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# STUDYING HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

- Human geography incorporates a variety of philosophical perspectives in its approaches and analysis.
  - Determinism
  - Possibilism
  - Empiricism
  - Positivism
  - Humanism
  - Marxism
- Within human geography, there are several central concepts that serve two primary endeavours: the need to establish facts (geographic literacy) and the need to understand and explain the facts (geographic knowledge).
- Human geographers also employ qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess human relationships to their environment.
- Human geographers employ a variety of techniques of analysis based on the use of maps.
- Contemporary human geography has benefited from the information age.
  - Geographic information system (GIS)
  - Remote sensing

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- identify the philosophical constructs that underpin geographic approaches and explain how they relate to geographic approaches, concepts, and methods;
- incorporate and identify human geographic concepts;
- understand how human geographers incorporate Marxism into geographic approaches;
- explain the importance of maps to the study of human geography;
- understand how maps are made, and identify the different types of maps and some of their common limitations; and

- have knowledge of general methods and resources used for qualitative and quantitative research, including the techniques of analysis.

## KEY TERMS

**Accessibility** A variable quality of a location, expressing the ease with which it may be reached from other locations. (p. 38)

**Agglomeration** The spatial grouping of humans or human activities to minimize the distances between them. (p. 38)

**Capitalism** A social and economic system for the production of goods and services based on private enterprise. (p. 29)

**Cartography** The conception, production, dissemination, and study of maps. (p. 46)

**Choropleth map** A thematic map using colour (or shading) to indicate density of a particular phenomenon in a given area. (p. 46)

**Class** A large group of individuals of similar social status, income, and culture. (p. 30)

**Constructionism** The school of thought according to which all our conceptual underpinnings (for example, ideas about identity) are socially constructed and therefore contingent and dynamic, not given or absolute. (p. 32)

**Deconstruction** A method of critical interpretation applied to texts, including landscapes, that aims to show how the multiple positioning (in terms of class, gender, and so on) of an author or a reader affects the creation or reading of the text. (p. 33)

**Deglomeration** The spatial separation of humans or human activities so as to maximize the distances between them. (p. 38)

**Development** A term that should be handled with caution because it has often been used in an ethnocentric fashion; typically understood to refer to a process of becoming larger, more mature, and better organized; often measured by economic criteria. (p. 43)

**Diffusion** The spread of any phenomenon over space and its growth through time. (p. 42)

**Distance** The spatial dimension of separation; a fundamental concept in spatial analysis. (p. 37)

**Distance decay** The declining intensity of any pattern or process with increasing distance from a given location. (p. 38)

**Distribution** The pattern of geographic facts (for example, people) within an area. (p. 37)

**Empiricism** A philosophy of science based on the belief that all knowledge results from experience and, therefore, gives priority to factual observations over theoretical statements. (p. 26)

**Essentialism** Belief in the existence of fixed unchanging properties; attribution of “essential” characteristics to groups. (p. 32)

**Ethnocentrism** A form of prejudice or stereotyping that presumes that one’s own culture is normal and natural and that all other cultures are inferior. (p. 52)

**Ethnography** The study and description of social groups based on researcher involvement and first-hand observation in the field; a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. (p. 51)

**Existentialism** A philosophy that sees humans as responsible for making their own natures; stresses personal freedom, decision-making, and commitment in a world without absolute values outside of individuals’ personal preferences. (p. 27)

**Feminism** The movement for and advocacy of equal rights for women and men, and commitment to improve the position of women in society. (p. 30)

**Feudalism** A social and economic system prevalent in Europe, prior to the Industrial Revolution, in which land was owned by the monarch, controlled by lords, and worked by peasants who were bound to the land and subject to the lords’ authority. (p. 29)

**Fieldwork** A means of data collection; includes both qualitative (for example, observation) and quantitative (for example, questionnaire) methods. (p. 51)

**Formal region** A region identified as such because of the presence of some particular characteristic(s). (p. 37)

**Friction of distance** A measure of the restraining effect of distance on human movement. (p. 38)

**Functional region** A region that comprises a series of linked locations. (p. 37)

**Gender** The social aspect of the relations between the sexes. (p. 31)

**Geographic information system (GIS)** A computer-based tool that combines the storage, display, analysis, and mapping of spatially referenced data. (p. 48)

**Historical materialism** An approach associated with Marxism that explains social change by reference to historical changes in social and material relations. (p. 29)

**Humanism** A philosophy centred on such aspects of human life as value, quality, meaning, and significance. (p. 27)

**Hypothesis** In positivist philosophy, a general statement deduced from theory but not yet verified. (p. 26)

**Idealism** A humanistic philosophy according to which human actions can be understood only by reference to the thought behind them. (p. 27)

**Idiographic** Concerned with the unique and particular. (p. 34)

**Image** The perception of reality held by an individual or group. (p. 42)

**Interaction** The relationship or linkage between locations. (p. 38)

**Isochrones** Lines on a map of equal travel time from a given starting point. One example of an iso-line. Isolines generally allow map readers to infer change with distance and to estimate specific values at any location on the map. (p. 39)

**Isopleth map** A map using lines to connect locations of equal data value. (p. 46)

**Law** In positivist philosophy, a hypothesis that has been proven correct and is taken to be universally true; once formulated, laws can be used to construct theories. (p. 26)

**Marxism** The body of social and political theory developed by Karl Marx, in which mode of production is the key to understanding society and class struggle is the key to historical change. (p. 29)

**Mental map** The individual psychological representation of space. (p. 42)

**Model** An idealized and structured representation of the real world. (p. 52)

**Mode of production** The organized social relations through which a human society organizes productive activity. (p. 29)

**Modernism** A view that assumes the existence of a reality characterized by structure, order, pattern, and causality. (p. 32)

**Nomothetic** Concerned with the universal and the general. (p. 34)

**Participant observation** A qualitative method in which the researcher is directly involved with the subjects in question. (p. 51)

**Patriarchy** A social system in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. (p. 31)

**Perception** The process by which humans acquire information about physical and social environments. (p. 42)

**Phenomenology** A humanistic philosophy based on the ways in which humans experience everyday life and imbue activities with meaning. (p. 27)

**Place** Location; in humanistic geography, “place” has acquired a particular meaning as a context for human action that is rich in human significance and meaning. (p. 36)

**Placelessness** Homogeneous and standardized landscapes that lack local variety and character. (p. 36)

**Positivism** A philosophy that contends that science is able to deal only with empirical questions (those with factual content), that scientific observations are repeatable, and that science progresses through the construction of theories and derivation of laws. (p. 26)

**Postmodernism** A movement in philosophy, social science, and the arts based on the idea that reality cannot be studied objectively and that multiple interpretations are possible. (p. 32)

**Pragmatism** A humanistic philosophy that focuses on the construction of meaning through the practical activities of humans. (p. 27)

**Projection** Any procedure employed to represent positions of all or a part of the earth's spherical (three-dimensional) surface onto a flat (two-dimensional) surface. (p. 47)

**Qualitative methods** A set of tools used to collect and analyze data in order to subjectively understand the phenomena being studied; the methods include passive observation, participation, and active intervention. (p. 51)

**Quantitative methods** A set of tools used to collect and analyze data to achieve a statistical description and scientific explanation of the phenomena being studied; the methods include sampling, models, and statistical testing. (p. 52)

**Questionnaire** A structured and ordered set of questions designed to collect unambiguous and unbiased data. (p. 52)

**Raster** A method used in GIS to represent spatial data; divides the area into numerous small cells and pixels, and describes the content of each cell. (p. 48)

**Regionalization** A special kind of classification in which locations on the earth's surface are assigned to various regions, which must be contiguous spatial units. (p. 37)

**Remote sensing** A variety of techniques used for acquiring and recording data from points that are not in contact with the phenomena of interest. (p. 49)

**Sacred space** A landscape particularly esteemed by an individual or a group, usually (but not necessarily) for religious reasons. (p. 36)

**Sampling** The selection of a subset from a defined population of individuals to acquire data representative of that larger population. (p. 52)

**Scale** The resolution level(s) used in any human geographic research; this most characteristically refers to the size of the area studied, but also to the time period covered and the number of people investigated. (p. 40)

**Scientific method** The various steps taken in a science to obtain knowledge; a phrase most commonly associated with a positivist philosophy. (p. 26)

**Sense of place** The deep attachments that humans have to specific locations such as home and also to particularly distinctive locations. (p. 36)

**Site** The location of a geographic fact with reference to the immediate local environment. (p. 35)

**Situation** The location of a geographic fact with reference to the broad spatial system of which it is a part. (p. 35)

**Slavery** Labour that is controlled through compulsion and is not remunerated; in Marxist terminology, one particular mode of production. (p. 29)

**Socialism** A social and economic system that involves common ownership of the means of production and distribution. (p. 29)

**Space** Areal extent; a term used in both absolute (objective) and relative (perceptual) forms. (p. 34)

**Text** A term that originally referred to the written or printed page, but that has broadened to include such products of culture as maps and landscape; postmodernists recognize that there may be any number of realities, depending on how a text is read. (p. 33)

**Theory** In positivist philosophy, an interconnected set of statements, often called assumptions or axioms, that deductively generates testable hypotheses. (p. 26)

**Topophilia** The affective ties that humans have with particular places; literally, love of place. (p. 36)

**Topophobia** The feelings of dislike, anxiety, fear, or suffering associated with a particular landscape. (p. 36)

**Transnationals** Large business organizations that operate in two or more countries. (p. 46)

**Vector** A method used in GIS to represent spatial data; describes the data as a collection of points, lines, and areas, and describes the location of each of these. (p. 67)

**Vernacular region** A region identified on the basis of the perceptions held by people inside and outside the region. (p. 37)

**Verstehen** A research method, associated primarily with phenomenology, in which the researcher adopts the perspective of the individual or group under investigation; a German term, best translated as “empathetic understanding.” (p. 27)

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is the social theory of Marxism applied by human geographers? What are some common contemporary subjects or contexts to which this area of thought is applied?

2. What are some major similarities and differences between humanist and Marxist geographies and how they are applied?
3. What are some contemporary techniques and applications of remote sensing? How has remote sensing contributed to advancing knowledge about the state of the environment?
4. Globalization integrates concepts of space, location, place, region, and distance. What are some human processes or issues that have been positively and/or negatively affected by globalization and how have they been affected?
5. What are some contemporary techniques and applications of geographic information systems? How has the use of GIS advanced knowledge in an increasingly complex world?

## LINKS OF INTEREST

- American Society for Photogrammetry & Remote Sensing (ASPRS)  
<http://www.asprs.org/>
- Environmental Systems Research Institute  
<http://www.esri.com/>
- Geoscience and Remote Sensing Society  
<http://www.grss-ieee.org/>
- Geospatial Information & Technology Association (GITA)  
<http://www.gita.org/>
- GIS Geography  
<http://gisgeography.com/>
- Remote Sensing Society of Canada  
<http://www.casi.ca/canadianremotesensingsociety.aspx>
- Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (URISA)  
<http://www.urisa.org/>

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Gomez, B., and J. P. Jones III, eds. 2010. *Research Methods in Geography: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Text intended for students that includes chapters on research methodology, data collection, and techniques. Covers both human and physical geography. Includes clear definitions of key terms.

Johnston, R. J., D. Gregory, and D. M. Smith, eds. 2000. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 4th edn. Oxford: Blackwell.

A remarkably comprehensive, detailed, and clear dictionary with major entries often treated in an almost encyclopedic fashion; highly recommended.

Philipps, M. 2005. "Philosophical Arguments in Human Geography," in Philipps, ed., *Contested Worlds: An Introduction to Human Geography*. Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 13–85.

Informative overview of philosophies in human geography highlighting the important role played in research.

## YOUTUBE VIDEOS

- TEDx Talks. 2013. "Geographic Information Systems (GIS): Dan Scollon at TEDxRedding." YouTube video, 16:00. Posted October 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VMz7NDy3o>
  1. According to the talk, how are today's maps altering the way we perceive our world and interact with it?
    - The video begins by showing a global map. On this illustration, populations can be identified; energy consumption rates can be noted as can distribution of populations, density and patterns of cultures. Maps provide us with more information than ever before. Using modern technological advances, people from all corners of the globe are able to access information and make the assumptions based on that information.
  2. What is the historical significance of maps?
    - There is a very long history of maps. Maps have evolved from showing us opportunities and risk of place to evolve into very complex multi-use tools. European conquest was driven by at the time, modern maps. Today maps have evolved into computer-delivered and digital devices that we use on a daily basis.
- edeos- digital education. 2011. "Globalization." YouTube video, 8:10. Posted October 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oTLyPPrZE4>
  1. In our globalized world, how does the video make a case that economics, ecology, society, and politics are no longer limited at the national level?
    - The video begins by stating that reasonable governance can only be realized in a broader state. Because of globalization our world functions through a series of international organizations (NATO, European Union, NAFTA, United Nations). These large multi-national organizations drive commerce, international organization, and human movement.
  2. How has "distance" decreased?
    - Technological advancement has essentially removed distance. Whether that is via global, instant, 24-hour television broadcasts to all corners of the world, the decrease costs associated with communication via telephone calls, emails, text, etc., or the rapid decrease in container shipment costs, our cost of and ease of travel has effectively made the world smaller.