**What is cultural geography?**

The term cultural geography implies an emphasis on human cultures rather than on the physical environment people live in. To understand the scope of cultural geography, we must first agree on what the word culture means. Social scientists and humanists have suggested many definitions of culture, some broad and some narrow. Furthermore, even within some disciplines not all scholars agree on a common definition.

For our purposes, we will define culture as learned collective behaviour, as opposed to instinctive, or inborn, behaviour. These learned traits form a total way of life held in common by a group of people. Learned similarities in speech, behaviour, ideology, livelihood, technology, value system, and society bind people together in culture. It involves a communication system of acquired beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that serves to supplement and channel instinctive behaviour.

Cultural geography, then, is the study of spatial variations among cultural groups and the spatial functioning of society. It focusses on describing and analysing the ways language, religion, economy, government, and other cultural phenomena vary or remain constant from one place to another and on explaining how human functions spatially. Cultural geography is, at heart, a celebration of human diversity. Because cultures are formed by groups of people, the cultural geographer is necessarily concerned with humans in the aggregate. However, you should not make the mistake of assuming that the individual person is culturally unimportant or powerless. A culture, after all, is not an organism or an irresistible force compelling its members to behave in a certain way. At the most basic level, culture is simply people interacting with one another. An individual is therefore potentially able to modify the culture he or she shares with others. Partly for this reason, change is an ever-present cultural phenomenon.

Anthropologists, historians, and sociologists share geographers’ fascination with culture. Geographers’ attention to culture overlaps that of many of these other social scientists and humanists. Even so, it is still possible to discern a focus of concern that sets geographers apart from other students of culture: the previously mentioned concern with the ways cultures and societies vary and function spatially. Geographers are trained to observe spatial patterns of all kinds, both human and environmental. Therefore, they are particularly well qualified to describe and interpret spatial variations in culture. Geographers recognize that any differences and similarities in cultures are the result of complex forces. As a result, they can rarely find easy explanations for the questions raised by spatial patterns in culture, causing them to adopt a rather holistic or integrative view of culture.

The complexity of the forces that affect culture can be illustrated by an example drawn from agricultural geography: the distribution of wheat cultivation in the world. Looking at the map in Fig. 1 you can see important wheat cultivation in Australia but not Africa, the United States but not Brazil, China but not Southeast Asia. Why does this spatial pattern exist? Partly it is due to environmental factors such as climate, terrain, and soils. Some regions have always been too dry for wheat cultivation, others too steep or infertile. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between wheat cultivation and midlatitude climates, level terrain, and good soil. Still don not place too much importance on such physical factors. People can now modify the effects of climate through irrigation or the development of new, specialized strains of wheat. They can conquer slopes through terracing, and they can make infertile soils productive through fertilization. For example, in the United States, environmental factors alone cannot explain the curious fact that major wheat cultivation is concentrated in the semiarid Great Plains, some distance from states such as Ohio and Illinois, where the climate for wheat is better.

The cultural geographer knows that wheat has to survive in a cultural as well as physical environment. Agricultural patterns cannot be explained by the characteristics of the land and climate alone. Many factors complicate the distribution of wheat, including people’s tastes, desires, and traditions. Food preferences and taboos, often backed by religious beliefs, strongly influence the choice of crops to plant. Some cultural groups, such as the Poles, prefer dark bread made from rye flour. Other groups, particularly American Indians, would rather eat breads made from corn. Obviously, wheat will not “thrive’ in such cultural environments. Where wheat bread is preferred, people are willing to put great efforts into overcoming hostile physical surroundings. They have even created new strains of wheat, thereby decreasing the environment’s influence on distribution. Economics also enters the picture. Wheat farming is a less profitable use of the land than dairying or fattening livestock. For this reason, wheat is sometimes not grown in the most suitable regions, such as the American Midwest.

This is by no means a complete list of the forces that affect wheat distribution. It should be clear, though, that the contemporary map of wheat reflects the pushing and pulling of many factors. The distribution of all cultural elements, not only the distribution of wheat, is a result of the constant interplay of diverse causal factors.