

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

“Don’t look at people like an ant heap.
These are individuals” (Zwingle 1998, 38-39).

“Issues...that are absent from the textbook most likely remain absent from the [classroom]” (Mayer 1989, 398). In this study, human rights discussions are found to be largely absent from the textbooks assessed. Does this mean that students enrolled in introductory Human Geography and Regional Geography classes do not learn about human rights issues in the course of their geographic studies? The relationship between textbook content and classroom learning has been well established in numerous studies (Apple 1985). Thus, the general omission of human rights topics in the introductory geography textbooks assessed in this study could be indicative of a general omission of human rights issues in many geography classrooms.

This omission should be remedied, as greater integration of human rights issues into geographic curriculum would greatly benefit the discipline. In addition to the extrinsic benefits to society, a geographic curriculum that includes human rights issues will greatly enhance student learning. As discussed in chapter two, human rights

education not only promotes higher-level *cognitive* learning, but also effectively encourages the often-neglected *affective* domain of learning. This enhanced learning process ensures that students of geographic education gain a deeper understanding of geographic concepts and principles.

Yet human rights discussions provide an even more powerful benefit for geographic education. It is generally accepted that the foundation of all learning is inspiring interest and curiosity in the subject matter. Indeed, it is often said that true knowledge is not what the pupil remembers, but what he or she cannot forget. Human rights discussions have the invaluable ability to further *engage* students in geographic learning—to teach students what they cannot forget by presenting “compelling images which...capture students and to which students see themselves connected and interdependent” (Jennings 1994, 293). This invaluable asset makes the integration of human rights discussion into geographic education a powerful tool in combating what some prominent geographers contend to be a possible reason for recent fluctuations in university-level enrollment—the failure to “capture the imagination of our pupils whose interest lies in *real people* who live in *real places*?” (Geographical Association Working Group 1995, 138, emphasis mine).

Clearly, challenges exist. Incorporating human rights discussions into geography textbooks requires careful planning and deliberation in order to prevent the unwitting imposition of a particular ideological agenda or the presentation of human rights issues in a manner that would be deleterious to student well being. Likewise, creators of geographic curricula must be well-versed in the debate over cultural relativism in order to avoid the extreme polarities of radical universalism or radical relativism. However, such

obstacles can be overcome, and the benefits of integrating human rights issues into geographic education far outweigh the additional preparation and planning required for their successful integration.

Summation of findings

Human and Regional Geography textbooks overlook the suffering of millions of people, even when basic, widely-recognized human rights are being violated. Aside from a handful of discussions, the texts assessed in this study do not even include mere *mentions* of the on-going practice of human slavery, the persistent and degrading occurrence of child sexual exploitation, the rising occurrence and tremendous impacts of forced child soldiery, nor the pervasive and institutionalized discrimination against Europe's Roma population. Moreover, the majority of the texts do not even *mention* those rights that involve cultural justifications for deviations from international human rights norms. The severe, systematic repression of half of the population of Afghanistan is largely ignored. Likewise, the tens of thousands of women killed each year by members of their own family in 'honor killings' and 'dowry deaths' are largely overlooked; the majority of texts do not consider the topic worthy of a mere mention. And the 114 million women whose bodies have been significantly altered by female genital mutilation—a practice comparable to the removal of the entire penis of a male—are not even mentioned in seven of the eight texts.

Some controversial human rights are not only not mentioned—the abuse of the right is actually indirectly praised. The ability of a state to maintain territorial integrity is highly praised in virtually all cases, with almost no discussion on the rights of the nation peoples who are fighting to preserve their distinct way of life. Likewise, investments by

transnational corporations in developing countries in order to take advantage of low wages are explained repeatedly as a mutually beneficial exchange. Only one text broaches the right to a liveable wage and the possibility that not all parties are benefiting from such an exchange.

Rights that are considered by some to be ‘goals’ receive more coverage. Aside from the issue of child labor, which is largely absent from both Regional and Human Geography texts, the issues of poverty, malnutrition, and refugees are discussed often. Many of the ‘discussions,’ however, are either *mentions* of its occurrence or are largely details on the ‘facts’ of the issue. Little insight into the human dimension of poverty, malnutrition or refugees is given, and no text discusses the right of an individual to be free from hunger or the right to a minimum standard of living. Instead, discussions focus on the large-scale occurrence of poverty, malnutrition, and refugee crises, providing the student with little opportunity or incentive to ‘step into the skin of others’ and develop a deeper understanding of what such issues mean for the *individuals* involved.

Implications for Geographic Learning

The general absence of human rights discussions represents one example of the dominant large-scale approach that serves to distance students from human lives. As geographers, our curiosity is undeniably focused on human lives. Yet when the *quality* of the lives that we are studying is not included in our inquiries, “students learn to overly emphasize an objective and dispassionate view of the curriculum and hence their world. Consequently, students more easily objectify and distance themselves” from the human lives which are the very heart of our studies. This lack of emphasis on *quality* of human lives transforms those lives into “‘objects’ of study rather than compelling images which

are allowed to capture students and to which students see themselves connected and interdependent” (Jennings 1994, 293).

Pervasive emphasis on large-scale analyses of the world is unquestionably necessary in a course whose ambition is to ‘explain the world in one semester.’ An understanding of how regions or states interact economically, politically, and culturally can equip students with valuable knowledge about their world. However, to balance large-scale analyses, a smaller scale needs to be introduced as well. For example, statistics on poverty rates or literacy rates, and their implications on a country as a whole, should be accompanied by insight into the implications of poverty and illiteracy for *humans* who are experiencing the phenomenon. Without this balance, “geography, now regarded as an abstracted form of discourse rather than a portrayal of the real world” will fail “to capture the imagination of our pupils whose interest lies in *real* people who live in real places” (Geographical Association Working Group 1985, 138).

Implications for Student Growth

A geography that incorporates interest in the *quality* of human lives is a geography that encourages students to analyze their place in the world and think critically about what kind of world they will help create through their own participation in society. Such “an imaginative view of future possibilities requires more than an intellectual analysis of things as they stand” (Mertineit 1984, 12). It requires an understanding in which students see themselves as connected and interdependent with ‘the world outside the tree boundary’—a transformation that has just begun for one recent graduate of a human rights curriculum:

The concepts studied...have made a lasting impression on my life and on my way of thinking. In looking at all that I have learned, I have progressed from being very apathetic and uncaring to being very concerned and involved (Bardige 1998, 92).

The human race has made far more progress in science and technology than it has in the regulation of human relations. “In mankind's long march towards its destiny, what better contribution could we make than to ensure that human rights are effectively included in man's future conquests and aspirations” (UNESCO 1978, 259). Geographic education can, and should, make a vital contribution to this legacy.