

GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM

A.

N. Chumakov

Geographical Determinism * (from Greek *geographia*, or “description of the Earth” and Latin *determine*, “I define”): a world outlook and a scientific/philosophical school whose backers absolutize the influence of geographical conditions on human lives and actions claiming that geographical environment is the determinative factor of social development. Under geographical environment is meant, as a rule, the part of terrestrial nature (the upper lithosphere, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, flora and fauna) involved in human activities and being a necessary precondition for social existence and development. A concept, opposite to geographical determinism—geographical indeterminism—rejects causality as far as interactions between nature and society are concerned.

Although the French philosophers of the eighteenth century Turgot and Montesquieu are commonly thought of as the founders of geographical determinism, this concept dates back to Antiquity. We can distinguish between real geographical determinism developed by the Greek historians Herodotus and Strabo aiming at revealing the dialectics of interrelations between nature and human development; physiological geographical determinism founded by the Greek physician Hippocrates and studying interconnections between human health and natural environment; geopolitical geographical determinism dating back to the Greek historian Thucydides and studying the influence of nature on social development. Putting a lot of emphasis on climate variations among different regions, the Greeks considered Greece and the Mediterranean the friendliest environment for human life and activities.

In the eighteenth century a mechanistic geographical determinism emerged insisting on nearly total dependence of human activity on natural environment. The founder and the most outstanding representative of this school was the French Enlightenment philosopher Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755). In his large treatise *On the Spirit of Laws* he extensively announced his concept, stating that their geographical and climatic environment directly causes human life, morals, laws, customs, and even political organization. Acknowledging that nature has created all people equal from their birth he, at the same time, stresses their differences from a geographical determinist viewpoint. He wrote that fruitless land makes people industrious, ascetic, hard working, fearless, and belligerent because they must get for themselves what their land is unable to provide; fertile land brings not only wealth but also femininity and an unwillingness to sacrifice human lives. Montesquieu gives the same explanations when describing life of insular nations. They are, according to him, more prone to freedom than continental inhabitants because the small sizes characteristic of islands make oppression of one part of the population rather hard for the other part. Islands are separated from the big empires by a sea and they cannot support a tyranny; besides, a sea intercepts a conqueror.

That is why, Montesquieu thought, insular nations are not in danger of being conquered and it is easier for them to preserve their laws.

A bit later an English economist Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) developed these ideas and put forward his prominent concept that there is some “natural law” regulating the level of population in accordance with the available food supply. According to this law, population growth always exceeds the growth of the means of subsistence because population increases in a geometrical ratio while the means of subsistence increase in an arithmetical ratio, which necessarily leads to “absolute overpopulation” that threatens many social disasters. Emphasizing strict determination of social development by the eternal laws of nature Malthus argued that the laws of nature are unchangeable from the beginning of the world.

German ethnographer and geographer F. Ratzel was the foremost representative of geographical determinism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Building upon ideas of Kant, von Humboldt, Ritter, and others, he was the first one to link politics to geography in his attempts to explain the behavior of this or that state by its geographical position and the space it occupies. The fullest description of these ideas can be found in his volume *Political Geography* (1887). Arguing that human beings are a part of the whole world and that landscape and natural environment have a central impact on the character of nations living in various regions of the planet, Ratzel came to the conclusion that human beings must, like plants and animals, adapt to their natural environment. Moreover, even a state’s wealth depends on to what extent it has adjusted itself to its natural environment, because a state, from Ratzel’s point of view, is a biological organism acting according to the laws of biology and is rooted in the land like a tree. He concluded that expansion of living space (*Lebensraum*), or territorial expansion, is the most important means for a state to acquire power. Ratzel applied his ideas to Germany arguing that its central economic and political problems were caused by unjustly drawn and too narrow borders limiting the country’s progressive development.

It is evident that territory, climate, resources, landscape, and the lay of the ground, have an impact on social development because while working and producing material goods people use various natural materials, and the broader the sphere of their economic activity becomes, the more actively they use these materials. As a result, the sphere of direct interactions between humans and nature undergoes changes and expansion, meaning the role of the geographical environment in social life grows. While primitive people mostly used natural living sources (plants and animals) and made their labor tools from naturally available materials (stone and wood), at later stages of historical development the significance of mineral and energy resources grew and the geography of human activity expanded dramatically. Simultaneously the complexity of labor was constantly growing due to geographical factors because human activity took place not only within friendly environments but also under severe, life-threatening natural conditions. So, moderate climate, fertile land, and optimal humidity provide an opportunity for bountiful harvest under relatively low labor costs, and

natural resources' availability and their easy extraction make mining simpler and the production costs lower.

Up to our century, human economic and social life depended on the geographic environment and the forces of nature less than when their economic and technical capabilities were higher. In the twentieth century this trend changed and even reversed. That means now, after humankind has become a planetary phenomenon, its economic growth encounters natural limits of the geographic environment that is too limited in its size and resources to correspond to the growing human productive activity. It has been calculated that over the last three years the amount of raw materials consumed equaled the amount consumed during the whole of previous history. In the next decades, if the speed of economic growth is the same, industrial production may grow two to three times more, causing a demand for an additional huge amount of natural resources.

The image of the Earth has been even more changed after the emergence of human-made environments, or so-called "second nature" (See also Anthroposphere; Technosphere). That means the presence of huge megalopolises and countless cities and towns covering nearly all the inhabitable territory of our planet's continents and islands. That also means a dense net of roads and railways, channels, pits, dumps, waste sites, and other objects made by humans that did not previously exist. Thus, nowadays human beings play the major role in changing the geographical environment but, at the same time, after having encountered the above-mentioned natural constraints they have lost their relative independence from them. This does not just explain the long-lasting attempts to find theoretical foundations for the role of geographical environment in social development, but also makes many discussions concerning the process of globalization and the re-emergence of global problems especially significant.