

POSSIBILISM

Possibilism in geography developed as a reaction to extreme generalizations of environmental determinists that led to a counter thesis, of possibilism, which presented the man as an active rather than a passive agent.

This philosophy attempts to explain man and environment relationship in a different way, taking man as an active agent in environment. This is a belief which asserts that natural environment provides options, the number of which increases as the knowledge and technology of a cultural group develop.

Led by French geographers,

the followers of historian Lucian Febure, possibilists presented a model of people perceiving the range of alternative uses to which they could put an environment and selecting that which best fitted their cultural dispositions. This point of view was named 'possibilism' by Lucien Febvre, who writes: "The true and only geographical problem is that of utilization of possibilities. There are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities.

The natural data (factors) are much more the material than the cause of human development. The 'essential cause' is less nature, with its resources and its obstacles, than man himself and his own nature."

According to Febvre, a possibilist, “man is a geographic agent and not the least. He everywhere contributes his share towards investing the physiognomy of the earth with those changing expressions which is the special charge of geography to study.”

Vidal refuted the concept of physical determinism and advocated possibilism. “Nature sets limits and offers possibilities for human settlement, but the way man reacts or adjusts to these conditions depends on his own traditional way of life.”

But, the possibilists recognize the limitations imposed by physical environment. Febvre

echoes this view: "Men can never entirely rid themselves whatever they do of the hold their environment has on them." In the similar manner, Brunhes remarks: "The power and means which man has at his disposal are limited and he meets in nature bounds which he cannot cross. Human activity can within certain limits varies its play and its environment, but it cannot do away with its environment, it can only modify it but it can never surpass it, and will always be conditioned by it." Brunhes further writes: "Nature is not mandatory but permissive."

Similarly, Lablache says: "There is no question of geographical determinism,

nevertheless, geography is a key that cannot be dispensed with.”

Possibilism is also associated with the French School of Geography founded by Vidal de Lablache (1845-1918). The French geographers saw in the physical environment a series of possibilities for human development, but argued that the actual ways in which development took place were related to the culture of the people concerned, except perhaps in regions of extremes like deserts and tundra.

The historian Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) set out to demolish the environmental deterministic argument by asserting the initiative and mobility of man as against the passivity of the environment, and regarded other humans as part of environment, of any group because they contributed to the formation of the next group's cultural surroundings, or milieu. Among those influenced by this type of thinking was H.J. Fleure (1877-1969) who tried to formulate world regions based on human characteristic rather than the traditional climatic—biotic regions. So he brought forth a scheme which included 'regions of effort', 'regions of hunger' and 'industrialized regions', to name a few.

Possibilism has also been influential in the rise of the school of cultural geography associated with the name of Carl Ortwin Sauer and the University of California at Berkeley, and with the development of the idea of human ecology. The founder of this latter notion (human ecology) was H.H. Barrows (1877-1960) of the University of Chicago.

The possibilists cited numerous examples in support of their argument. There are distinct zones which are distributed symmetrically on each side of the equator, great climato-botanic frames, unequally rich in possibilities, unequally

in possibilities, unequally favourable to the different human races, and unequally fitted for human development; but the impossibility is never absolute—even for the races least ‘adapted’ to them—and all probabilities are often found to be upset by the persistent and supple will of man. The ‘environmental determinist’ thesis has it that these frames constitute “a group of forces which act directly on man with sovereign and decisive power”, and which govern “every manifestation of his activity from the simplest to the most important and most complicated”.

The roots of Possibilism :can be traced back to the works of Plato(428-348 B.C.), (master of deductive reasoning) and Strabo (64 B.C.): Humans can make things happen by their own intelligence over time.



18TH Century: French scholar– Montesquieu, who is credited with developing a doctrine analogous to modern paradigm of possibilism



18TH Century French philosopher, Comte de Buffon.

-man was ordered to conquer the earth and even transform it. Their views laid the base for crypto-possibilistic hypothesis



19TH Century: George Perkins Marsh (1864) of America and Kirchoff made an attempt to put forward a non-deterministic approach to human geography; they focused on the man himself.

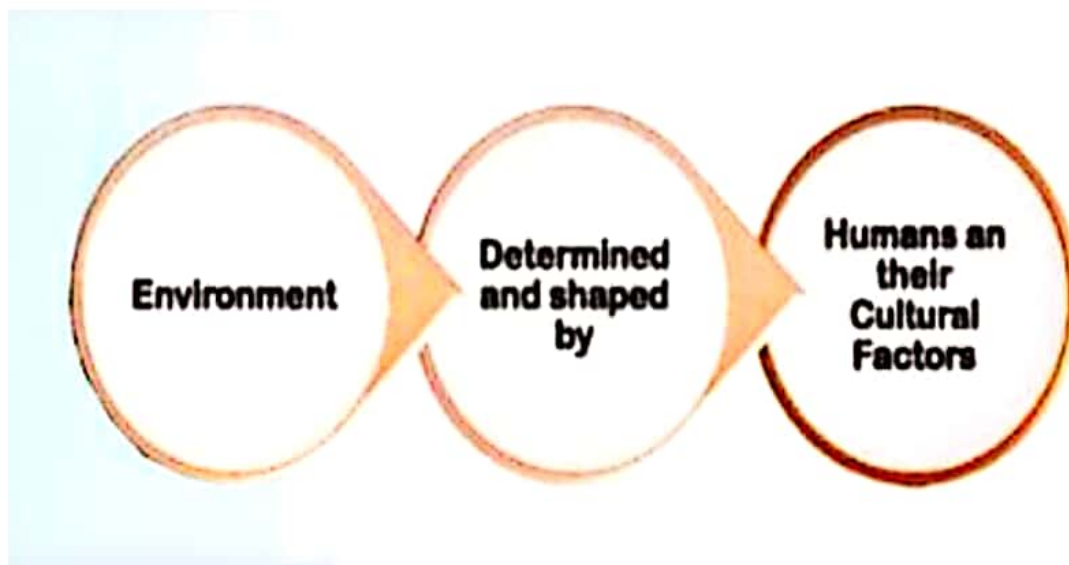


**Late 19th century: under the leadership of Vidal De la Blache (1845 – 1918)
A possibilistic view of man-environment developed.**

Basic Knowledge about possibilism

- Possibilism in cultural geography is the theory that the environment sets certain constraints or limitations, but culture is otherwise determined by social conditions.
- In Cultural ecology Marshall Sahlins used this concept in order to develop alternative approaches to the environmental determinism dominant at that time in ecological studies.
- Theory by Strabo in 64 BC that humans can make things happen by their own intelligence over time. Strabo cautioned against the assumption that nature and actions of humans were determined by the physical environment they inhabited. He observed that humans were the active elements in a human-environmental partnership.

Environmental possibilism



- The controversy between geographical possibilism and determinism might be considered as one of (at least) three dominant Epistemologic controversies of contemporary geography.
- The other two controversies are
 - 1) the "debate between Neo-positivists and Neokantians about the "exceptionalism" or the specificity of geography as a science
 - 2) the contention between Mackinder and Kropotkin about what is—or should be—geography".
- Possibilism in geography is, thus, considered as a distinct approach to geographical knowledge, directly opposed to geographical determinism.