ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

For two decades at the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of environmental determinism was dominant in American geography, largely through the work of Ellsworth Huntington, a prominent geographer at Yale University. Environmental determinism proclaims that climate and terrain are the dominant forces in determining cultural directions. For example, people in the temperate climates of Europe and North America would have clear, quick minds, an abundance of creativity, and high levels of industry because of the bracing winds and seasonality of the midlatitudes. On the other hand, individuals in the hot, humid, and seasonally unchanging weather of the tropics would be lethargic and lacking in energy. Environmental determinism had important conceptual precedents. Prominent geographers such as Friedrich Ratzel, Halford J. Mackinder, and William Morris Davis, among others, had written convincingly about the role of the physical environment and its influences on human groups. Ratzel, who was German, wrote about the effects of different physical features on the course of human history in the first volume of his work Anthropogeographie (1882). Although his second volume in the series, published a few years later, spoke more directly about culture groups, many prominent geographers continued to hold with his pronouncements on the power of the physical environment. Mackinder, Britain’s dominant geographical leader at the end of the nineteenth century, also spoke of the influence of the physical environment on humans. Mackinder, in 1877, was seeking to find a solid role for geography in the expanding universities. He contended that no other discipline dealt with the interface of the natural world and human culture and that geography must take up that challenge. Mackinder further stated that the function of geography was to show how physical causes directed human activity. In the United States, Davis, in the late 1800s, contended that the core of geography was the relationship between the physical environment and human behavior. Reflective of the thinking at that time, Davis concluded that the physical world controlled human behavior. Environmental determinism is a concept that eventually was judged to be too rigid. Geographers began to move away from the strict deterministic tenet in this concept. Certainly the environment influences human activity and will have an impact on behavior, but to contend that environmental factors determined human behavior was seen to be too pointed. Environmental determinism gradually gave way to the more flexible and logical concept of possibilism in the 1920s.