GEOGRAPHY IN DEPTH

CHAPTER 3

Geography seeks to explain locational patterns and explores spatial associations, along with possible cause-and-effect relationships. Periodically through the more than 2,000 year history of the discipline, a misdirected passion for precise and uncomplicated answers has resulted in a deterministic view of the complex relationships among physical and cultural geographic phenomena.

Determinism implies that people do not have freedom of decision making, that their actions and decisions are determined by some force or influence other than human will. American geography evolved as an offshoot of geology, and so the first generation of American geographers was trained mainly as physical geographers. Their interests lay in the study of landforms, climate, and natural vegetation. Ultimately, they began to study cultural geography—the distribution patterns of the human population, settlement, land use, resource exploitation, and levels of economic development. While seeking explanations for cultural geographic patterns strictly within the physical world, they attempted to show a direct causal connection between physical environmental factors and human activities. The first president of the Association of American Geographers, William Morris Davis, attempted to explain the organizational viewpoint of geography in 1906 by stating that it showed the relationship between “an element of inorganic control and one of organic response.” Control from the nonliving elements of the natural world was assumed to be imposed on all living organisms, including people.

The central concepts of environmental determinists were forcefully, if poetically, stated by geographer Ellen Churchill Semple. Her 1911 book, *The Influences of Geographic Environment*, opens:

*Man is a product of the earth’s surface. This means not merely that he is a child of the earth, dust of her dust, but that the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, given him his problems of navigation or irrigation, and at the same time whispered hints for their solution. She has entered into his bone and tissue, into his mind and soul.*

All those active verbs! In the determinists’ view, people respond to the actions and initiatives of nature. Many environmental determinists identified climate as the most powerful factor of the physical world. As Ellsworth Huntington asserted in his conclusions to *Civilization and Climate*:

*We are slowly realizing that character in the broad sense of all that pertains to industry, honesty, purity, intelligence, and strength of will is closely dependent upon the condition of the body. Each influences the other. Neither can be at its best while its companion is dragged down. The climate of many countries seems to be one of the great reasons why idleness, dishonesty, immorality, stupidity, and weakness of will prevail.*

At the other extreme from environmental determinism is cultural determinism, or possibilism. In this view, people can do anything, anywhere that they choose. Humans do things not because they are restrained by the environment, but despite the physical environment. The role of people is to conquer the environment, changing wilderness into productive landscape. Technology level is the main consideration, not the environment itself.

Contemporary geographers would avoid subscribing to either of these two extreme viewpoints. Physical environment is seen as passive; it does not dictate responses from people. People do indeed consider physical factors in making their decisions about land use and resource development, but they make these decisions within the framework of a culture. They consider available technology: prevailing costs of labor, energy, and capital.