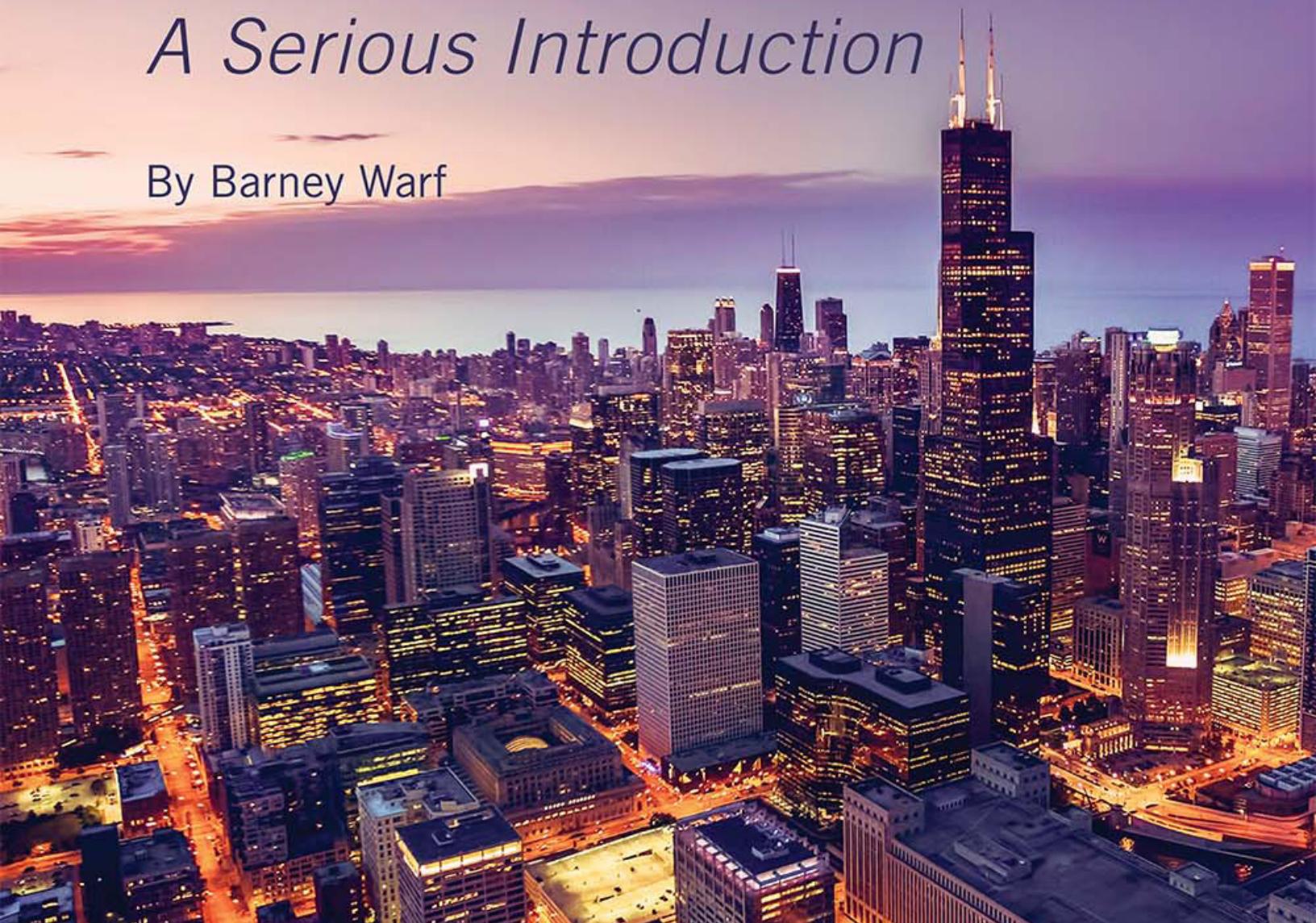


SECOND EDITION

# HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

*A Serious Introduction*

By Barney Warf



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# HUMAN GEOGRAPHY: A SERIOUS INTRODUCTION

Second Edition

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## Chapter One

# UNDERSTANDING HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

## MAIN POINTS

1. Geography is the study of the space of Earth's surface, including its physical and human-made characteristics and how regions reflect the combinations of these features.
2. Geographies—the spatial distributions and movements of people, goods, technologies, ideas, and other phenomena on Earth's surface—are human creations that change over time.
3. Space and landscapes have three key aspects: the natural environment; the distribution of social phenomena, such as population and culture; and the way that people think about and represent their worlds.
4. Maps help people represent and understand their worlds by structuring spatial information.
5. Five themes help us understand human geography:

**Theme 1:** Historical context: History is the study of people through time, and human geography studies people in space. Geographies are produced historically; histories unfold geographically; and understanding one requires understanding the other.

**Theme 2:** Networks and interdependence: Every place is part of a system of places. Places are always interconnected to one another.

**Theme 3:** People and the environment: Human geographies always reflect how people are affected by and, in turn, affect the natural environment.

**Theme 4:** Culture and space: To know how people make geographies, we must understand their culture, including the ideologies, languages, religions, and webs of meaning they use to make sense of the world.

**Theme 5:** Social relations: Societies are structured systems of economic, political, and cultural activity. Geographies reflect the societies that make them.

6. Landscapes are both tangible and intangible expressions of how societies are organized economically, politically, and culturally.
7. The term **region** refers to broad areas with similar characteristics.
8. Geographers use a broad array of analytical techniques, both quantitative and qualitative, to gather data and to interpret the distributions of people and human-produced phenomena.

**T**hink of the **landscape** of your campus: the distribution of its buildings, the open spaces in between, the areas in which people congregate (for example, for lunch) and those that are empty (maybe the library), the sports facilities, the administration offices, and the classrooms. A campus is a geography, a **place**, a locale where faculty, students, staff, administrators, and others come together. It is a system of people gathered in a **location** (specific spot on the planet's surface) for a variety of related purposes. Elements of the natural environment appear in it, but this environment has been extensively modified over time. It both resembles other campuses and differs from them; it combines the general and the unique. A campus is the site of both physical interactions and intangible, symbolic ones (for example, learning or the quest for social status). The activities of its inhabitants follow regular patterns that fluctuate on a daily and weekly basis, as well as over the academic year. The campus's organization reflects many forces, including its history, its planning and architectural codes, and the behavior of its users. For example, wealthy private schools will have different landscapes and different student bodies than underfunded public ones. In all these ways, a campus is a microcosm of what human geographers study: the ways in which different combinations of social forces come together to produce a unique spatial arrangement. A campus is simultaneously physical and cultural, economic and political, local and global, a union of many factors that shape its form, function, and structure over time.

The word “geography” has Greek roots: *geo* means “Earth,” *graph* means “to write.” Literally, then, what geographers do is Earth-writing. Geography is the study of **space**, how Earth’s surface is used, how societies produce places, and how human activities are stretched among different locations. In many respects, geography is the study of space in much the same way

that history is the study of people in time. This conception differs vastly from popular stereotypes that often portray geographers as concerned only with making maps or drawing boundaries and obsessed with memorizing the names of obscure capital cities. **Physical geography** addresses the physical world (for example, climates and landforms, rivers and streams, soils, plants, and animals). **Human geography** addresses the human world (for example, agricultural activities, migration, the spread of disease, political conflicts, and settlement patterns) (Figure 1.1).

Essentially, the *discipline of geography examines why things are located where they are*. Simply knowing where things are located is relatively simple; anyone with a good atlas can find out, for example, where bananas are grown or the distribution of petroleum reserves. Geographers are much more interested in explaining the *processes* that give rise to **spatial distributions**, not simply mapping those patterns. For example, rather than merely noting the changing locations of jobs in banking, geographers seek to understand why firms move from one city to another or

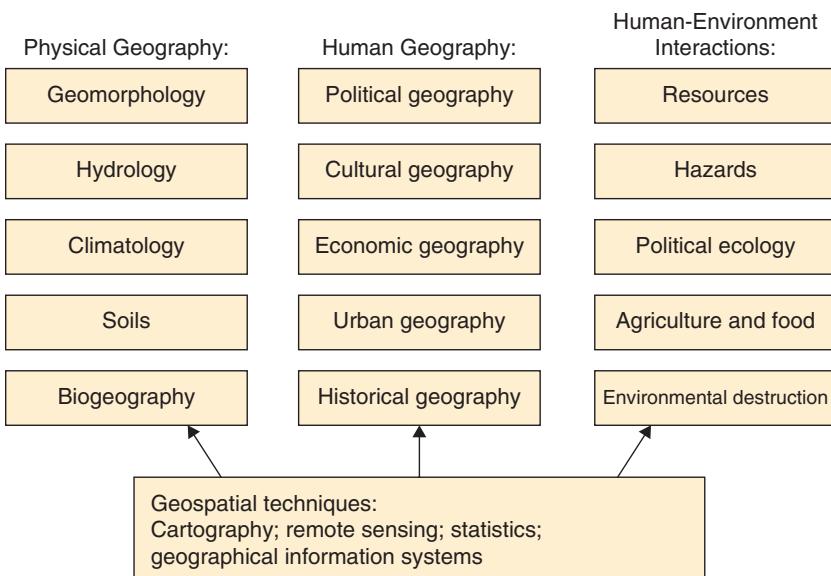


Figure 1.1: Human geography is one part of the broader discipline of geography, which is concerned with how Earth's surface is organized and shaped by physical and social processes. Geographers study a wide array of topics that include both environmental and human phenomena, and they use several geospatial techniques such as maps, statistics, remotely sensed images, and geographical information systems.

from one country to another in an age of **globalization**. Much more interesting than simply finding patterns on Earth's surface is the *explanation* linking the spatial outcomes to the social and environmental processes that give rise to them. Thus, geographers examine not only where people and places are located, but how people understand those places, give them meaning, change them, and are, in turn, changed by them. To understand how geographies are created and change over time is to understand the ways in which societies give rise to new forms of spatial organization. For example, comprehending the shift of the U.S. population from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West entails appreciating the impacts of migration, birth and death rates, immigration, government spending, favorable climates, water shortages, urban growth, and the changing national distribution of jobs. Because this issue involves both social and environmental topics, geography studies the distribution of both human and natural phenomena. For this reason, it lies at the intersection of the social and physical sciences, as well as the arts and humanities.

Although many geographers have tried to combine the discipline's physical and human components, human geography and physical geography are typically distinct fields with different methods and topics of study. Human geographers do not deny the relevance of physical geography to their work, but they also do not insist that their studies always include a physical component. Because human geography studies human beings, it has close ties with social sciences, such as history, economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science. One of the strengths of human geography is that it considers the human world in terms of physical and human factors, as necessary. Where appropriate, this book introduces aspects of physical geography. For example, to understand world population distributions, we need to know about global climates. We also need to know what people think of those climates and how different groups have adapted to inhabit different climates. Thus, human geography is related to, but separate from, physical geography in much the same way as it is related to, but separate from, the other disciplines that study human beings.

All social processes and problems are simultaneously spatial processes and problems, for everything social occurs somewhere. More important, *where* something occurs shapes *how* it occurs. Geographers ask questions related to location: Why are there skyscrapers downtown? Why do Asians rely so heavily on rice? Why is the number of world languages declining? Why are there famines in Africa? How do foreign Muslims view the United States, and why do they hold those views? Why is China rapidly becoming a global economic superpower? How does globalization affect different parts of the world?

To view the world geographically is to see space as socially produced (created by people). The landscape and the distribution of various things on it are shaped by people in interaction with one another and with nature (Figure 1.2). They are constructed over time as societies link places together in ever-changing ways. Geographies are created as a product of social relations, a set of



Figure 1.2: Landscapes are a central topic of geographic analysis and reflect both the influences of the natural environment and the political, economic, and cultural forces of societies as they unfold historically over the world. This scene illustrates how landscapes are always mixtures of natural and social features.

patterns and distributions that change over time. Geographic landscapes are social creations produced by people, in the same way that your shirt, computer, school, and family are also social creations. Geographers maintain that the production of space involves different spatial scales, ranging from the smallest and most intimate—the body—to progressively larger areas, including neighborhoods, regions, nations, and the least intimate of all, the entire world.

Because places and spaces are populated—inhabited by people, shaped by them, and given meaning by them—geographers argue that social processes are embodied. This means that places are made by people who live in the world, changing it and being changed by it, through their physical bodies. The body is the most personal of spaces, the “geography closest in,” the part of the world that is also part of us. Our bodies are intimately

connected to the world we live in, through the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the buildings in which we live and move. Individuals create geographies in their daily lives as they move through time and space in their ordinary routines. In local communities, neighborhoods, and cities—the next larger scale—individuals' movements form regular patterns that reflect a society's organization, division of labor, cultural preferences and traditions, and political opportunities and constraints. Geographies, thus, reflect the class, gender, ethnicity, age, and other categories into which people sort themselves. Spatial patterns reflect the historical legacy of earlier social relations; political and economic organization of resources; the technologies of production, transportation, and communication; the cultures that guide behavior; and legal and regulatory systems.

Geographers study how societies and their landscapes are intertwined. For example, to understand a society like China, which emerged over thousands of years, we must comprehend its vast agricultural landscape suitable for producing large amounts of rice to feed a growing population. More recently, we must understand the cities that are home to half of China's people. China's history, society, economy, and culture cannot be separated from the places in which it has existed. To appreciate this idea, we must recognize that social processes and spatial structures shape each other in many ways. Societies involve complex networks that tie together economic relations of wealth and poverty, political relations of power, cultural relations of meanings, and environmental processes, as well. Geographers examine not only the ways in which people organize themselves spatially, but also how they view their worlds, how they represent and give meaning to space. Divorcing one dimension, say the economic, from another, such as the political or the cultural, is ultimately fruitless.

The distributions of different natural and social phenomena often form regular patterns over Earth's surface, which can be analyzed to determine what causes them and how they change. For example, the location of the world's population can be understood in terms of climatic factors, such as the length of growing seasons and soil fertility, as well as social dynamics, such as the impacts of colonialism, the role of the global and national economies, the formation of cities, and so forth. This distribution is constantly changing through uneven geographies of birth rates, death rates, and migration (Chapter 8). The geography of population unfolds at multiple spatial scales, including the global, that within individual countries, the local (e.g., neighborhoods), and the individual body. One way of understanding geographies is to focus on broad patterns of one phenomenon, an approach often called **systematic geography**. For example, geographers might examine the distribution of a particular industry around the world or spatial patterns of fertility. Another approach is to examine how different phenomena combine within the context of a particular area, an approach known as *regional geography*. For example, geographers may study the combination of environmental and social factors that produce the culture and landscape of, for example, Oaxaca, Mexico. Geographers use both

approaches to see how the general and the unique intersect to produce patterns over Earth's surface.

## 1.1 WHAT IS SPACE?

If human geography is the study of people and space, what is this nebulous but crucial thing we call “space?” The space of Earth’s surface (as opposed to other kinds of spaces, like outer space) is a complex set of changing phenomena that defies easy explanation. To assist in this task, it is useful to examine three ways in which space and place can be understood: the natural environment; the distribution of human activities; and how people perceive and give meaning to places (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3: Space assumes a variety of forms and meanings, ranging from the biophysical processes of the natural environment and cultural landscapes to the perceptions and meanings that people assign to them. For the Asian farmers who created this terraced hillside, the landscape represents a place to live and work and the source of their primary food, rice.

First, there is the physical surface of the planet in all of its geological, atmospheric, and biological complexity. Space, in this meaning, includes the shape of the land and the chemical and biological processes that shape and change it: the topography (shape) of the land, soil types, ecosystems, climate types, and so forth, all of which formed over millennia or longer (Figure 1.4). As we shall explore shortly, this natural environment is vitally important to how people produce and distribute themselves over landscapes. In this respect, human geography intersects and overlaps with physical geography. Yet, because



Figure 1.4: This desert landscape depicts part of the biophysical environment, what we might think of as space that exists “outside” of human activities. Certainly, such physical landscapes preceded the emergence of human beings. But given the extensive human modification of environments around the world, even “natural” landscapes are not so natural anymore. Rather, they reflect the enormous imprint of human cultures and behavior. Even this seemingly pristine landscape has been modified by many years of human action.

human activities have affected almost all of the natural world, to appreciate this dimension of space, we must include the ways in which people change the physical landscape and give meaning to it.

A second meaning of space involves the spatial distribution of social phenomena, such as population (Figure 1.5), different cultures and religions, cities, different types of jobs, and the locations of wealth and poverty. Obviously, to some extent, the location of human phenomena reflects the natural world. Yet, this contributes to only part of the explanation. Cultural, political, and economic landscapes do not simply result from climate or topography, but emerge from social relations of power, culture, and economy as they unfold over time. For example, if we wish to understand why pockets of poverty exist in large cities, such as New York, or on Native American reservations, we must focus on the mechanisms that created these places. Such factors include labor markets (the number and types of available jobs); public policies;

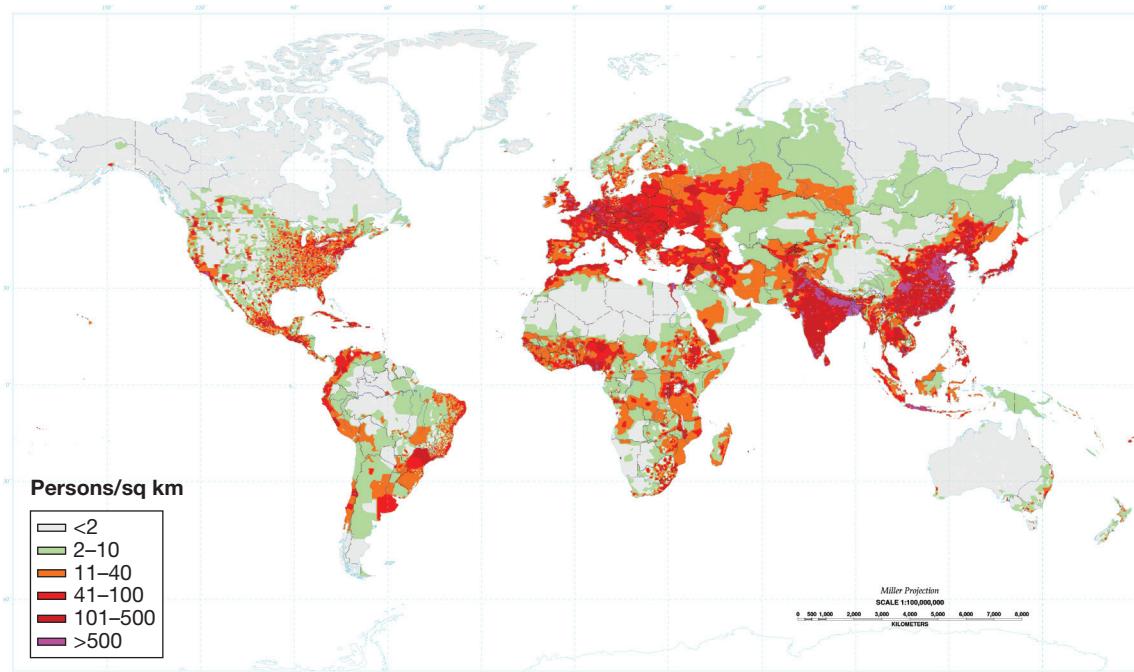


Figure 1.5: Although influenced by the world's climates, soils, topography, and ecosystems, the location of people is also the product of many social forces and processes that play out over the surface of Earth. The geography of the world's population is a reflection of many factors, including the availability of agricultural land, colonialism, urbanization, and migration.

public and private investment (or lack of it); technological changes, migration into and out of a region; and people's cultural beliefs about work, leisure, saving, and spending.

A third dimension of space, one many people do not automatically associate with geography, concerns its symbolic, psychological, and ideological contours. Space is not simply what is "outside" of people's minds. It also exists in how people perceive and give meaning to their world. Geography exists, therefore, simultaneously as a concrete, material world and as an intangible, symbolic one. A rich tradition in human geography studies how people represent their worlds. All human beings develop a symbolic geography, including **mental maps** of where they think places are located, whether accurate or not. Every society represents its spaces and places to itself and to others. Different cultures describe and interpret the parts of the world they inhabit. They do so through narrative descriptions and stories, as well as paintings, photographs, and maps. The history of cartography (mapmaking), for example, is full of examples of how different societies mapped their worlds. How we know the world shapes the world itself; reality and our knowledge of it can never be effectively separated. For example, as Europeans made increasingly accurate world maps during the Renaissance (Figure 1.6) and the period of colonialism that began in the sixteenth century, their ability to control the world's oceans and continents grew correspondingly. Their maps did not simply mirror the world; they helped to create a global economy with Europe at the center (Chapter 5).

Because **maps** summarize vast amounts of information efficiently, **cartography** (the creation and study of maps) has a long history associated with geography. Maps extend our perceptions of the world, allowing us to "see" places and their relations to one another, even if we have never been there. Cartographers have studied maps extensively, including their history, the role of scale, rules for including some information and leaving some out (generalization), computer maps, map symbols, and so forth. No map is perfect. For example, it is impossible to represent a three-dimensional globe on a two-dimensional surface without some distortion of area size or shape. Cartographers have developed several different standard ways of doing this, known as **map projections**. Moreover, no map can show everything about a place; of necessity, it must be selective in what it represents. Maps are thus not simply "objective" statements about the world, but reflections of culture and power.

Figure 1.7 is a simple map showing how the land surface of the world is divided into countries. What do these borders tell us? Have they always existed? Are the divisions changing today—possibly even between the time when I am writing and the time when you read these words? Is the total number of countries increasing or decreasing? What do these political divisions reflect—population distribution, cultures, development? Are there meaningful groupings? Do basic groupings, such as north versus south, or east versus west, have any value? These are the sorts of questions that human geographers ask.



Figure 1.6: Maps testify to geography's concern with how cultures perceive, understand, and give meaning to space, as well as how landscapes and distributions are produced. The Waldseemüller map here, the first to show the Americas, is among the most famous in history.

Political boundaries interest human geographers for at least three reasons. First, the political partitioning of the world exemplifies regionalization, or the organization of space. Second, political units usually play a major role in determining such matters as the number of births and deaths and the availability of paid employment. Third, many political divisions reflect differences in ethnicity and/or culture (for instance, in language or religion). Human geographers identify relationships between culture and political divisions, often with the help of maps. For example, the breakup of the former state of Yugoslavia in the 1990s occurred largely along linguistic and religious lines, particularly between Bosnian Muslims, Orthodox Christian Serbs, and Catholic Croatians.

The world is divided not only into political units but also into larger groups of countries labeled “more developed” and “less developed.” These divisions reflect the tendency of capitalist societies to produce uneven distributions of wealth, a theme we will explore at length in later chapters. There are enormous differences among individuals and

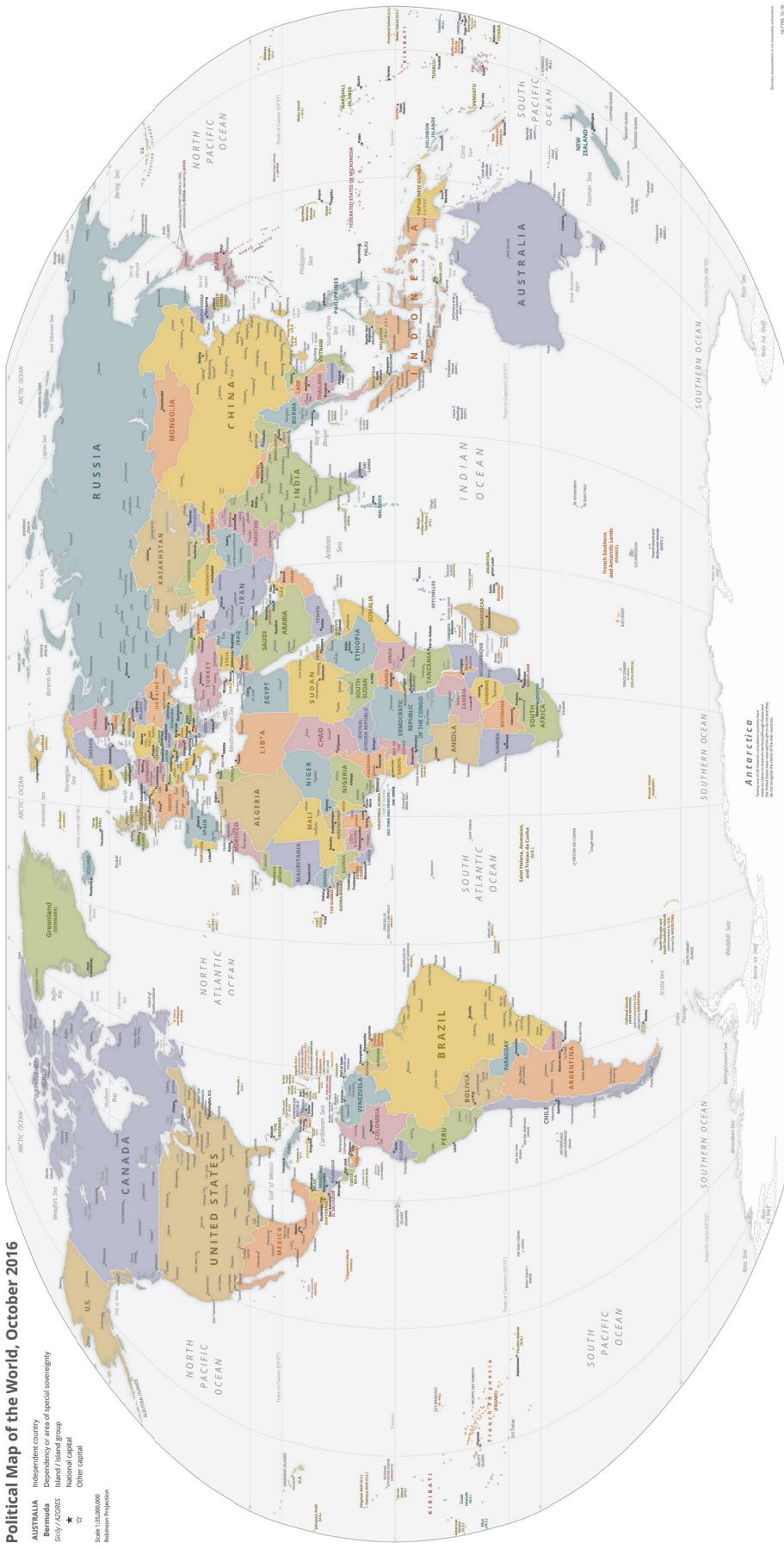


Figure 1.7: The distribution of the world's countries in 2017 reflects one way to organize political landscapes (i.e., using the nation-state). However, there are other ways in which power is manifested geographically, including tribes and globalization, that challenge this seemingly natural system.

more general differences among groups of individuals. Similarly, landscapes vary. Each particular location is unique, of course, different from every other—but it is often more useful to note the more general differences that exist between regions. (We discuss the concept of regions, areas that share certain characteristics, later in this chapter.)

## 1.2 FIVE THEMES FOR STUDYING HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

One means of understanding human geography is through five themes that will reappear in different ways throughout this book. These are broad generalizations designed to encourage you to think about how societies and places reflect each other. They include (1) the historical context in which geographies are produced; (2) the interconnectedness of regions, particularly with the rise of the global capitalist economy; (3) the interrelatedness of human and natural systems; (4) the importance of culture and everyday life; and (5) the centrality of social structures and relations in human geography.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The study of space is inseparable from the study of time. If one accepts geography as the study of human beings in space and history as the study of people over time, then this theme reveals the profound links between geography and history. For example, one cannot understand the contemporary geography of the United States—the locations of its cities and agricultural areas, the distribution of its people and different ethnic and religious groups—without examining the evolution of American society over the past four or five centuries. Because the accumulated decisions of actors in the past—individuals, organizations, governments, and others—created the present, we cannot explain the contemporary world meaningfully without continual reference to their actions. Awareness of the importance of history undercuts the common assumption that the present is “typical” or “normal,” for history, as much as geography, teaches us the full range and diversity of human behaviors, cultures, and social systems. The organization of space occurs as societies go through changes over time, and all changes over time occur in places (Figure 1.8). Such an emphasis leads us to question of *how* histories and geographies are produced. Historical geography—and *all* geography is inescapably historical—does not just reconstruct past worlds, but also analyzes how social systems have changed over space and time.



Figure 1.8: Because time and space cannot be separated, all geographies must be understood historically. To know a landscape is to know how it came to be and how it has changed over time. This photo of Istanbul, Turkey, reveals a landscape shaped over many centuries, revealing how history is enfolded in every landscape.

But, there is a broader, deeper implication here. Taking history seriously means acknowledging that geographies are never fixed but are always changing. Change, of course, occurs at many temporal and spatial scales, from gradual, long-term processes, such as population growth, to short-term, rapid ones, such as movements of information through the Internet. History and geography develop through the dynamics of everyday life, the routine interactions through which people create societies, reproduce them, and change them. An historical perspective reveals that social and geographical realities are not predetermined, but made and can be unmade. There is, for example, no need to accept the geography of the world's poverty as inevitable, or to accept the repression of women or mistreatment of children as unchangeable. Views of geography that try to capture a "snapshot in time," therefore, are deceptive; it is the *process* underlying the creation of places that is central, the social dynamics at work, not their appearance at one particular historical moment. Geographies are inherently unstable and never frozen, so we must approach them as processes rather than static states.

## NETWORKS AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Every place is part of a system of places (Figure 1.9). All regions are interconnected; they never exist in isolation from one another. Things that tie places together to a greater or lesser extent include the natural environment (e.g., winds and currents, flows of pollution); flows of people (migration); movement of capital and money (investment); exchange of goods (trade); and the diffusion (spread) from source areas of information, ideas, innovations, and disease. Places always belong to a network because contemporary social relations stretch across regions. For example, to understand the geography of a city, such as Miami, one must examine how it arose historically. This includes the role of railroads in the early twentieth century, and more recently, migration streams from the northeastern United States, Cuba, and many other places.



Figure 1.9: Geography is not just about places, but is also about the networks and flows that bind them together, as this map of the diffusion of Polynesians across the Pacific illustrates.

Because places are always tied together, what happens in one place must affect events in others. For example, the Internet links people in distant places in many ways; the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) joins regions from southern Mexico to Quebec; immigration has brought parts of the developing world into wealthy countries; and the jet airplane has made the contemporary world vulnerable to new diseases, such as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and Ebola. Although this theme holds in the study of many places throughout history, it is especially relevant since the rise of global capitalism beginning in the fifteenth century (discussed in Chapter 5). Today's global system of nations and markets has tied places together to an unprecedented degree. For example, as any trip to the grocery store will attest, we can buy products from all over the world. Globalization is just the most recent manifestation of how people have developed relations over ever-larger distances that shape multiple places (Chapter 6). Thus, to understand regions and places as linked is to acknowledge that what happens in one place always reverberates to shape others.

One compelling example of changing geographies can be found in the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The world felt the impact of the terrorist attacks that destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and damaged the Pentagon near Washington, DC, killing more than 3,000 people. The consequences of those attacks, some immediate, some longer term and still uncertain, have reshaped both local and global geographies. The skyline of New York City will never be the same. Nor will the pattern of global politics, because the United States responded to the attacks by invading Afghanistan, where the ruling Taliban had supported terrorist groups. In the wake of the attacks, there was widespread acknowledgment that fighting terrorism would require in-depth understanding of local geographies, both physical and human.

## PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Human action always occurs in a natural environment. Unfortunately, the term "nature" often carries connotations of being separate from human activities. The natural environment includes the climate, topography (shape of the land surface), soils, ecosystems and vegetation, and mineral and water resources of a region. It shapes everything from the length of a growing season of agricultural crops to transport costs to energy supplies. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, and earthquakes also shape where and how people live and the risks they face. Although these factors certainly *affect* the creation of histories and geographies, they do not *control* the destiny of societies (as a bankrupt early theory called **environmental determinism** once claimed).

But conversely, the relationship between people and nature is a two-way street. Everywhere, nature has been changed by human beings. Examples include the modification of ecosystems;

annihilation of plant and animal species; soil erosion; air, ground, and water pollution; changed drainage patterns; agriculture; deforestation; desertification; disruptions of natural cycles of nutrients, including carbon and nitrogen, and energy loops in ecosystems; and more recently, global climate change, a process that has had severe ecological impacts ranging from the melting of glaciers and ice caps to the acidification of the oceans. Indeed, human beings cannot live in an ecosystem without modifying it. Human-induced changes within the planet's environments have been so extensive that many geologists talk of a new era, the Anthropocene (the Human Age), in which humans are the major agents changing the world's landscapes. In short, the formation of geographies is neither reducible to the natural environment nor independent of it (Figure 1.10).



Figure 1.10: Landscapes are neither purely “natural” nor purely “cultural,” but the product of interactions of the two, revealing how society and nature are shot through with each other. Thus, although nature determines the climate and topography of this scene, humans have extensively modified it.

People produce geographies in the context of particular natural environments, and those environments are always altered through human actions. The spread of human beings accelerated the growth of grasslands worldwide as hunters burned savannahs and prairies. Prior to the Columbian encounter in the sixteenth century, Native Americans produced enormous ecological impacts, including widespread hunting and the burning of prairies and forests. Such facts run counter to the myth that native peoples left their world in an untouched, “natural” state. Indeed, in many ways “nature” is not natural anymore but has been shaped by societies over eons. Humans have redistributed numerous species of plants, animals, viruses, and bacteria over the world, and exterminated many others. The spatial structure of the Industrial Revolution was profoundly influenced by the location of the large coal deposits in Britain and the northern European lowlands. In these examples, the natural environment—the subject of physical geography—was important to understanding how human geographies were created.

## CULTURE AND SPACE

Human consciousness is fundamental to understanding how geographies are made. Human beings always possess an awareness of themselves and their world, as manifested in their perceptions, thoughts, language, and ideas. Far more than any other species, humans produce and use symbols to manipulate their world and to communicate. Because people are social animals, the shared medium of **culture** (Chapter 13) organizes their consciousness—their language, assumptions, beliefs, priorities, norms, and values (Figure 1.11). Thus, social science differs fundamentally from analyses of the nonhuman world (except, perhaps, the behavior of some animals).

Traditional definitions of culture portray it as the sum of learned behavior or a “way of life” (religion, language, mores, traditions, roles, and other elements). Thus, culture is not biological and is not inherited through genes. Culture tells us how to behave in the world and relate to one another. We can specify this idea further if we define culture as the knowledge we take for granted, what we know without knowing it, “common sense.” Everyone must internalize a culture to survive in it, to know how to act male or female, young or old, wealthy or poor. Within each social context, culture defines what is normal, important, and acceptable—and what is not.

People acquire culture through a lifelong process of **socialization**. Individuals never live in a social vacuum but develop their sense of identity from their interactions with others, from the cradle to grave. The family, peer groups, schools, media, and other social institutions play key roles in this process. As people acquire a culture in daily life, they reproduce the society in



Figure 1.11: Because people are conscious, sentient beings, their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are learned through culture. Culture consists of the web of values, norms, mores, ideologies, and symbolic systems that socialize people, let them make sense of their worlds, and guide their behaviors. These Maori women in New Zealand are illustrative of an ancient traditional culture that has been challenged and modified by years of exposure to Western culture.

which they live: A society can only exist from one day to the next, or from one generation to the next, if it passes down its cultural norms over time. When people go about their daily lives, they reproduce their social world, largely unintentionally. In turn, that world structures their lives. Thus, individuals are both shaped by and shapers of history and geography. Everyday thought and behavior do not simply mirror the world; they create it.

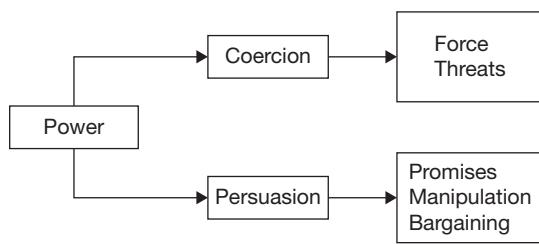


Figure 1.12: Power takes multiple forms and is always unevenly distributed within and among societies. Class, gender, and race are major forms through which power is manifested. Power may involve coercion (force or the threat of force), as well as persuasion and manipulation.

## SOCIAL RELATIONS

Social relations describe the structure and organization of societies and places. Every society includes structures of power and wealth that benefit some groups and not others. For example, one cannot hope to understand a society, such as the United States, without looking at how its economy has generated types of jobs (e.g., in finance) that typically favor certain social groups (e.g., white men) over others (e.g., women or ethnic minorities). The analysis of social relations allows us to understand societies as more than just the sum of individual actions (Figure 1.12).

We can define the study of social relations as **political economy**. In this context, the term refers to the organization of societies as systems of power and wealth, including class relations, gender, and ethnicity. A focus on power emphasizes, “who gets what, when, where, and why” in the making of geographies. That is, political economy emphasizes the ways in which social resources are distributed as defining characteristics of everyday life and as part of the fundamental dimensions of political struggle. An economy may be defined as the means by which societies allocate scarce resources (e.g., land, labor, capital), a system of producing and distributing goods and services. Political relations are closely related to economic ones; wealth always brings with it power. Politics is the struggle for power, and power takes many forms, including coercive and persuasive power the possession or withholding of information, wealth, violence, and bureaucratic authority (Figure 1.13). Power is always unevenly distributed and unequally shared by different groups divided by class, gender, ethnicity, and place. As we will see throughout the following chapters, class structures human geographies in many ways.

A social perspective contrasts with the widespread individualism found in Western societies, particularly the United States. Many disciplines, such as economics, take individual decision making as their starting point. In contrast, from a political economy perspective, individuals are the product, not the producer, of social relations



Figure 1.13: From a political economy perspective, it is not individuals but the relations among them that are of paramount importance. Societies are more than the sum of their parts, and individuals are the products, as well as the producers, of social relations. Although we all like to think of ourselves as unique individuals, as indicated by the photo of this group, in reality we are all inevitably products of our social environments.

(Figure 1.13). All individuals are socially produced, and their choices and opportunities are constrained with fields of power that fluctuate over time and space.

Similarly, feminists have shown how uneven power relations between men and women affect all aspects of life, including allocations of resources and modes of thought and behavior. Geographers study spatial differences between men and women in housing, work, and commuting patterns and how such relations have typically favored men over women. For example, manufacturing-based economies generated particular types of jobs dominated by men, giving rise to urban landscapes in which women primarily stayed at home. Conversely, service-based economies have pulled many women into the labor market, changing their role in the household. The rise of the two-income family has altered residential location decisions and commuting patterns of these households.

Finally, as with class and gender, ethnicity is a powerful dimension of social relations. All over the world, ethnic minorities tend to be second-class citizens, with less access to wealth and power than the majorities of their societies. For example, many American cities contain large concentrations of impoverished African Americans. Geographers seek to explain how ethnicity intersects with the dynamics of power, the economy, and cultural attitudes toward race to explain such ghettos. In this book, we will see how class, gender, and ethnicity repeatedly structure the unfolding of human geographies over time.

## ■ KEY TERMS

**Cartography:** the science and art of making and understanding maps

**Culture:** the webs of meaning that people use to interpret the world

**Diffusion:** the spread of a phenomenon over time and space

**Environmental determinism:** the belief that the natural environment dictates human affairs

**Globalization:** the processes that link people together in far-flung places around the world

**Human geography:** the portion of the discipline of geography concerned with the spatial dimensions of human existence and the distributions of social phenomena

**Landscape:** Earth's surface at a local or regional scale

**Location:** position on Earth's surface as measured either in absolute terms of latitude and longitude or in relative terms compared with other places

**Map:** a graphical device portraying the distribution of phenomena over space or regions

**Map projections:** various means of converting Earth's three-dimensional surface onto a two-dimensional map

**Mental maps:** maps of places that people carry in their heads

**Place:** a location to which people give meaning and experience everyday life

**Political economy:** the study of social relations, that is, how societies are structured as systematic networks of wealth, power, and culture

**Region:** a part of the world that shares a broad set of characteristics in common

**Scale:** the amount of space over which particular processes play out

**Socialization:** the internalization of social norms and rules by individuals

**Space:** in geography, the surface of Earth

**Spatial distribution:** the uneven geographical location of various phenomena

## ■ STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Define the term *geography*, and explain what the discipline studies.
2. In what ways do people construct space?
3. How does the study of society connect to that of space?
4. How and why do maps selectively portray spatial features?
5. What does the relationship between space and time imply about history and geography?
6. Define *political economy*, and explain its relationship to geography.
7. Is culture comprehensible without referring to how societies and places are structured? Why or why not?
8. Why can it be argued that “nature isn’t natural anymore”?
9. Can places be fully understood when considered in isolation? Why or why not?

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