Chapter 8

Environmental and Geographic Determinism: Jared Diamond and His Ideas

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Introduction

The relationship between man and his environment has been a persistent theme through several centuries of geographical work. This relationship has now developed into a major social issue, as the planet faces deepening environmental problems. To recognize geography’s contributions to current environmental problems, it is necessary to understand past and current theories on the complex interaction between humankind and the environment. Numerous studies have been carried out to clarify this relationship, but there has been no synthesis of these perspectives on the past and present.

Achieving the integration of high quality natural science research with the social sciences has proven difficult. In the social sciences, grand theories become “science” when they accurately comprehend the structure and dynamic of a part, or an aspect, of reality. Recently, Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* has enjoyed remarkable success at both the popular and academic levels. It argues that the distribution of wealth and power among societies around the world has been determined by biogeographic and environmental factors. His approach, from the point of view of geographic determinism, was to evaluate why societies located in different parts of the world
develop in different ways. Therefore, this chapter presents the historical context and main concepts of environmental determinism, and examines environmental determinism’s claim to universal validity and its inclusion as a Grand Theory in the social sciences.

**Historical Contexts of Environmental and Geographic Determinism**

From the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, human geography was dominated by what is known as environmentalism. This field was concerned with documenting the “influence of the natural environmental on human geographies and, in particular, civilizations.” Environmental determinism, however, is the notion that the environment controls or determines the course of human action. Keith Buchanan describes “the old environmentalist approach as the belief that the natural environment firmly molded man and his activities, a belief that in its extreme form postulated an inevitable, almost fatalistic, relationship between man and environment.”

A student of the German scholar Friedrich Ratzel in the 1890s, Ellen Churchill Semple is also widely interpreted as having introduced Ratzelian ideas into the mainstream of the subdiscipline of U.S. geography. She dominated the environmentalist period of the discipline in the early twentieth century and trained a large number of those who became leaders of the profession during the period between the two world wars. She was exploring some major ideas, and her theories served significant sociopolitical interests. In her work she has argued that the physical environment, rather than social conditions, determines culture, defining geography as the “scientific investigation of the physical conditions of historical events.” Another prominent environmental determinist, William Morris Davis, found that “a relation between an element of inorganic control and one of organic response” stated in terms of a “causal or explanatory relationship” was the “most definite, if not the only, unifying principle that I can find in geography.”

Shortly thereafter, Gordon R. Lewthwaite argued that environmental determinism is “the view that the physical, natural or geographic environment rigidly controls human action.” He stated that “the definition of geography is the study of relationships between the environment and man.” Finally, “determinism, in geography,” is “frequently an abbreviation for the particular determinism which selects the geographic environment as the primary control of human life.”