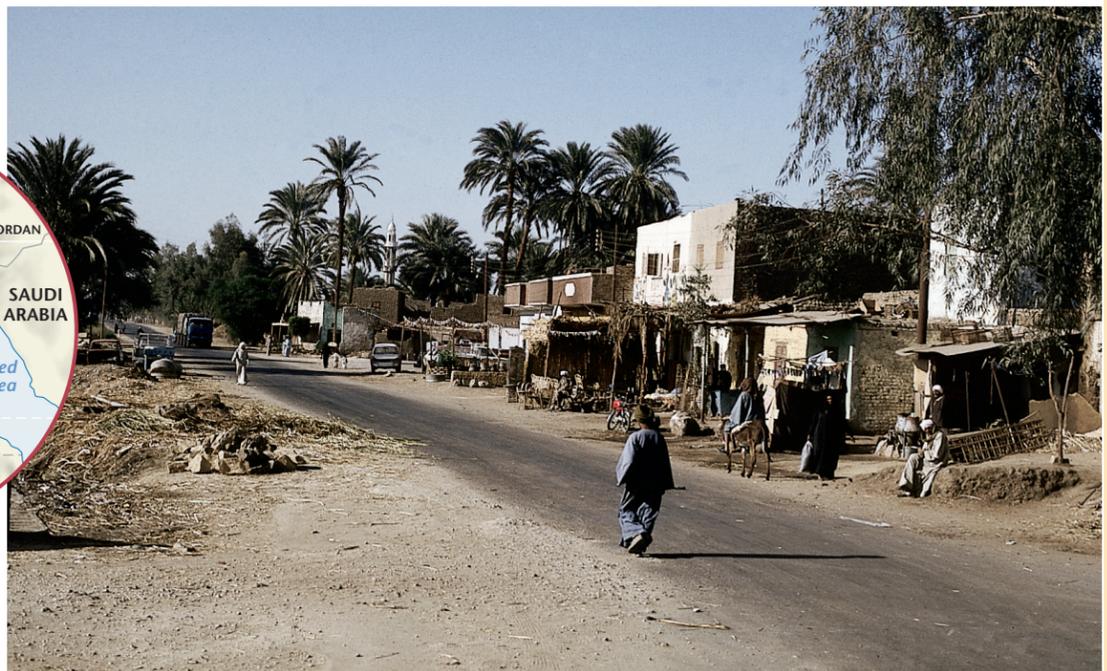


Chapter 2

Cultures, Environments, and Regions

From the field notes



“Crossing the Nile at Luxor, I made my way along the west bank of the river heading toward the Valley of the Kings. The narrow strip of fertile land I traversed was a world apart from the arid landscape that lay just a few miles farther to the west. Passing through a series of tiny towns, I was struck by the visible interplay between culture and environment. The modest houses were surrounded by reminders of the agricultural life of their inhabitants—farm tools, animals, and storage containers. Mosques dotted the landscape, and trees had been planted strategically to provide a modicum of shade and a buffer between road and field. Here, people’s lives are inextricably intertwined with the environment, and the landscapes they create reflect both their culture and the environment in which it is situated.”

KEY POINTS

- ◆ **The concept of culture lies at the heart of human geography, for culture mediates all human decisions and actions.**
- ◆ **Cultural geography focuses on where cultural ideas and practices developed, how and where they diffused, and how they affect landscape, human perception, and human–environment relations.**
- ◆ **Cultural hearths are the sources of civilizations; ideas, innovations, and ideologies radiate outward from them.**
- ◆ **Cultural diffusion can take the form of expansion diffusion or relocation diffusion.**
- ◆ **Perceptual regions depend on an individual’s cultural context and the mental maps he or she uses to make sense of the world.**
- ◆ **The doctrine of environmental determinism, which holds that human behavior is limited or controlled by the environment, has been a subject of intense debate, and broad generalizations about the impact of environment on humans have been discredited.**

Human geography, as we saw in Chapter 1, is a major component of the discipline of geography. It is unified by its spatial perspective and by its focus on the concrete character of human impact on the Earth’s surface. How are the products of human activity

arranged on the Earth? What forces and factors influenced their location and distribution? Do different societies organize their space in different ways, and if so, what can be learned from the patterns we observe? How do humans shape the landscape—and with what result? ◆

◆ CULTURE AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

At the heart of the wide-ranging subdiscipline of human geography lies the concept of **culture**, for location decisions, patterns, and landscapes are fundamentally influenced by cultural attitudes and practices. Like the regional concept discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of culture appears to be deceptively simple, but in fact it is complex and challenging. You can prove this just by looking up the word “culture” in several dictionaries and introductory anthropology texts and noting how widely their definitions vary. Our uses of the word also vary. When we speak of a “cultured” individual, we tend to mean someone with refined tastes in music and the arts, a highly educated, well-read person who knows and appreciates the “best” attributes of society. As a scientific term, however, culture refers not only to the music, literature, and arts of a society but also to all the other features of its way of life: prevailing modes of dress; routine living habits; food preferences; the architecture of houses and public buildings; the layout of fields and farms; and systems of education, government, and law. Thus culture is an all-encompassing term that

identifies not only the whole tangible lifestyle of peoples, but also their prevailing values and beliefs.

The concept of culture is closely identified with the discipline of anthropology, and over the course of more than a century anthropologists have defined it in many different ways. Some have stressed the contributions of humans to the environment (e.g., M. J. Herskovitz), whereas others have emphasized learned behaviors and ways of thinking (e.g., M. Harris). Several decades ago the noted anthropologist E. Adamson Hoebel defined culture as:

The integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance . . . culture is not genetically predetermined; it is noninstinctive . . . [culture] is wholly the result of social invention and is transmitted and maintained solely through communication and learning.

Hoebel’s emphasis on communication and learning anticipated the current view that culture is a system of meaning, not just a set of acts, customs, or material products. Clifford Geertz advances this view in his classic work, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973); much recent work in human geography has been influenced by

it. Hence, human geographers are interested not just in the different patterns and landscapes associated with different culture groups, but in the ways in which cultural understandings affect both the creation and significance of those patterns and landscapes.

The concept of culture is so broad ranging that cultural geography is sometimes considered to be synonymous with human geography. More often, however, it is considered to be a subset of human geography because many questions about population, economy, and politics can be posed without emphasizing their cultural dimensions. Does this mean that cultural geography is limited to the study of particular elements of culture (language, religion, etc.)? Few contemporary cultural geographers would see it that way. Instead, they would argue that cultural geography looks at the ways culture is implicated in the full spectrum of topics addressed in human geography. As such, cultural geography can be seen as a perspective on human geography as much as a component thereof. And this, in turn, exposes the limitations of viewing the discipline strictly along the lines suggested by Figure 1-1. There is much blurring among and between the various components of the discipline, and certain topics (particularly culture, politics, and economics) cut across the entire field.

Components of Culture

Culture is so complex that it is useful to identify some of its interconnected parts. Certain of these parts tie in directly with geography's emphasis on space. A **culture region** (the area within which a particular culture system prevails) is marked by all the attributes of a culture, including modes of dress, building styles, farms and fields, and other material manifestations. Cultural geographers identify a single attribute of a culture as a **culture trait**. For example, the wearing of a turban can be a culture trait of certain Muslim societies; for centuries, it was obligatory for Muslim men to wear this headgear. Although it is no longer required everywhere, the turban continues to be a distinctive trait of many Muslim cultures. The use of simple tools also constitutes a culture trait, and eating with certain utensils (knife and fork or chopsticks) is a culture trait.

Culture traits are not necessarily confined to a single culture. More than one culture may exhibit a particular culture trait, but each will consist of a discrete combination of traits. Such a combination is referred to as a **culture complex**. In many cultures, the herding of cattle is a trait. However, cattle are regarded and used in different ways by different cultures. The Maasai of East Africa follow their herds along seasonal migration paths, consuming blood and milk as important ingredients of a unique diet. Cattle occupy a central place in Maasai existence; they are the essence of survival, security, and prestige. Although the Maasai culture complex is only one of many cattle-keeping complexes, no other culture

complex exhibits exactly the same combination of traits. In Europe, cattle are milked and dairy products, such as butter, yogurt, and cheese, are consumed as part of a diet very different from that of the Maasai.

Thus culture complexes have traits in common, and so it is possible to group certain complexes together as **culture systems**. Ethnicity, language, religion, and other cultural elements enter into the definition of a culture system; for example, much of China may be so designated. China's culture system consists of a number of quite distinct culture complexes, united by strong cultural bonds. Northern Chinese people may eat wheat and those in the south may eat rice as their staple, and the Chinese language as spoken in the north may not be quite the same as that spoken in the south, but history, philosophy, environmental adaptation and modification, and numerous cultural traditions and attitudes give coherence to the Chinese culture system.

On the map, a culture region can represent an entire culture system. West Africa, Polynesia, and Central America are sometimes designated as culture regions of sorts, each consisting of a combination of culture complexes of considerable diversity but still substantial uniformity. Many geographers, however, prefer to describe regions such as Han China, West Africa, and Polynesia as **geographic regions** rather than as culture regions because their definition is based not only on cultural properties but on locational and environmental circumstances as well.

An assemblage of culture (or geographic) regions forms a **culture realm**, the most highly generalized regionalization of culture and geography. Together, the culture regions of West, East, Equatorial, and Southern Africa can be thought of as collectively constituting the Sub-Saharan African culture realm. Once again, there are good reasons for calling these **geographic realms** of the human world: the criteria on which they are based, though dominated by cultural characteristics, extend beyond culture.

Cultural Geographies Past and Present

The colonization and Europeanization of much of the world have obliterated a great deal of the cultural geography of earlier times. Very little is left of the map we might have constructed of indigenous North American culture regions (Fig. 2-1); similarly, a historical map of aboriginal Australian cultures would differ radically from the contemporary version. At the same time, maps of indigenous or "traditional" culture complexes do not show the regional patterns resulting from the European colonization and its associated migrations. Thus, when viewing any map showing culture regions or geographic realms, it is important to be sensitive to what is being depicted—and when.

The importance of the latter point becomes clear if you compare Figure 2-1 with Figure 2-2. Figure 2-2 is a



Figure 2-1 Culture Regions of North America. One approach to the regionalization of indigenous American cultures. Modern boundary lines are included for spatial references.

recent attempt to divide up Subsaharan Africa into different culture regions. This attempt to depict “modern” culture regions and geographic realms does not reflect the historical patterns shown in Figure 2-1; instead it seeks to represent dominant present-day realities—at least as seen by one commentator. Yet elements of the historic pattern still exist—and even influence present patterns. The reality is that the world is made up of a constantly changing, often overlapping mix of traditional and modern culture regions.

◆ KEY TOPICS IN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

The field of cultural geography is wide-ranging and comprehensive. To understand the various ways in which geographers look at culture, it is useful to focus

on five traditionally prominent areas of study and research.

- 1. Cultural Landscape.** The imprint of cultures on the land creates distinct and characteristic cultural landscapes.
- 2. Culture Heartths.** Several sources, crucibles, of cultural growth and achievement developed in Eurasia, Africa, and America.
- 3. Cultural Diffusion.** From their sources, cultural innovations and ideas spread to other areas. The process of cultural diffusion continues to this day.
- 4. Cultural Perception.** Culture groups have varying ideas and attitudes about space, place, and territory.
- 5. Cultural Environments.** This area deals with the role of culture in human understanding, use, and alteration of the environment.



Figure 2-2 Culture Regions of Subsaharan Africa. Generalized regionalization of indigenous cultures in mainland Africa south of the Sahara.

In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on these areas in more detail.

The Cultural Landscape

The cultures that occupy or influence an area leave their imprint on the landscape. Often, a single scene, a photograph or picture, can reveal the cultural milieu in which it was made. The architecture, the mode of dress of the people, the means of transportation, and perhaps the goods being carried—all reveal a distinctive cultural environment.

The people of any particular culture transform their living space by building structures on it, creating lines of contact and communication, tilling the land, and chan-

neling the water. There are a few exceptions: nomadic peoples may leave a minimum of permanent evidence on the land, and some peoples living in desert margins (such as the few remaining San clans) and in tropical forest zones (Pygmy groups) do not greatly alter their natural environment. However, most of the time there is change: asphalt roads, irrigation canals, terraced hillslopes.

This composite of artificial features is the **cultural landscape**, a term that came into general use in geography in the 1920s. The geographer whose name is still most closely identified with this concept is University of California at Berkeley Professor Carl Sauer. In 1927 Sauer wrote an article entitled “Recent Developments in Cultural Geography,” in which he argued that cultural land-



scapes are comprised of the “forms superimposed on the physical landscape” by human activity. However, when human activities change the physical or natural landscape, the physical landscape itself can take on cultural properties. For example, a dam built in the upper course of a river can affect the whole character of the river downstream, even hundreds of miles away. It can alter the strength of the river’s flow and the rate of deposition of sediments in a delta. As such, perhaps the best definition of cultural landscape is the broadest: that the cultural landscape includes all identifiably human-induced changes in the natural landscape, changes that involve the surface as well as the biosphere.

The concept of cultural landscape takes on a practical aspect when an area has been inhabited—and transformed—by a succession of culture groups, each of which leaves a lasting imprint. As successive occupiers arrive, they bring their own technological and cultural traditions—and transform the landscape accordingly. Yet successive occupiers can also be influenced by what they find when they arrive—and leave some of it in place. In 1929, Derwent Wittlesey proposed the term *sequent occupance* to refer to such cultural succession and its lasting imprint.

The Tanzanian city of Dar es Salaam provides an interesting urban example of this process. Its site was first chosen for settlement by Arabs from Zanzibar who sought a mainland retreat. Next it was selected by the German colonizers as a capital for their East African domain, and it was given a German layout and architectural imprint. After World War I, when the Germans were

ousted, a British administration took over and the city began yet another period of transformation. A large Asian population created a zone of three- and four-story apartment houses, which look as if they had been transplanted from Bombay. Then, in the early 1960s, Dar es Salaam became the capital of newly independent Tanzania. Thus, the city experienced four stages of cultural dominance in less than one century, and each stage of the sequence remains imprinted in the cultural landscape.

The cultural landscape, then, can be seen as a kind of text offering clues into the cultural practices and priorities of its various occupiers. Some cases do not offer the relatively distinct phases of occupance that characterize the Dar es Salaam example, however, and cultural influences from outside often complicate the picture. Hence, rather than emphasizing distinct phases of settlement, geographers now tend to think more in terms of processes of cultural intermixing in particular places—and the transitions over time they produce. Nonetheless, it is still useful to think about dominant influences at particular times as emphasized in the sequent occupance concept, for these often have the most visible impact on an area.

The concrete properties of a cultural landscape can be observed and recorded with relative ease. Take, for example, the urban “townscape” (a prominent element of the overall cultural landscape), and compare a major U.S. city with, say, a leading Japanese city. Visual representations would quickly reveal the differences, of course, but so would maps of the two urban places. The U.S. central city, with its rectangular layout of the central business district (CBD) and its far-flung, sprawling suburbs, contrasts sharply with the clustered, space-conserving Japanese city (Fig. 2-3). Again, the subdivision and ownership of American farmland, represented on a map, looks unmistakably different from that of a traditional African rural area, with its irregular, often tiny patches of land surrounding a village. These things help to shape the personality of a region.

Still, the whole of a cultural landscape can never be represented on a map. A cultural landscape consists of buildings and roads and fields and more, but it also has an intangible quality, an “atmosphere,” which is often so easy to perceive and yet so difficult to define. The smells and sights and sounds of a traditional African market are unmistakable, but try to record those qualities on maps or in some other way for comparative study! A challenge for anyone interested in place is to appreciate its less tangible characteristics that give it personality—its visual appearance, its noises and odors, and even its pace of life.

From the field notes

“The Atlantic-coast city of Bergen, Norway, displayed the Norse cultural landscape more comprehensively, it seemed, than any other Norwegian city, including Oslo. The high-relief site of Bergen creates great vistas, but also long shadows: windows are large to let in maximum light. Red-tiled roofs are pitched steeply to enhance runoff and inhibit snow accumulation; streets are narrow and houses clustered, conserving warmth.”



Culture Hearths

For as long as human communities have existed on Earth, there have been places where people have thrived, where invention and effort have resulted in an increase in

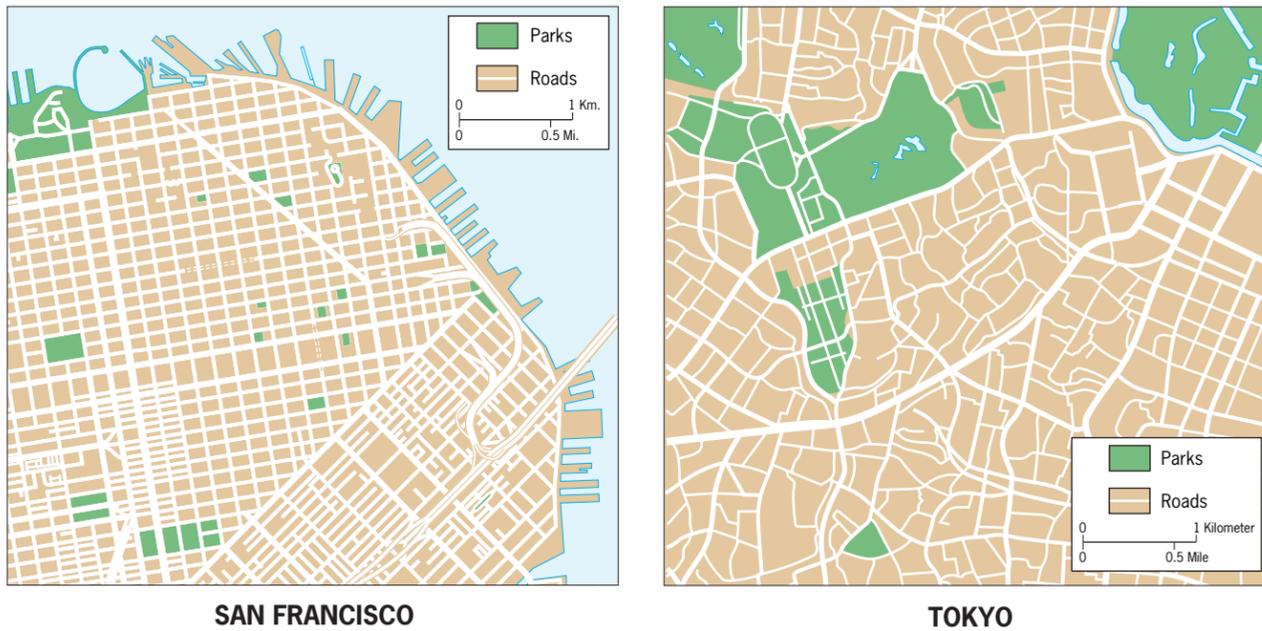


Figure 2-3 San Francisco and Tokyo Maps. Both San Francisco and Tokyo are laid out on a comparatively high-relief urban topography, but their street patterns differ markedly. As a result, moving around in these two cities is quite different.

numbers, growing strength, comparative stability, and technological development. Conversely, there have been areas where this has not occurred. The areas where success and progress prevailed were the places where the first large clusters of human population developed, both because of sustained natural increase and because other people were attracted to those places. The increasing numbers of people led to the development of new ways to exploit locally available resources and gain power over resources located farther away. Progress was made in farming techniques and, consequently, in crop yields. Settlements could expand. Societies grew more complex, and there were people who could afford to spend time not merely in subsistence activities, but in such pursuits as politics and the arts. The circulation of goods and ideas intensified. Traditions developed, along with ways of life that set an example for people in other places, far and near. These areas were humanity's early **culture hearths**—the sources of civilization, outward from which radiated the ideas, innovations, and ideologies that would change the world beyond.

Culture hearths should be viewed in the context of time as well as space. Long before human communities began to depend on cultivated crops or domesticated animals, culture hearths developed in response to the discovery and development of a tool or weapon that made subsistence easier or more efficient. Fishing techniques improved, and waterside communities prospered and grew. Thus the Inuit people, with their early and in-

ventive adaptation to their frigid, watery environment, developed a culture hearth, just as the ancient Mesopotamians did. The nomadic Maasai and their remarkable cattle-based culture still inhabit the region in which they developed their culture hearth.

Some culture hearths, therefore, remain comparatively isolated and self-contained, whereas others have an impact far beyond their bounds. When the innovation of agriculture was added to the culture complexes that already existed in the zone of the Fertile Crescent, it soon diffused to areas where it was not yet practiced and affected other culture complexes far and wide. In the culture hearth itself, the practice of cultivation led to the evolution of an infinitely more elaborate civilization, where one innovation followed another.

Thus it is appropriate to distinguish between culture hearths, thousands of which have evolved across the Earth from the Inuit Arctic to Maori New Zealand, and the source areas of **civilizations**. These latter also began as culture hearths, but their growth and development had a wider, sometimes global impact. Early culture hearths (Fig. 2-4) developed in Southwest Asia and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and East Asia in the valleys and basins of the great river systems. The Middle and South American culture hearths evolved thousands of years later, not in river valleys but in highlands. The West African culture hearth emerged later still, strongly influenced by innovations made by the peoples of the Nile Valley and Southwest Asia.

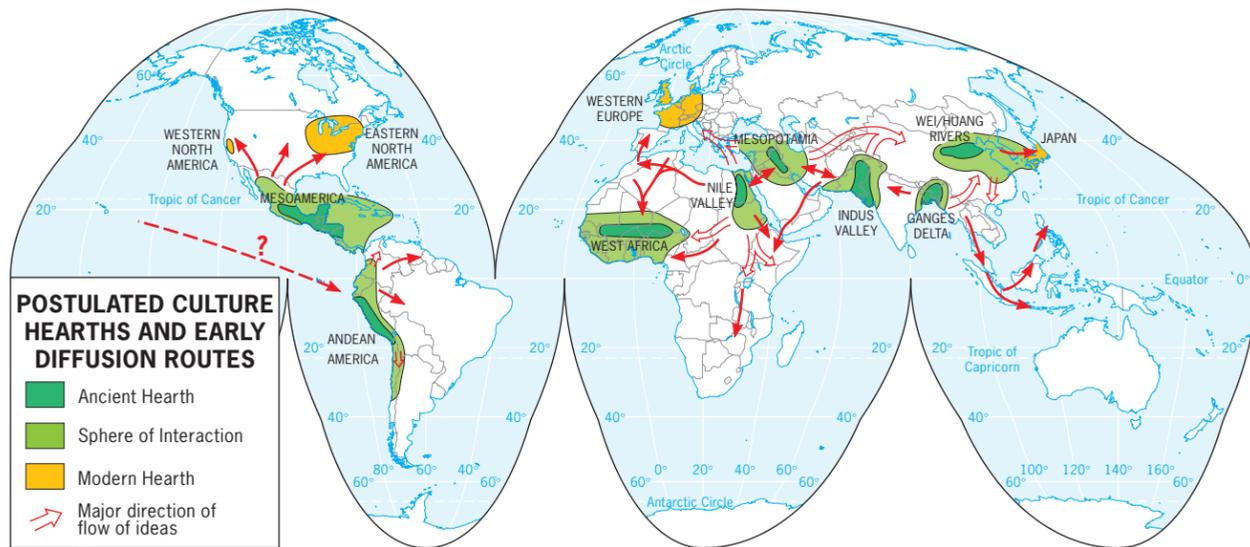


Figure 2-4 Postulated Culture Hearths and Early Diffusion Routes. Ancient and modern culture hearths. The ancient hearths and their diffusion routes are speculative; today's industrial and technological culture hearths are superimposed. *Source:* From authors' sketch.

It is important to note that all the ancient culture hearths shown in Figure 2-4 achieved breakthroughs in agriculture. Irrigation techniques, crop domestication, planting, seeding and weeding methods, harvesting, storage, and distribution systems all progressed, and individual cultures achieved remarkable adaptations in order to maximize the opportunities offered by their environment.

Shifts in Culture Hearths The locations and nature of the cultural innovations of recent centuries are very different. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the world was transformed by the spread of innovations from new hearths, new sources of invention and diffusion. The ancient agricultural and urban revolutions were followed, millennia later, by equally consequential industrial and technological revolutions that created totally new cultural landscapes. These revolutions were (and are) centered in Europe, North America, and East Asia (Fig. 2-4). And one of the great—and not entirely answered—geographic questions is why there, as opposed to somewhere else.

Think of the ways in which our daily lives have been changed by the inventions made in these hearths of innovation and how effective modern dissemination systems are. Also note that in the nineteenth century, Western Europe was the dominant industrial hearth—a position that was taken over by the United States during the twentieth century. More recently Japan emerged as a major industrial hearth, and despite current economic difficulties other East Asian industrial-technological giants have sprung up as well. Will the next century witness yet another shift?

Cultural Diffusion

The ancient culture hearths were focal points of innovation and invention; they were sources of ideas and stimuli. From these source areas, newly invented techniques, tools, instruments, and ideas about ways of doing things radiated outward, carried by caravans and armies, merchant mariners, teachers, and clergy. Some of the innovations that eventually reached distant peoples were quickly adopted and often modified or refined; others fell on barren ground.

The process of dissemination, the spread of an idea or innovation from its source area to other cultures, is known as **cultural diffusion**. Today the great majority of the world's cultures are the products of innumerable ideas and innovations that have arrived in an endless, centuries-long stream. Often it is possible to isolate and trace the origin, route, and timing of the adoption of a particular innovation. The phenomenon of **diffusion** is therefore an essential part of the study of cultural geography.

The appearance of a particular technique or device in widely separated areas does not necessarily prove that diffusion occurred. Various cultures in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas developed methods of irrigation, learned to domesticate animals and plants, and reached other achievements through **independent invention**. Moreover, a major invention did not guarantee rapid diffusion and adoption everywhere. The wheel, surely a momentous invention, was not adopted in Egypt until 20 centuries after its introduction in nearby Mesopotamia.

Diffusion occurs through the movement of people, goods, or ideas. Carl Sauer focused attention on this process in *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals* (1952), which was published at about the same time that the pioneering diffusion research by the Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand began to appear in print. This fascinating research attracted many geographers to the study of diffusion processes.

Geographers have identified several different processes whereby diffusion takes place. The differences have to do with various conditions: whatever it is that is diffusing through a population, the distribution and character of that population, the distances involved, and much more. Consider two examples: the diffusion of a disease such as Asian “flu” through a population and the diffusion of fax machines. The first case involves involuntary exposure and the second voluntary adoption. Both, however, are manifestations of diffusion processes.

Expansion Diffusion Geographers classify diffusion processes into two broad categories: expansion diffusion and relocation diffusion. In the case of **expansion diffusion**, an innovation or idea develops in a source area and remains strong there while also spreading outward. Later, for example, we will study the spread of Islam from its hearth on the Arabian Peninsula to Egypt and North Africa, through Southwest Asia, and into West Africa. This is a case of expansion diffusion. If we were to draw a series of maps of the Islamic faithful at 50-year intervals beginning in A.D. 620, the area of adoption of the Muslim religion would be larger in every successive period. Expansion diffusion thus is a very appropriate term (Fig. 2-5).

Expansion diffusion takes several forms. The spread of Islam is an example of **contagious diffusion**, a form of expansion diffusion in which nearly all adjacent individuals are affected. A disease can spread in this way, infecting almost everyone in a population (although not everyone may show symptoms of the disease).

However, an idea (or a disease, for that matter) may not always spread throughout a fixed population. For example, the spread of AIDS in the United States has not affected everyone in the population. Instead, it has affected particularly vulnerable groups, leapfrogging over wide areas and appearing on maps as clusters in distantly separated cities. This represents another kind of expansion diffusion, **hierarchical diffusion**, in which the main channel of diffusion is some segment of those who are susceptible to (or adopting) what is being diffused. In the case of the diffusion of AIDS, the hierarchy is the urban structure in the United States; the sizes of cities, towns, and villages are reflected in the clusters of infected people.

Hierarchical diffusion is also illustrated by the spread of the use of fax machines. Here the hierarchy is

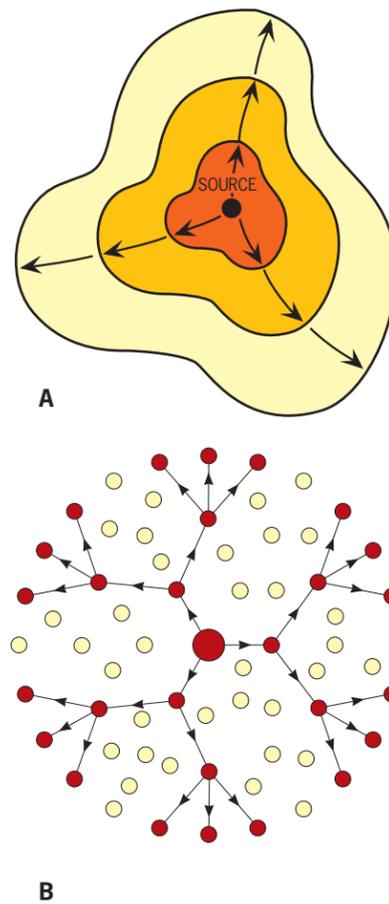


Figure 2-5 Types of Diffusion. Schematic representation of spatial flows associated with expansion diffusion (A) and hierarchical diffusion (B).

determined by the equipment’s affordability and the potential users’ perception of need. Again, the pattern is likely to show an urban-based order. But not all innovations are adopted in cities and towns. The diffusion pattern for an improved piece of farm machinery will be quite different.

A third form of expansion diffusion is **stimulus diffusion**. Not all ideas can be readily and directly adopted by a receiving population; some are simply too vague, too unattainable, too different, or too impractical for immediate adoption. But this does not mean that such ideas have no impact at all. They may indirectly promote local experimentation and eventual changes in ways of doing things. For example, the diffusion of mass-produced food items in the late twentieth century—pushed by multinational retailers—led to the introduction of the hamburger to India. Yet the Hindu prohibition on the consumption of beef presented a cultural obstacle to the adoption of this food item. However, retailers began

selling burgers made of vegetable products—an adaptation that was stimulated by the diffusion of the hamburger but that took on a new form in the cultural context to which it diffused.

Relocation Diffusion As noted earlier, expansion diffusion takes place through populations that are stable and fixed. It is the innovation, the idea, or the disease that does the moving. **Relocation diffusion**, in contrast, involves the actual movement of individuals who have already adopted the idea or innovation, and who carry it to a new, perhaps distant, locale, where they proceed to disseminate it.

When cultures make contact through relocation diffusion, one culture often comes to dominate another. In the process, the less dominant culture adopts elements of the cultural practices and ideas of the dominant culture. This process is known as **acculturation**. In extreme cases, the adoption of cultural elements from the dominant culture can be so complete that the two cultures become indistinguishable. This is known as **assimilation**. Yet acculturation, and even assimilation, are not necessarily one-way streets; dominant cultures often adopt aspects of the latter's culture even as their own culture has a disproportionate influence.

After Spanish invaders overthrew the Aztec kingdom, Spanish culture began to prevail: towns were transformed, a new religious order was introduced, and new crops were planted. Acculturation proceeded, but most people maintained significant elements of their own culture, so assimilation did not occur. But the peoples of Latin America were not the only ones affected by this encounter. Spanish culture also absorbed Aztec influences. Aztec motifs pervaded Spanish architecture, Aztec crops were transplanted to Iberia, and Spaniards began to wear clothing that reflected Aztec influences.

Relocation diffusion has usually produced the type of cultural contact where one culture has dominated another. Occasionally there is contact between culture complexes that are more nearly equal in numbers, strength, and complexity. In such cases, a genuine exchange follows, in which both cultures function as sources and adopters. This process is referred to as **transculturation**.

A particular form of relocation diffusion is known as **migrant diffusion**. There are times when an innovation originates somewhere and enjoys strong, but brief, adoption there. By the time it reaches distant places, it has already lost its strength at the place where it started. The diffusion map thus would show a continuous outward shift to new adopters, but there would be no stable core area. Some diseases, such as milder influenza pandemics, display this process as well. By the time these reach North America and Europe, they already have faded away in China, so that the diffusion pattern is one of migrant, rather than contagious, diffusion.

These are some of the leading processes of diffusion and the factors involved. However, there are also forces that can work against diffusion and the adoption of new ideas and innovations. One of these is distance; another is time. The farther it is from its source, the less likely an innovation is to be adopted, and the “innovation waves” become weaker. Similarly, the acceptance of an innovation becomes less likely the longer it takes to reach its potential adopters. In combination, time and distance cause **time-distance decay** in the diffusion process.

Cultural barriers can also work against diffusion. Certain innovations, ideas, or practices are not acceptable or adoptable in particular cultures because of prevailing attitudes or even taboos. Prohibitions against alcoholic beverages, as well as certain forms of meat, fish, and other foods, have restricted their consumption. Cultural barriers against other practices, such as the use of contraceptives, also have inhibited diffusion processes. Cultural barriers can pose powerful obstacles to the spread of ideas as well as artifacts.

Cultural Perception

Although architecture—even simple dwellings in remote forests or mountains—dominates the cultural landscape, other aspects of daily life also contribute to the character of places. One of those aspects is the pace of life as it is lived in a given area. During the 1960s, when thousands of students from African countries came to study in the United States, a geography professor conducted a survey of their perceptions of this country. Among the top five impressions was a variation of the following: “People and things move so fast here! Everyone seems to be running from one appointment to the next!”

The pace of life is not something that can be easily mapped, but it is an important aspect of place. Courtesy is another. A similar survey in Britain produced many references to the British habit of “queueing,” or lining up neatly to await one's turn boarding a bus or paying a bill. Again, while tradition does not have the permanence of an architectural style, it is nonetheless part of the cultural character of places. Such intangible elements help define the personality of a region. They also can contribute to cultural conflict. Violation of such traditions by outsiders can even lead to strife.

Perceptual Regions How is the cultural landscape perceived? In Chapter 1, we noted that people of all cultures have spatial memories, or mental maps, that influence their perception. Thus, from the viewpoint of the United States, many countries appear to be technologically unsophisticated and poor. But from the perspective of those countries, U.S. society may seem overdeveloped and wasteful. So it is with culture and the cultural landscape. Our perceptions of our own community and culture may differ quite sharply from those of people in

other cultures. **Perceptual regions** are intellectual constructs designed to help us understand the nature and distribution of phenomena in human geography. Geographers do not agree entirely on their properties, but they do concur that we all have impressions and images of various regions and cultures. These perceptions are based on our accumulated knowledge about such regions and cultures. The natural environment, too, is part of this inventory. Think of Swiss culture, and the image of a single Alpine environment may come to mind, even though, in fact, Swiss culture is divided into several distinct regions by language, religion, and tradition, and the majority of Swiss citizens today do not live in such environments.

Although we can easily explain in general terms how we perceive a culture region, it is much more difficult to put our impressions on a map. For example, consider the **Mid-Atlantic Region**. Weather forecasters refer to the “Mid-Atlantic area” or the “Mid-Atlantic States” as they divide their maps into manageable pieces. But where is this Mid-Atlantic Region? If Maryland and Delaware are part of it, then eastern Pennsylvania is, too. But where across Pennsylvania lies the boundary of this partly cultural, partly physical region, and on what basis can it be drawn? There is no single best answer (Fig. 2-6).

Again, we all have a mental map of the South as a culture region of the United States. But if you drive southward from, say, Pittsburgh or Detroit, you will not pass a specific place where you enter this perceptual region. You will note features in the cultural landscape that you perceive to be associated with the South, and at some stage of the trip they will begin to dominate the area to such a degree that you will say, “I am really in the South now.” This may result from a combination of features of

the region’s material as well as nonmaterial culture: the form of houses and their porches, items on a roadside restaurant menu (grits, for example), a local radio station’s music, the sound of accents that you perceive to be Southern, a succession of Baptist churches in a town along the way. These combined impressions become part of your overall perception of the South as a region.

Perceptual regions can be studied at a variety of levels. The 12 world geographic realms that form the basis of many courses in world regional geography are perceptual units at the smallest of scales; at the opposite, largest end of the scale would be a tiny region defined by one of the remaining communities of Amish people in the United States. Quite possibly, our perceptions are weakest and least accurate at each end of the scale: at the small scale because so much information must be synthesized that images become distorted, and at the large scale because most diminutive cultures within cultures are not well-defined parts of our general spatial knowledge. An interesting example of regional definition at an intermediate scale is found in an article by Terry Jordan entitled “Perceptual Regions in Texas” (1978). Like all of us, Texans use regional-cultural names for various parts of their state, and in this article Jordan identifies where names such as Panhandle, Gulf Coast, Permian Basin, and Metroplex actually apply (Fig. 2-7).

Perceptual Regions in the United States The cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky tackled the enormous, complex task of defining and delimiting the perceptual regions of the United States and southern Canada. In an article entitled “North America’s Vernacular Regions” (1980), he identified 12 major perceptual regions on a series of maps. Figure 2-8 summarizes these regions. Of necessity, it shows overlaps between certain units. For example, the more general term “the West” obviously incorporates more specific regions, such as the Pacific Region and part of the Northwest.

The problem of defining and delimiting perceptual regions can be approached in several ways. One is to conduct interviews in which people residing within as well as outside a region are asked to respond to questions about their home and cultural environment. Zelinsky used a different technique; he analyzed the telephone directories of 276 metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada, noting the frequencies with which businesses and other enterprises use regional or locational terms (such as “Southern Printing Company”) in their listings. The resulting maps show a close similarity between these perceptual regions and culture regions identified by geographers.

Regional Identity Culture regions also represent an emotional commitment. Among the perceptual regions shown in Figure 2-8, one, the South, is unlike any of the others. Even today, five generations after the Civil War,

Figure 2-6 Mid-Atlantic Folk-Culture Region. One delimitation of a Mid-Atlantic culture region. Source: H. Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, p. 39.



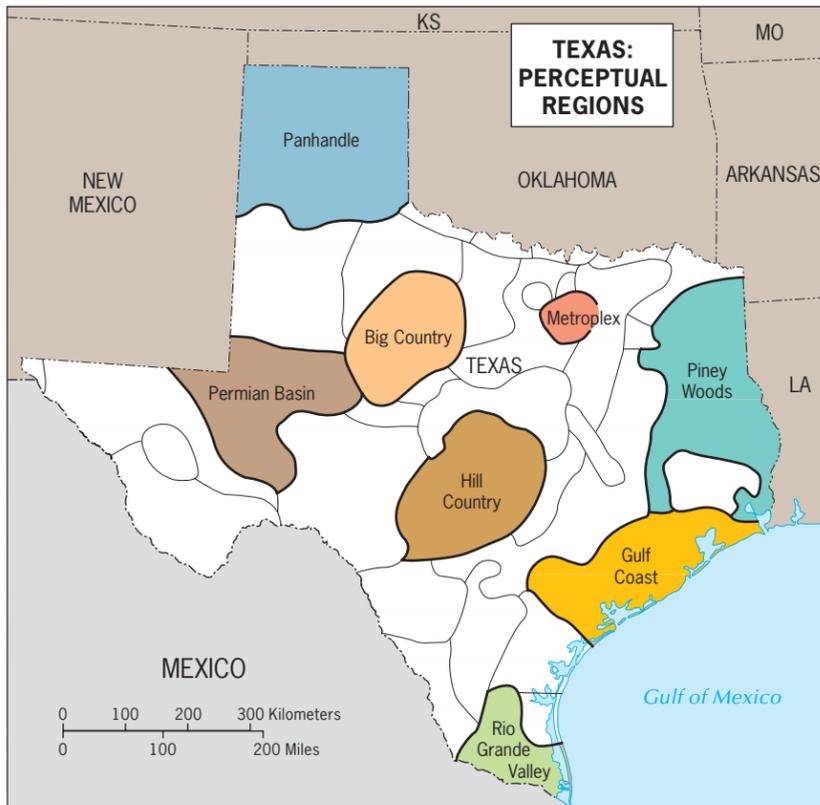


Figure 2-7 Perceptual Regions of Texas. Prominent perceptual regions in Texas. *Source:* T. G. Jordan, "Perceptual Regions in Texas." *Geographical Review* 68, 1978, p. 295.

the Confederate flag still evokes regional sentiments; the "Bible belt" still has some meaning; and the South's unique position among American regions is entrenched in songs and dialects. Certainly a "New South" has emerged over the past several decades, forged by Hispanic immigration, urbanization, Sunbelt movements, and other processes. But the South—especially the rural

South—continues to carry imprints of a material culture long past. Its legacy of nonmaterial culture is equally strong, preserved in language, religion, music, food preferences, and other traditions and customs.

Such cultural attributes give a certain social atmosphere to the region, an atmosphere that is appreciated by many of its residents and is sometimes advertised as

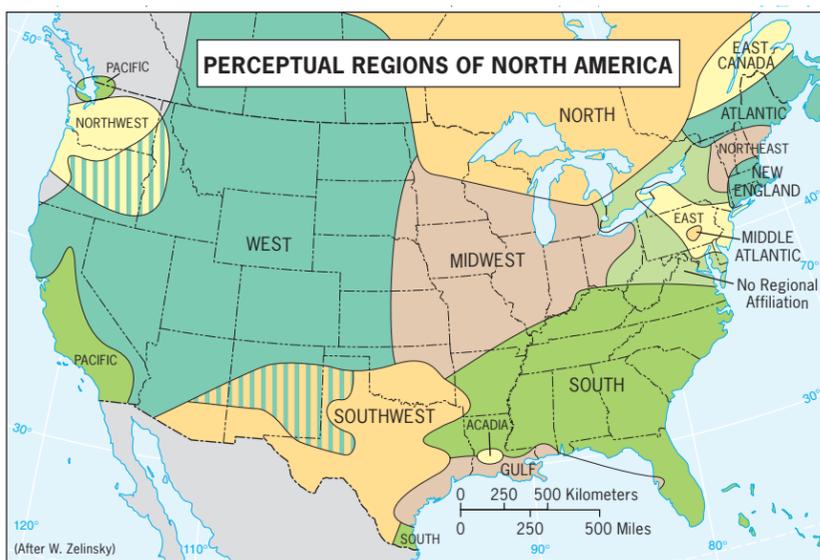


Figure 2-8 Perceptual Regions of North America *Source:* W. Zelinsky, "North America's Vernacular Regions," *Annals of the AAG*, 1980, p. 14.

an attraction for potential visitors. “Experience the South’s warmth, courtesy, and pace of life,” said one such commercial, which portrayed a sun-drenched seaside landscape, a bowing host, and a couple strolling along a palm-lined path. Such images may or may not represent the perceptions of most inhabitants of the region, but few Southerners would object to publicity of this kind.

The South has its vigorous supporters and defenders, and occasionally a politician uses its embattled history to arouse racial antagonism. But today the South is so multifaceted, so diverse, so vigorous, and so interconnected with the rest of the United States that its regional identity is much more complicated than traditional images suggest. This serves as an important reminder that perceptual regions are not static. Images of the South are rapidly changing, and no identifiable group, or combination of groups, clings to the idea that the region should secede from the United States.

Elsewhere, however, discrete and strongly defined culture regions have become political (and even actual) battlegrounds. Emotional attachments to territory and tradition can run so strong that they supersede feelings of national (state) identity, an issue we take up in Chapter 16.

Cultural Environments

The relationships between human societies and the natural environment are complex. Environment affects society in countless ways, some of which are reflected by the different types of houses people build, the diverse crops they grow, and the kinds of livestock they can maintain. Societies modify their natural environments in ways that range from slight to severe. In this book we will frequently encounter evidence of human impact on natural environments. Public art and monumental architecture are parts of the cultural landscape, but so are pollution-belching smokestacks, contaminant-oozing landfills, and sludge-clogged streams.

But there is another question involving society and environment. Human cultures exist in a long-term accommodation with their physical environments, seizing opportunities presented by those environments and suffering from the limitations and extremes they sometimes impose. No culture, no matter how sophisticated technologically, can completely escape the forces of nature, as can be seen in the annual list of tornado casualties in the United States. But some cultures have overcome the apparent limitations of their natural environments more effectively than others. How can this be explained?

In the 1940s, the geographer Harlan Barrows argued that this is a central question for geographers, and he proposed the term *cultural ecology* to identify the arena in which the necessary research would take place. Actually, the whole issue of nature and culture had already taken center stage, albeit under a different heading.

From the field notes

“Looking down on Florence from above, what stands out are the symbols of church and state. And what symbols they are! The magnificent dome of the Cathedral was designed by one of the giants of the Italian Renaissance, Brunelleschi, whereas the Palazzo Vecchio (the Old Palace) was clearly meant to reflect both the authority of local governmental leaders and the greatness to which they aspired. Here is a landscape created by and for humans. It evokes much more than the aesthetic preferences of the Italians. It provides a dramatic reminder of where power and money were concentrated in the evolving city.”



Environmental Determinism Efforts to explain the achievements of certain cultures under particular environmental regimes had been going on for decades before Barrows tried to focus the debate. In fact, the fundamental questions were raised centuries earlier. The ancient Greeks, finding that some of the peoples subjugated by their expanding Empire were relatively docile while others were rebellious, attributed such differences to variations in climate.

In this connection, let us look again at the map of ancient culture hearths (Fig. 2-4). Note that many of these crucibles of cultural achievement lie in apparently unfavorable climatic zones such as deserts. Nonetheless, 23 centuries ago, Aristotle described the peoples of cold, distant Europe as being “full of spirit . . . but incapable of ruling others” and those of Asia (by which he meant modern-day Turkey) as “intelligent and inventive . . . [but] always in a state of subjection and slavery.”

Aristotle’s views on this topic were nothing if not durable. As recently as the first half of the twentieth century, similar notions still had strong support. Here is how Ellsworth Huntington (1876–1947), an early-twentieth-

century geographer, stated this idea in *Principles of Human Geography*, published in 1940:

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.

The doctrine expressed by these statements is referred to as environmentalism or, more precisely, **environmental determinism**. It holds that human behavior, individually and collectively, is strongly affected by—even controlled or determined by—the physical environment. It suggests that climate is the critical factor. Yet what constitutes an “ideal” climate lies in the eyes of the beholder. For Aristotle, it seems to have been the climate of Greece. Through the eyes of more recent commentators from Western Europe and North America, the climates most suited to progress and productivity in culture, politics, and technology are (you guessed it) those of Western Europe and the northeastern United States.

For a time, some geographers attempted to explain the distribution of centers of culture in terms of the “dictating environment.” Quite soon, however, some geographers doubted whether these sweeping generalizations were valid. They recognized exceptions to the environmentalists’ postulations (e.g., the Maya civilization in Mesoamerica arose under tropical conditions) and argued that humanity was capable of much more than merely adapting to the natural environment. As for the supposed “efficiency” produced by the climate of Western Europe, this idea ignored the fact that for millennia the most highly developed civilizations were found outside of Western Europe (North Africa, Southeast Asia, East Asia, etc.). Surely it was best not to base “laws” of environmental determinism on inadequate data in the face of apparently contradictory evidence.

Such arguments helped guide the search for answers to questions about the relationships between human society and the natural environment in different directions, but for several decades some geographers still held to the environmentalist position. In this connection it is interesting to read S. F. Markham’s *Climate and the Energy of Nations* (1947). Markham thought that he could detect in the migration of the center of power in the Mediterranean (from Egypt to Greece to Rome and onward) the changing climates of that part of Europe during several thousand years of glacial retreat. Markham saw the northward movement of isotherms—lines connecting points of equal temperature values—as a key factor in the shifting centers of power in the Ancient World.

Geographers grew increasingly cautious about such speculative notions, however, and they began asking new questions about societal-environmental relationships. If generalizations were to be made, they felt they ought to arise from detailed, carefully designed research. Everyone agrees that the natural environment affects human activity in some ways, but people are the decision makers and the modifiers—not the slaves of environmental forces. And the decisions people make about their environment are influenced by culture.

Reactions to environmentalism produced counterarguments. An approach known as **possibilism** emerged—espoused by geographers who 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 its members’ requirements and the technology available to them. The doctrine of possibilism became increasingly accepted, and environmental determinism became increasingly discredited—at least within geography. For those who have thought less carefully about the human-environment dynamic, environmentalism continues to hold an allure, leading to some highly questionable generalizations about the impact of the environment on humans.

Even possibilism has its limitations, for it encourages a line of inquiry that starts with the physical environment and asks what it allows. Yet human cultures have frequently pushed the boundaries of what was once thought to be environmentally possible by virtue of their own ideas and ingenuity. Moreover, in the interconnected, technologically dependent world we live in today, it is possible to do many things that are seemingly at odds with the local environment. Hence, research today tends to focus on how and why humans have altered the environment, and the sustainability of their practices. And in the process the perspectives of cultural ecology have been supplemented by those of **political ecology**—an area of inquiry fundamentally concerned with the environmental consequences of dominant political-economic arrangements and understandings.

The fundamental point is that human societies are sufficiently diverse and the human will is too powerful to be the mere objects of nature’s designs. We cannot escape the environmental contexts in which we are situated—nor should we try if the environmental degradation that has followed such efforts is any guide. Indeed, the effort to avoid any semblance of determinism has perhaps overly discouraged consideration of the impact of the environment on humans. What is clear, however, is that any inquiry that does not give credence to the extraordinary power of the intertwined domains of culture, politics, and economy in human-environment relations embarks on a path that has consistently been shown to be simplistic, if not fundamentally wrong.

◆ KEY TERMS ◆

acculturation	culture region	independent invention
assimilation	culture system	migrant diffusion
civilization	culture trait	perceptual region
contagious diffusion	diffusion	political ecology
cultural diffusion	environmental determinism	possibilism
cultural landscape	expansion diffusion	relocation diffusion
culture	geographic realm	sequent occupance
culture complex	geographic region	stimulus diffusion
culture hearth	hierarchical diffusion	transculturation
culture realm		

◆ APPLYING GEOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE ◆

1. During a certain week some years ago, several people in a village near a large East Asian city got the flu. Within days, hundreds of people in the city came down with it. In the surrounding countryside, numerous villagers in an ever-widening area became ill. Meanwhile, this Asian flu appeared in such cities as San Francisco, New York, London, and Moscow. What processes spreading this malady were at work in China and worldwide, and how do they differ? If you were unable to be immunized, how would you use your knowledge of geography to best protect yourself?
2. Ask a classmate to join you in a geographic experiment involving perceptual regions. The idea is to confirm, through a simple test, how regional perceptions can vary. First, agree on a U.S. or Canadian region to be defined; this should not be the region in which either of you resides. Next, take a blank outline map of North America (or at a larger scale, the United States or Canada), and separately draw a boundary that, in your view, delimits the region in question (such as the U.S. South or the Canadian West). Now compare your maps and, most importantly, explain why you defined the region as you did. What underlies your differing perceptions?