**Man-Nature Relationship**

According to Glacken (1956 and 1967) three different modes of nature-society or man-environment relations have permeated the history of Western thought:

* Humanity in harmonious relationship with nature;
* Humanity as determined by nature; and
* Humanity as modifier of nature.

The man as modifier and conqueror of nature view has dominated modern thought though the other two perspective have by no means been completely absent.

Environmental determinism and possibilism are the two mutually exclusive philosophies in human geography, centred around man -whether Man to be looked upon as a ‘passive being’ or as an ‘active force’, reacting to his environment and changing it. In other words, in the deterministic view of struggle and survival, i.e. the environment controls the course of human action, explained as consequences of natural conditions. The philosophy of possibilism on the other hand, reflects the view that the “pattern of human activity on the earth’s surface is the result of the initiative and mobility of man operating within a frame of natural forces. Without denying the limits every environment sets to man’s ambition, they emphasize the scope of man’s action rather than these limits.

The Deterministic Perspective

The philosophy of environmental determinism is, perhaps, the oldest surviving philosophy that can be traced back to the classical antiquity. However, geographer’s interest in the study of man-environment relationships got a new lease of life after the publication of Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1959), owing to the underlying emphasis on ecological relationship between an organism and its environment in the evolutionary thesis, and the notions of organization, and struggle and selection. The Darwinian theory gave new respectability to geography as a field of learning. The fact that the Darwinian theory of biological evolution through selection and struggle in which the fittest survived appeared to offer a scientific justification for European domination of the lesser mortals in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Geography as the science of environmental relationships became the vehicle for putting forth this justification for European imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, many modern geographers (e.g., Hudson and Stoddart) have argued that the rise of geography as a university-level discipline in the last quarter of the nineteenth century owed a great deal to its usefulness in the task of justifying the current phase of European imperialism in terms of varying natural qualities and abilities of the different ‘racial’ groups. The justification was carried out through disciplinary focus on environmental determinism. The line of argument pursued was: Differences in physical and mental abilities of different societies, and in the level of their cultural and economic potential and achievement, were caused by the regional differences in the quality of natural environment, so that European domination of people in the other lands was natural and in line with the wishes of the Creator. The inherent competitiveness and aggression in capitalism and imperial expansionism were justified as the natural pattern of behaviour for any species in terms of the Darwinian thesis. Indeed, English philosopher Herbert Spence advocated the application of the Darwinian theory to the study of human society – a line of thought that came to be known as social Darwinism of which the best advocate in geography was German geographer Friedrich Ratzel. This was the most popular theory of geography pursued through out the world during that period of European domination.

The first forceful attack on the tenets of environmental determinism in modern geography came only in the late 1920s from Wittfogel (1929) who denied the thesis of direct natural causation of inherent human characteristics. He maintained instead that human labour organized in different social forms moulded nature into the different material bases for economic development of regional societies. This is what created the distinctive regional cultural traits, rather than the environment per se. Thus, man made himself: Societies are human creations rather than natural/environmental creations. Wittfogel was however, not opposed to the idea of natural forces being a potent influence in man’s life upon earth.

After the Second World War, the philosophy of environmentalism was further attacked. Many geographers in the United States, Britain, Canada and other countries drew attention to the one-sided approach adopted by the environmentalist in their interpretation of historical reality, to their exaggeration of nature’s active role and to the fact that they only acknowledge man as capable of passive attempts at adaptation. Actions of man reveal many facts for which environmental forces alone can give no satisfactory explanation.

The Possibilist Perspective

An alternative view of environmentalism in geography around the beginning of the twentieth century found wide acceptance in France according to which the physical environment offers opportunities for a range of possible directions of development, and it depended on human initiative as to which particular directions of progress was chosen. The basic premise that the environment presents a range of opportunities, and it is for human groups in particular places to choose between them, came to be known by the name of possibilism. This view is generally identified with the French school of human geography that developed around the turn of the twentieth century under the leadership of Vidal de la Blache. The possibilistic view of man-environment relations developed by Blache represented a middle course between the views of the French sociologist Emelie Durkhiem (who proposed that human geography should be reduced to the study of social morphology, comprising, “the mass of individuals who comprise the society, the manner in which they are disposed upon the earth, and the nature and configuration of objects of all sorts which affect collective relations”) and the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel.

Vidal rejected Durkheim’s view of human geography as social morphology, and insisted instead that man “joins in nature’s game” and the external environment (milieu externe) was a partner not a slave of human activity. On the contrary, he shared Ratzel’s view that society ought not to be left “suspended in air”, that it must be placed against the environment in which it grows; but he squarely rejected any notion of environmental determinism associated with the Ratzelian view of geography as propounded by his American disciple Ellen Churchill Semple (1911). He was emphatic that “nature is never more than an advisor”, and that man’s interaction with the external environment revealed the human being as “at once both active and passive”. The Vidalian approach to the environment followed a middle course between extreme (radical) possibilism and strict environmental determinism. Blache rejected the view that society and nature stood out as adversaries in the man-environment confrontation. For him, man was part of nature (“living creation”) and, therefore, its most active collaborator. The concept of genre de vie (way of life) was Vidal de la Blache’s formulation to resolve man-environment duality, in that the life styles of the people in particular locales revealed that physical factors and human ingenuity collaborated to create distinctive genre die vie.

French historian Lucien Febvre supported Vidal’s view in his famous phrase “there are not necessities but everywhere possibilities; and man, as master of these possibilities is the judge of their use” (Febre, 1932). This was a modified view of the Vidalian perspective, since in its essentials the Vidalian view of possibilism “could still legitimately be regarded as a qualification rather than a negation of environmental determinism”. In spite of the fact that man has numerous possibilities in a given physical setting, he cannot go against the directions laid by the physical environment. The possibilistic approach has been criticized by many contemporary thinkers. Griffith Taylor, while criticizing possibilism, opined that society as a whole should make a choice, and since only an advisory role is assigned to geographer, his function “is not that of interpreting nature’s plan”. Moreover, possibilism does not encourage study of geographical environment and it promotes over anthropocentrism in geography.