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# What Is Environmental Determinism?

## A Topic Later Replaced by Environmental Possibilism

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Throughout the study of geography, there have been some different approaches to explaining the development of the world's societies and cultures. One that received much prominence in geographic history but has declined in recent decades of academic study is environmental determinism.

### Environmental Determinism

Environmental determinism is the belief that the environment, most notably its physical factors such as landforms and climate, determines the patterns of human culture and societal development. Environmental determinists believe that ecological, climatic, and geographical factors alone are responsible for human cultures and individual decisions. Also, social conditions have virtually no impact on [cultural development](#).

The main argument of environmental determinism states that an area's physical characteristics like climate have a substantial impact on the psychological outlook of its inhabitants. These different outlooks then spread throughout a population and help define the overall behavior and culture of a society. For instance, it was said that areas in the tropics were less developed than higher latitudes because the continuously warm weather there made it easier to survive and thus, people living there did not work as hard to ensure their survival.

Another example of environmental determinism would be the theory that island nations have unique cultural traits solely because of their isolation from continental societies.

### Environmental Determinism and Early Geography

Although environmental determinism is a relatively recent approach to formal geographic study, its origins go back to ancient times. Climatic factors, for example, were used by Strabo, [Plato](#), and [Aristotle](#) to explain why the Greeks were so much more developed in the early ages than societies in hotter and colder climates. Additionally, Aristotle came up with his climate

classification system to explain why people were limited to settlement in certain areas of the globe.

Other early scholars also used environmental determinism to explain not only the culture of a society but the reasons behind the physical characteristics of a society's people. Al-Jahiz, a writer from East Africa, for instance, cited environmental factors as the origin of different skin colors. He believed that the darker skin of many Africans and various birds, mammals, and insects was a direct result of the prevalence of black basalt rocks on the Arabian Peninsula.

Ibn Khaldun, an Arab sociologist, and scholar was officially known as one of the first environmental determinists. He lived from 1332 to 1406, during which time he wrote a complete world history and explained that the hot climate of Sub-Saharan Africa caused dark human skin.

## Environmental Determinism and Modern Geography

Environmental determinism rose to its most prominent stage in modern geography beginning in the late 19th Century when it was revived by the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel and became the central theory in the discipline. Ratzel's theory came about following [Charles Darwin's](#) *Origin of Species* in 1859 and was heavily influenced by evolutionary biology and the impact a person's environment has on their cultural evolution.

Environmental determinism then became popular in the United States in the early 20th Century when Ratzel's student, [Ellen Churchill Semple](#), a professor at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, introduced the theory there. Like Ratzel's initial ideas, Semple's were also influenced by evolutionary biology.

Another one of Ratzel's students, Ellsworth Huntington, also worked on expanding the theory around the same time as Semple. Huntington's work though, led to a subset of environmental determinism, called climatic determinism in the early 1900s. His theory stated that the economic development in a country could be predicted based on its distance from the equator. He said temperate climates with short growing seasons stimulate achievement, economic growth, and efficiency. The ease of growing things in the tropics, on the other hand, hindered their advancement.

## The Decline of Environmental Determinism

Despite its success in the early 1900s, environmental determinism's popularity began to decline in the 1920s as its claims were often found to be wrong. Also, critics claimed it was racist and perpetuated imperialism.

[Carl Sauer](#), for instance, began his critiques in 1924 and said that environmental determinism led to premature generalizations about an area's culture and did not allow for results based on

direct observation or other research. As a result of his and others' criticisms, geographers developed the theory of environmental possibilism to explain cultural development.

Environmental possibilism was set forth by the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blanche and stated that the environment sets limitations for cultural development, but it does not wholly define culture. Culture is instead defined by the opportunities and decisions that humans make in response to dealing with such limitations.

By the 1950s, environmental determinism was almost entirely replaced in geography by environmental possibilism, effectively ending its prominence as the central theory in the discipline. Regardless of its decline, however, environmental determinism was an important component of geographic history as it initially represented an attempt by early geographers to explain the patterns they saw developing across the globe.