

Radicalism in Geography

RADIALISM

The radical approach in geography developed in 1970s as a reaction to 'quantitative revolution' and positivism which tried to make geography as a spatial science, with great emphasis on locational analysis.

It began as a critique within the contemporary liberal capitalistic society but later coalesced around a belief in the power of Marxian analysis. According to radicalists, inequality is inherent in the capitalist mode of production. Redistribution of income through taxation policies will not solve the problems of poverty, according to Peet, alternative, environment designs, with removal of central bureaucracies and their replacement by anarchistic models of community control are needed, and geographers should work towards their creation.

The followers of radical approach in geography mainly concentrated on the issues of great social relevance like, inequality, racism, sexism, crime, delinquency, discrimination against blacks and non-whites, females, exploitation of juveniles and environment resources and the opposition of the Vietnam war in U.S.A. Events of the late 1960s, such as the burning of large cities in the western world, student-unrest, worker-uprising in Paris in 1968, massive anti-Vietnam war protest actions and radical cultural reformation exposed the social and political irrelevance of geography as a spatial science and proved the hollowness of locational analysis.

It was in this background that the radicalized students and junior faculty members challenged the traditional geography (geography as spatial science) and they started publishing articles with more 'socially relevant' geographic topics in the professional journals. In 1969, Antipode—a Radical Journal of Geography was founded at the Clark University in Worcester (Massachusetts), specifically to publish the research papers of the younger geographers with a revolutionary leaning.

The young radical geographers published papers in Antipode dealing with urban poverty, discrimination against women, coloured people and minority groups, unequal access to social amenities, crimes, deprivation, permissiveness and sexism. They also published articles on underdevelopment, poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment and resource misuse in the Third World countries. Thus, the radicalists took the side of the oppressed, advocating their causes and pressing for fundamental social change. In brief, the radical geography was a quest for social relevance of the discipline geography at a time of contradiction and crises in the capitalistic society of the west.

The radical approach in geography is only about twenty-five years old. Radicalism grew as a major criticism of quantitative geography, positivism and traditional regional geography.

The origin of radical geography can be traced to the radical geography movement which started in the 1960s in the USA. There were three prominent issues of international concern behind the movement, viz., the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement of the Blacks, and the all-pervasive phenomenon of poverty in urban ghettos which generated social tension.

The radicalists put emphasis on the need for a revolution in both theory and practice of geography. Thus, the radical approach is value-based, especially the theory of labour value, as against the supposedly value-free approaches. Radicalists stress that, with the changing production techniques, the symbiotic relationship between human beings and the environment also changes accordingly (a relationship from which the vital elements of the composition of society arise).

Radicalism believes in economic classes and the Subsequent class struggle as the cornerstone of historical materialism. Most of the radicalists have a strong Marxist base and take a holistic view of economics, society and polity.

According to Peet (1977), radical geography grew, by and large, as a negative reaction to the established discipline.

The main criticisms against radicalism are as follows:

- (i) Radicalism reduces human beings to a passive existence in the field of historical and structural determinism. Rather than being a product of history, human beings become the creators of history.
- (ii) The radicalists are victims of Marxist orthodoxy; thus they stress

The reasons:

Marxist ideas themselves became subject to criticism.

- (ii) The collapse of Communist countries forced a rethinking on the matter.
- (iii) Radical geographers had no empirical study on the erstwhile Communist countries.
- (iv) Radicalism has become more professional and a substantial number of radicalists of the 1960s and the 1970s joined the 'establishment'.

By the end of the 1980s, some geographers like Peet and Thrift termed radicalism 'the political- economy perspective' whereas others like D. Harvey continued supporting its closeness to Marxist theories.