

Possibilism in Geography

1. Introduction:

The relationship between man and environment has been of increasing interest to geographers throughout its history. One can say that the idea of geography as the study of man-environment relationship has a long history and has led to a long-standing debate about the position of man in relation to nature. Determinism and possibilism are the two mutually elite philosophies in geography which are centered on a man and his place in nature. Both these doctrines try to place man within the ambit of the environment and deliberate on the issue whether a man should be looked upon as a 'passive' agent or an 'active force' while interacting with the environment. In this process, he not only adapts to the environment but also brings changes within it.

The deterministic point of view states that human activities are controlled by the environment (Lewthwaite, 1966). They propose that man is just a passive force in front of nature as nature determines man's activities and in no way, man is free to control his life. Possibilism, on the other hand, argues that the relationship between man and nature is not so as human beings have the capacity to choose between a range of possible responses to physical conditions.

2. Historical Background:

Since ancient times, determinism has been an important notion defining the man-environment relationship. The idea was that man is a product of nature or physical environment moulds the human culture (Glacken, 1967). Most of the early scholars like Aristotle, Eratosthenes, Strabo, and Hippocrates were deterministic in their approach. For example, Aristotle believed that the world's climatic zones – frigid, temperate and torrid; determined habitability of man.

In medieval times, French scholar Montesquieu in his work *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) discusses how climatic conditions govern the degeneration and persistence of cultural traits. This philosophy even dominated the writings of Arab scholars especially Al-Masudi, Ibn-Battuta, and Ibn-Khaldun. In the early modern period, Kant vehemently supported determinism. Ritter, one of the founding fathers of Modern geography also had a tilt towards anthropocentric approach and advocated geographical determinism. Ratzel (1844-1904) also propagated new determinism where he emphasized that man holds a higher position than other organisms; still accepting that determinism is a dominant force in explaining the man-environment relationship. In the second volume of 'Anthropogeographie', he analyzes socio-economic activities and culture of man in relation to the physical environment. This concept at the later stage became an inspiration for Vidal de la Blache.

Apart from determinism, scientific concepts like deductive approach, Darwin's theory of evolution, Newtonian cause and effect relationships in the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century influenced a number of geographers in France. This led to the foundation of the modern school in France (France School of Geographical Thought) which had its roots in the philosophy of possibilism. Vidal de la Blache, Gallois, Brunhes, Demangeon, Emmanuel De Martonne, Blanchard, and all advocated the paradigm of possibilism. This philosophy is in direct contrast to determinism and puts a man in the first place that is a man and no longer the earth or climate influences man's habitability. Thus, presents man as an active rather than the passive agent.

3. The Rise of Possibilism

The doctrine of possibilism tries to explain the relationship of a human being with the environment in a different way; it puts human at a higher level and regards it as an active agent. It is a principle which claims that environment provides opportunities and man being an economic man chooses from those possibilities. Febvre (1932) in '*A Geographical Introduction*

to History' stated '*there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities; and man, as the master of these possibilities, is the judge of their use*'.

The roots of possibilism can be traced back to the works of **Plato**, who is considered the master of deductive reasoning. Though his idea went into gloom for hundreds of years; the contrasting doctrine of determinism continued to grow and flourished. It got support in the writings of French scholar of the eighteenth century – **Montesquieu**, who is credited with developing a doctrine analogous to modern paradigm of possibilism. He opined that man possesses free will and has the ability to choose from a series of opportunities. Similar thoughts were also put forward by another eighteenth-century French philosopher, **Comte de Buffon**. He believed that man was ordered to conquer the earth and even transform it. Their views laid the base for *crypto-possibilistic hypothesis* (Adhikari, 2010).

In the nineteenth century, **George Perkins Marsh** and **Kirchoff** made an attempt to put forward a non-deterministic approach to human geography; they focused on the man himself. It was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that under the leadership of **Vidal De la Blache** (1845 – 1918), a possibilistic view of man-environment developed. The focus of this philosophy was "*Nature has set boundaries and has provided possibilities for human settlement, but the way a person responds to these conditions or adjusts it depends on the traditional way of life.*" Vidal rejected the concept of material determinism and advocated favourability. He even rejected Durkheim's opinion of human geography as social morphology rather insisted that man was a partner and not a slave of the environment (Dikshit, 2009). He was critical of Darwinian-Ratzelian heritage which proposed environmental determinism and put forth the concept of possibilism. He sought a scheme for understanding the interaction of nature and culture that eschewed both environmental determinism and radical possibilism to seek answers or solution for the dichotomy between the human and the environment.

He vehemently rejected the idea that society and nature stood out as adversaries in the human-nature confrontation. For him, the man was part of nature and therefore, its most active collaborator. To resolve this dichotomy he generated the concept of '*genre de vie*'. '*Genre de vie*' (way of life) includes all activities, practices, and techniques that characterize the adaptation of a human group to the *milieu* – the natural surroundings of their habitat (Mercier, 2009). Vidal pointed out that the same *genre de vie* had different interpretations for various human groups. Thus, his works gave a sound methodological as well as a philosophical foundation for the

doctrine of possibilism. This growth somewhat weakened the hold of Darwinian Determinism within the geographical thinking.

In the twentieth century, possibilism got stronghold after the publication of Blache's article in 1913 where he categorically states that geography as a discipline seeks to measure and role of man in modifying the earth surface. This was further strengthened when his book was published in 1921 (English translation in 1926), though posthumously. He observes that nature gives man materials which have their inherent needs as well as limitations thus leading them to limited uses.

Possibilism was further flourished by acclaimed historian **Lucien Febvre** (1878-1956). He puts forward - "*Whatever the men do in their own environment, they cannot completely get rid of themselves completely.*" Febvre emphasized human initiative and motivation against the environment, destroying the environmental deterministic reasoning and as part of the environment of any group, as well as other humans, because they belong to the next group's cultural surroundings, or the constraints of the environment are influenced by such thinking. He stated that in the view of possibilists, a homogeneous region does not necessarily result in a homogeneous society. This is because people residing in any area have the choice of possibilities time to time and also in the quantity they want.

Bruhnes followed Blache's ideas and took it to next step, he not only transmitted Blache's philosophy in France but also disseminated it to different parts of the world. In 1910, his monumental work *La Geographie de L'Histoire* was published. His prime focus was on the actualities of exploitation of the earth by man. commented: "*The power that is meant is limited, and it meets in it the bounds of nature that it cannot cross human activity can change within its boundaries and its environment. But it cannot be removed from its environment, it can only modify it, but it can never cross it, and it will always be conditioned by it.*" He also stated that - "*Nature is not compulsory but the approval.*"

Futility is also associated with the French school of geography; French geographers saw a series of possibilities for human development in the physical environment, but argued that the development in the real development was related to the culture of related people, perhaps in the field of extremes like deserts and tundra.

Criticisms

Despite the fact that humans have many possibilities in some physical setting, they cannot go against the instructions set by the physical environment. Many contemporary thinkers have criticized the possibilistic approach. Griffith Taylor, criticizing the possibility, said that the society should elect entirely, and since only one advisory role has been assigned to geography, therefore their work is not "plan of explanatory nature". Taylor was fairly right when he wrote that the work of geography is not the study of all the problems related to natural environment and humans, human or 'cultural landscape'. Apart from this, the possibilities do not encourage the study of the physical environment and promote humanism in geography.

Geographical determinism forces at least geography to focus on nature, and if the question is asked who is deciding to destroy the geography, then everyone should blame on the doors of the prospects. Thus, imbalance tried to exaggerate the role of culture and to ignore the importance of the natural environment. In essence, the possibilities of probability can be careless as determinism, but there is a possibility that the extent of the work to be done by the environment is recognized, and to avoid great generalization, which is characteristic of their opponents.

The Neutrality of Possibilism Certain implications logically follows from this distinction. In the first place, it seems clear that (psychological affinities apart), possibilism has virtually no connection with the philosophical problem of determinism and free will. If the environment alone is considered, it may well be true, as Brunhes insisted, that there are "no necessities but everywhere possibilities,"⁵² but this leaves unsolved the further question of why one possibility should be selected rather than another. Unless the geographer then follows the chain of causation back and back through space and time and plumbs its very psychological or metaphysical depths (and how many geographers do that?), the problem of freedom and necessity remains unresolved. Nor are other particular determinisms banished: in fact, all that possibilism does or can do is to assert that whether or not human activity is free or determined, it is not determined solely by geographic conditions, a denial that leaves the door wide open to the forceful entry of other controls. Geographers may agree with Tatham that the Danish decision to turn from wheat-growing to dairying involved deliberate choice rather than environmental constraint,⁵ but this still **50 Platt, op. cit., footnote 49, p. 126, note 1. 51 Schaeffer, op. cit., footnote 10, p. 247. 52**

Brunhes, op. cit., footnote 16, p. 607. 53Tatham, in G. Taylor (Ed.), op. cit., footnote 8, p.

149. leaves the question unsolved: was the choice free or was it necessitated by some other factor, psychological, political, or economic, per chance? In point of fact, the only form of determinism with which possibilism is incompatible is geographic determinism: the field is left wide open for every other particular determinism as well as the overarching necessitarian principle. It was the realization of this fact which led Platt, involved in a plea for the reality of human choice, to complain that complex "determinism may persist as a false guide in geography even after environmentalism has been banished from the field."⁵⁴ Conversely, it is doubtful whether many deterministic philosophers have been sympathetic with their presumed allies working in geography. Freud was a determinist in general and in particular, but he was certainly not a geographical one, whereas Communists, committed both to economic determinism and the transforming power of social revolution, repudiate any theory that the Marxist vision may be frustrated by an environmental veto: it is possibilism which such determinists favour.