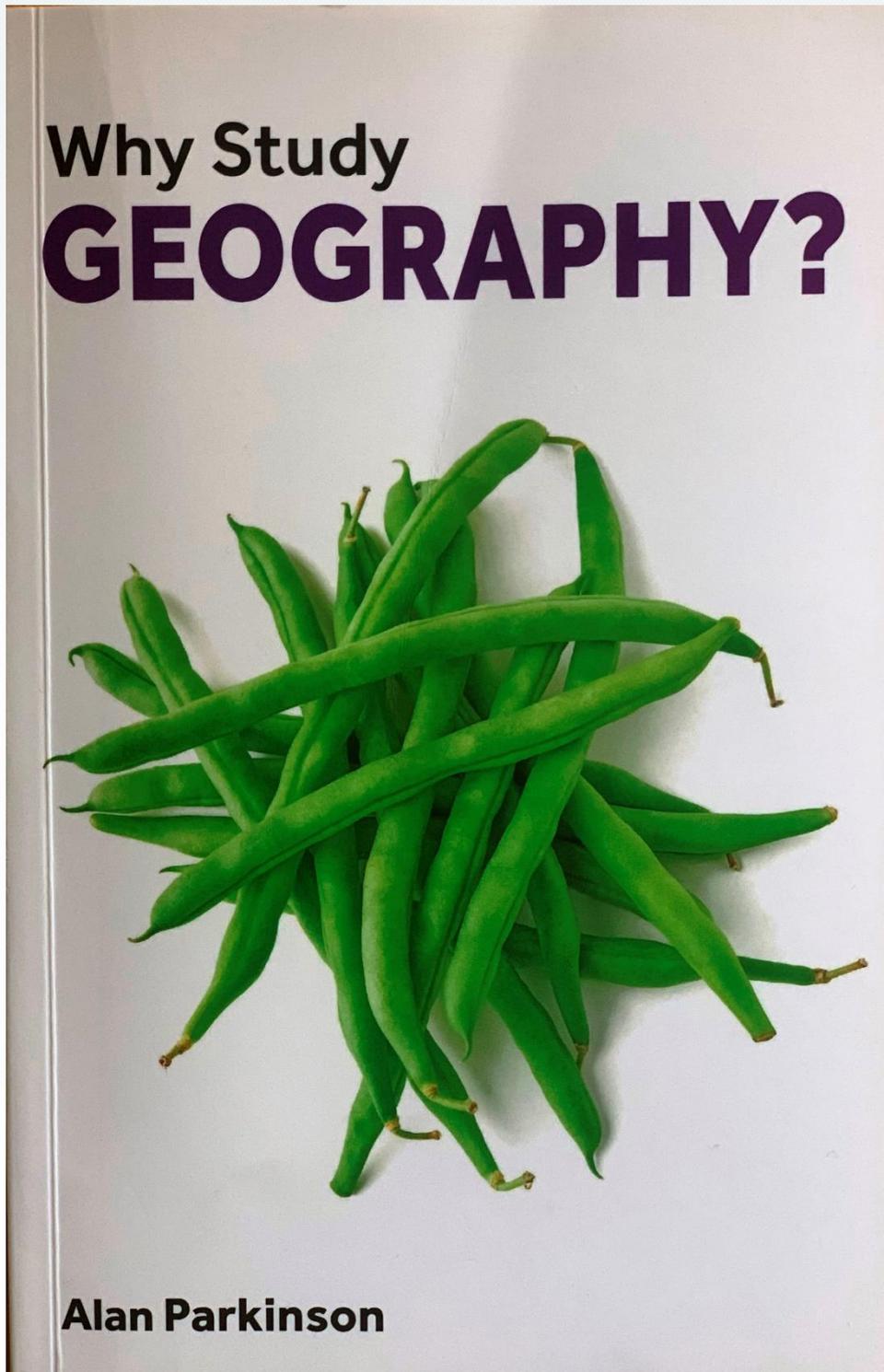


## **Why Study Geography?**



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This book is part of a series "... aimed at students, parents and teachers (which) explains in practical terms the range and scope of an academic subject at university level ...". Each book in the series attempts to address "crucial questions" which college prospectuses, given their particular role in the crowded international market-place, avoid or at best gloss over. It is squarely aimed at the English-speaking world and mainly the British educational diaspora. However, this book, concerning the study of geography, is of interest to the international field geography educationists, not least through the manner in which geography as a subject is described, but also through the detail of its sources describing geography and geographers in the work place, policy making and so on.

Among the crucial questions identified by the series is a purely utilitarian one concerning the 'currency' of a degree in a traditional subject like geography: where can a degree in geography lead in terms of a lucrative career? But of course, there are broader ones about the intrinsic and educational value of studying geography: how does the study of geography develop the mind? There are also even wider questions about the societal impact of having significant numbers of people educated to degree level and beyond in geography: how may 'geographers' contribute to the greater good of society and economy? This is quite a remit, and it is to Alan Parkinson's immense credit that the book tackles this whole agenda so well. The book is thorough, up to date and expertly researched. It is well written in a direct and practical manner and is lightened throughout with the cautious and nicely judged use of humor. Each chapter has thoughtful questions for readers to 'think about' in order to encourage reflection and discussion. And the book is full of genuinely useful links and suggestions to read, watch, listen to and interrogate in order to acquire more information and perspectives.

All this is to be expected from an author who occupies such a unique place in British geography education. He is a school-teacher in the east of England and a prominent school text book author. But he is also known for his co-founding of the quirky Mission: Explore initiative as well as his consultancy work with numerous national and international bodies. He is an admired teacher trainer and developer, working with both the leading bodies for geography in the UK, and to top it all he is currently Senior Vice-President of

the Geographical Association (President in 2021-22). So the book possesses a rare 'authority' – from the bottom up. From this perspective the book shines a clear and constant light on geography as a subject, avoiding slogans and incautious overclaiming about geography's use and potential. This is achieved by focussing on the power and potential of thinking geographically while at the same time avoiding the trap of suggesting any once and for all 'definition' of geography. As with all academic disciplines (but geography perhaps more than most) geography is dynamic, seemingly ever-expanding and somewhat unruly, and Parkinson's approach captures this nicely – equally fluently pointing to geography's 'STEM' credentials though big data, GIS and the geospatial industry; its value as a humanities subject through for example its concern with the significance and uniqueness of 'place'; and its value as what Danny Dorling calls "the big picture subject of our times", able to grasp and address various epochal issues on scales from the microscopic to the global.

This is an excellent book therefore, but it may have one or two significant blind spots. A minor one concerns the (nonetheless interesting) chapter of case studies addressing the question: "how have people used their geography qualifications?" I would have liked to read more about people who have achieved positions of influence say in commerce, financial services or manufacturing industry - and who were able to acknowledge and articulate the significance of their geography degree – alongside a collection of people who are, fundamentally, professional geographers. These people are, as Parkinson readily acknowledges, the exception: "You won't find many graduates with 'geographer' as their job title ..." (p62).

A far more important quibble concerns what has now, in 2020, emerged as an inescapable issue for geography as a disciplinary community. I am not referring to the Covid19 global pandemic, but the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the widely seen video footage showing three white police officers forcibly restraining and killing George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, US in May 2020. To be fair, Parkinson does address equality issues to an extent, but it is probably wishful thinking and inaccurate to claim (more than once) that "Geography is a very inclusive discipline." (p159).

It would be more honest to say that geography in universities has a problem attracting BAME students and that there may be something about the nature of the subject itself and its associations with Empire that explain this. I acknowledge that I risk opening a whole new can of worms which arguably was not in the already enormous remit of this book. However, that is of course the point: why would such an important issue almost drop off the radar? According to Black Geographers ([www.blackgeographers.com](http://www.blackgeographers.com)), across the UK in 2018 there were only 10 geography professors: meaning 7 in every 1000 geography professors identified as Black. This shows geography to be less than inclusive, and it would have been most encouraging, for all current and future students, to at least acknowledge the issue.

This would be a good issue to tackle in a second edition – for this book is set to become a ‘must have’ for all secondary schools preparing students for A level studies as well as university geography degree courses. And of course, to remain current will need updating and revising.

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