Still, Porter and Sheppard have at least written their 600 pages in a style that is student-friendly without being patronising. They deliberately opt for a conversational idiom that captures students’ attention in a way a more dispassionate and “scholarly” style could not. It’s also nice to see that both authors have maintained a consistent tone throughout, despite writing different parts of the book. And what of presentation? Far from being a cosmetic detail, the look of textbooks is central to their readability for students. I’ve never been a fan of the single-spaced, two-column-per-page layout that *A World of Difference* adopts—it always looks so cramped and dense to me. That said, the wealth of diagrams, plates, and tables found throughout the book are generally attractive, comprehensible and useful.

In terms of substantive content, *A World of Difference* at once impresses and disappoints. The attempt to mix theoretical discussion and debate with empirical detail is, on the whole, well executed throughout. Some chapters and parts are models of lucidity and genuinely illuminating. For me Part III, “The World as a Differentiated System,” is simply outstanding, and I would recommend it for a whole range of introductory courses on North-South relations, development, and globalisation. Indeed, one suspects that students may find *A World of Difference* more useful in parts than in the whole. I say this because where the book falls down for me is in the integration of its three sections. It takes a real effort of concentration and imagination to link the book’s three main parts together in anything other than a very general way. In addition, the parts are uneven in quality: Part I is too eclectic and fragmented, and Part II is not entirely satisfactory because, ch. 10 aside (“Soils, Vegetation, Pests, Water, and Agriculture”), the chapters on physical geography and resources are not well integrated with the discussions of people, culture, and economy offered elsewhere in the book.

These reservations aside, *A World of Difference* is a distinctive and in many respects good example of its genre. The real question however, concerns precisely the genre. I remain ambivalent about the educational merits of big blockbuster texts like *A World of Difference*. It seems to me that until we develop a clearer understanding of textbook usage by students we will remain ignorant as to whether books like Porter and Sheppard’s are of genuine educational value. As geography faculty outside North America (and particularly in Britain) move toward both producing and using textbooks in greater numbers, this is surely a good time to reflect on the more general question of what the geography textbook is and should be about at all levels of the undergraduate degree.

This brings me, finally, to a corollary concern: the role of textbooks in what Giroux (1992) calls a “critical pedagogy.” Of late many colleagues have been expressing angst about the inverse correlation between the vibrancy of critical scholarship in contemporary human geography and the capacity of critical geographers to actually change the world for the better (Bassett, 1997; Blomley 1994, 1995; Chouinard, 1994; Routledge, 1996; Smith, 1996; Tickell, 1995). This concern about “activism and the academy” (Blomley, 1994) is important, but it is largely premised on the idea that the proper (sic) locus for critical and practical intervention lies “out there” in the “real world” beyond the precincts of the university. What has been missing, I think, is a discussion of how critical human geography can make a
difference within the university itself. One dimension of this is critical pedagogy, that is, a form of teaching which in both style and content seeks to take issue, always responsibly and defensibly, with the world we study. The Left of geography has a poor record when it comes to debating seriously what constitutes effective critical teaching. Yet as more students pass through our universities and elect to take our courses, critical pedagogy is surely one of the most important opportunities geographers on the Left have to make a difference. This is a fitting observation with which to end a review of A World of Difference because—notwithstanding my reservations about the book—to its great credit it attempts something rare for an introductory textbook: to take issue with and question the condition of the world it describes and explains. Together, Porter and Sheppard use the motif of difference to disabuse the reader, gently but persistently, of belief in a set of “truths” about the developing world generated out of decades of Western theory and practice. As such, A World of Difference raises a final, key question: what role can textbooks play in a specifically critical pedagogy in geography? Answers on a postcard please.

References


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