

Rejection of Environmental Determinism

To understand what geographers do and how they do it, it is easiest to start by defining what geography is not. The ancient Greeks noticed that some of the peoples subjugated by their expanding empire were relatively docile while others were rebellious; they attributed such differences to variations in climate. Over 2000 years ago, Aristotle described northern European people as "full of spirit . . . but incapable of ruling others," and he characterized Asian people (by which he meant the inhabitants of modern-day Turkey) as "intelligent and inventive . . . [but] always in a state of subjection and slavery." Aristotle attributed peoples' response to being taken over by an outside power to the respective climates of the regions. In his mind, the cold northern European environment encouraged people to rebel and the warmer climate of Southwest Asia forced people to become enslaved.

Aristotle's views on this topic were long-lasting. As recently as the first half of the twentieth century, similar notions still had strong support. In 1940, in the *Principles of*

Human Geography, Ellsworth Huntington and C. W. Cushing wrote:

The well-known contrast between the energetic people of the most progressive parts of the temperate zone and the inert inhabitants of the tropics and even of intermediate regions, such as Persia, is largely due to climate . . . the people of the cyclonic regions rank so far above those of the other parts of the world that they are the natural leaders.

Huntington and Cushing claim climate is the critical factor in how humans behave. Yet what constitutes an "ideal" climate lies in the eyes of the beholder. For Aristotle, it was the Mediterranean climate of Greece. Through the eyes of more recent commentators from western Europe and North America, the climates most suited to progress and productiveness in culture, politics, and technology are (you guessed it) those of western Europe and the northeastern United States. Each of these theories can be classified as **environmental determinism**, which holds that human behavior, individually and collectively, is strongly affected by, even controlled or determined by, the physical environment.

Environmentally deterministic theories that explain Europe as "superior" to the rest of the world because of the climate and location of the region ignore the fact that for thousands of years, the most technologically advanced civilizations were not in Europe. The hearths of the agricultural and urban revolutions and the hearths of all of the world's major religions were in North Africa, Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, not Europe.

Chipping away at deterministic explanations helped move the geographic study of the relationships between human society and the environment in different directions. Everyone agrees that the natural environment affects human activity in some ways, but people are the decision makers and the modifiers—not just the slaves of environmental forces. People, motivated primarily by cultural traits, economics, and politics, shape environments, constantly altering the landscape and impacting environmental systems.

Possibilism

In response to environmental determinism, geographers argued that the natural environment merely serves to limit the range of choices available to a culture. The choices that a society makes depend on what its members need and on what technology is available to them. Geographers called this doctrine **possibilism**.

Even possibilism, however, has its limitations, partly because it encourages a line of inquiry that starts with the physical environment and asks what it allows. Human cultures, however, frequently push the boundaries of what is "environmentally possible" through their own ideas and ingenuity, and advances in technology. In the interconnected, technologically dependent world, it is possible to

transcend many of the limitations imposed by the natural environment.

Today, much research in human geography focuses on how and why humans have altered their environment, and on the sustainability of their practices. In the process, the interest in **cultural ecology**, an area of inquiry concerned with culture as a system of adaptation to and alteration of environment, has been supplemented by interest in **political ecology**, an area of inquiry fundamentally concerned with the environmental consequences of dominant political-economic arrangements and understandings (see Chapter 13). The fundamental point is that human societies are diverse and the human will is too powerful to be determined by environment.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Environmental Determinism vs. Possibilism

1. Define environmental determinism:

2. Define possibilism:

3. According to Huntington & Cushing, what is the most critical factor that dictates how humans behave?

4. Environmental determinism claims people are controlled by the physical environment. Besides the example mentioned above, what are other factors in our physical environment that influence the behavior of humans?

5. What two areas does environmental determinism claim to have flourished because of their physical environment?

6. According to the theory of possibilism, besides the limits placed by the natural environment, what factor weighs heavily on the behavior of humans?