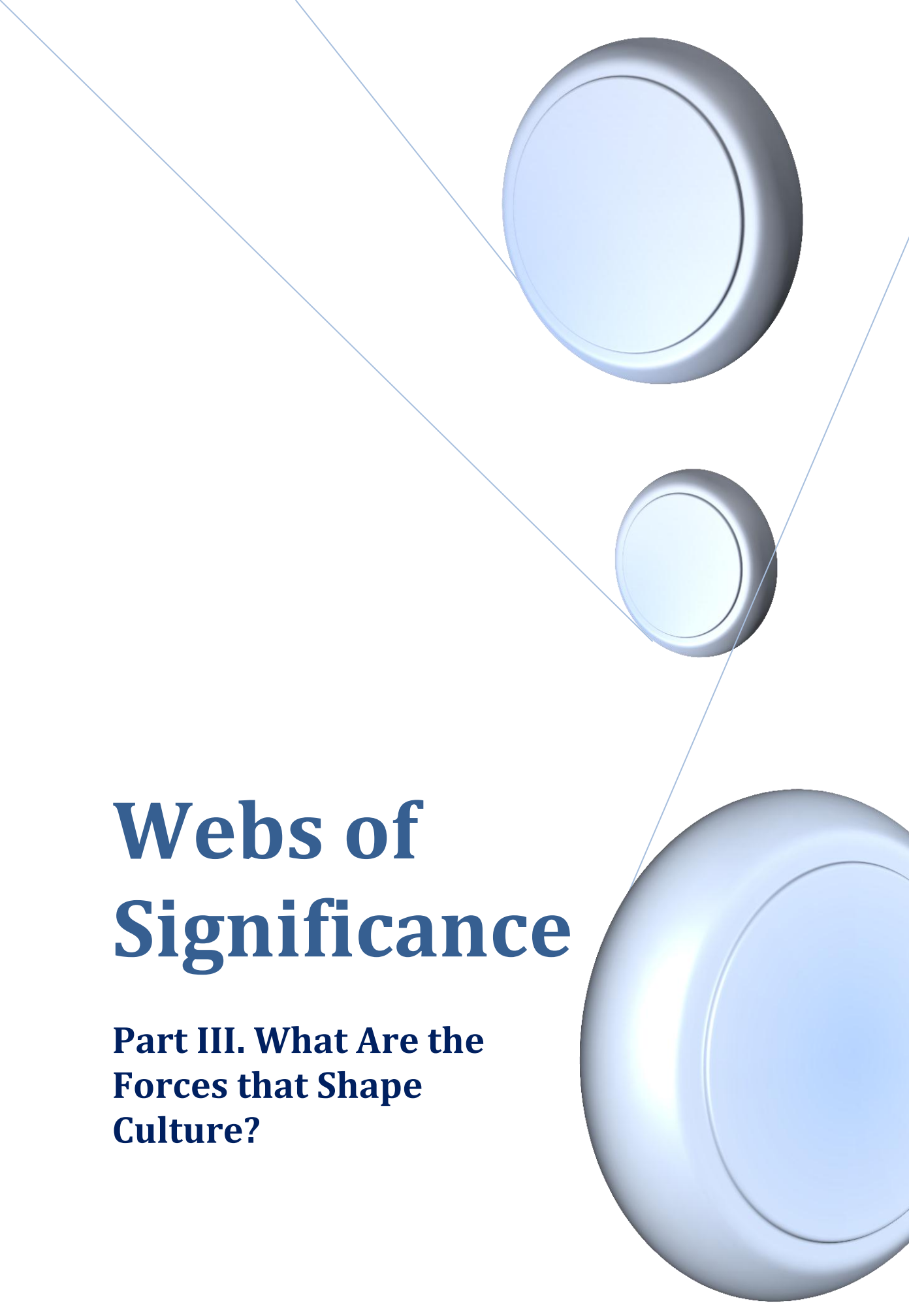


Webs of Significance

Part III. What Are the Forces that Shape Culture?

Part III. Forces that Shape Culture

We have already seen how our survival needs shape what we think, what we do, and what we produce. Maslow's Pyramid of Universal Human Needs provides a useful framework for analysis. In Part III of this course, we will focus closely on the interplay of **environmental** and **psychological factors** that, intertwined, drive our thoughts and behavior, shaping our cultures.

III.1 Physical Environment & Culture

Life sprouts in environments that support it; in the course of evolution, living things had to adapt to their changing environments in order to survive. Abstract thought gave us the power not only to better adapt to the physical world we live in, but also to change our environments to suit our needs. Instead of *reacting* to our environments, we learned to *actively* impact them, through the use of tools. As was discussed earlier,

Man wants the stick; the ape wants the fruit.

We differ from animals not just by a single feature, such as intellect, or free will; the difference between us is in our *relation to reality*. "Man differs from the animal by his ***consciousness***" (Vygotsky: 1925). Animals perceive reality only through their physical senses – their behavior is purely ***reactive*** to the concrete environment/circumstances they are in. Abstract thought gave us the power to rise above the concrete situations we find ourselves in; we can imagine (or 'abstract') the consequences of our actions, and so actively influence our environment.

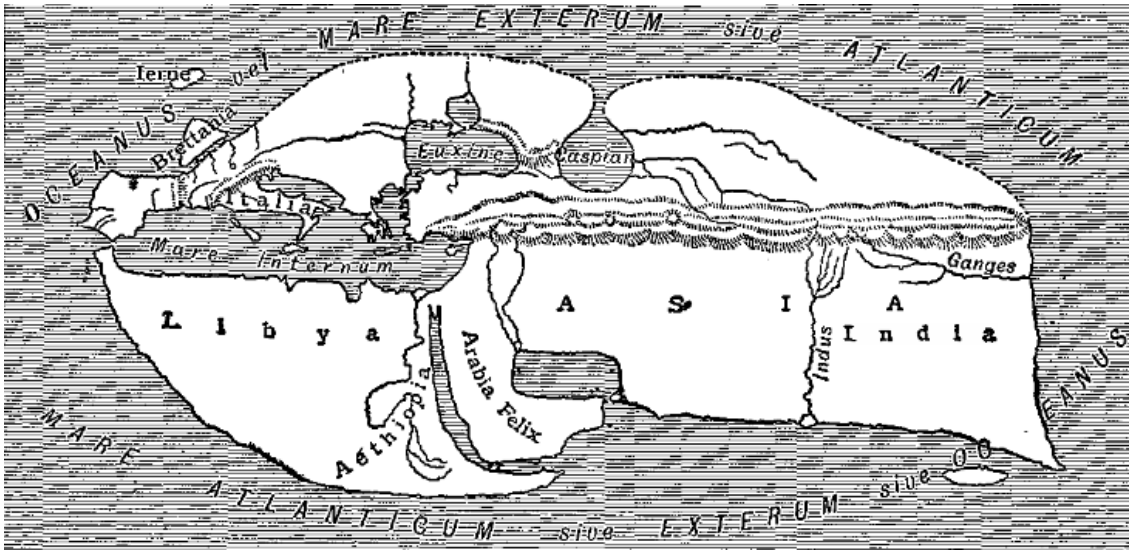
Friendly geographical environments and the tools we invented made it easier for us to ensure our basic survival needs, which left us **more time for thinking!** As Aristotle noted in Metaphysics, Book I,

> At first he who invented any art whatever that went beyond the common perceptions of man was naturally admired by men, not only because there was something useful in the inventions, but because he was thought wise and superior to the rest. But as more arts were invented, and some were directed to the necessities of life, others to recreation, the inventors of the latter were naturally always regarded as wiser than the inventors of the former, because their branches of knowledge did not aim at utility. Hence, when all such inventions were already established, the sciences (which do not aim at giving pleasure or at the necessities of life) were discovered, and **first in the places where men first began to have leisure**. This is why the mathematical arts were founded in Egypt; for there the priestly caste was allowed to be at leisure.

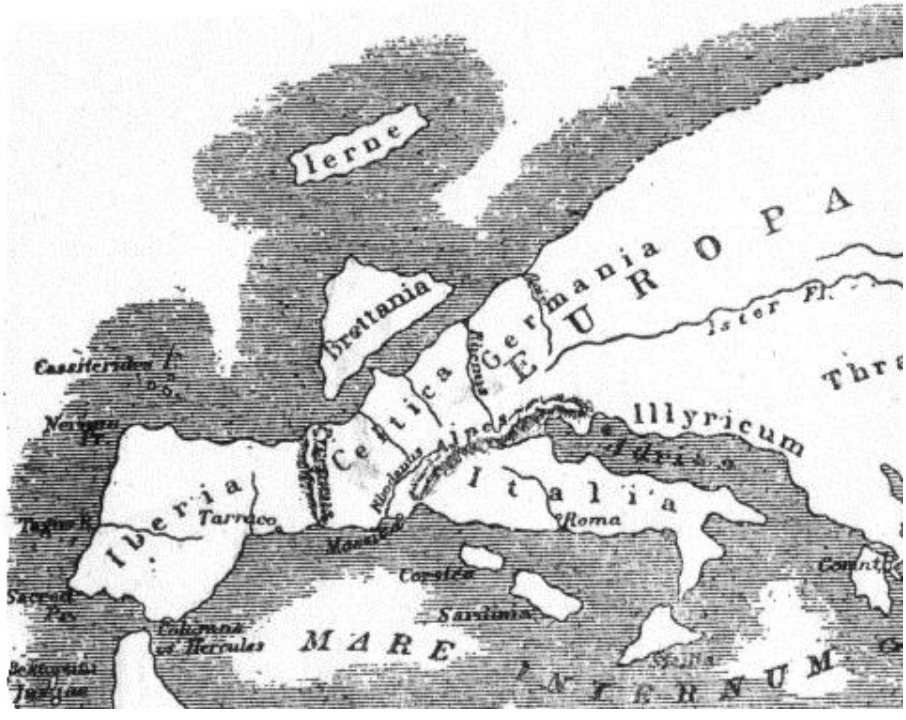
Part III. What Shapes Culture?

Despite our ability to impact our environments, their influence on human life is indisputable – survival needs have always driven us to 'greener pastures.' Before Aristotle, the great physician of Ancient Greece **Hippocrates (c. 460-380 BC)** discussed the influence of physical environments on human health and psychology in his medical treatise *Airs, Waters, Places* (400 BC).

In Roman times, the Greek geographer **Strabo (63/64 BC – ca. AD 24)** described in his *Geographica* how climate influences the psychological disposition of different races.



Maps of the world & Europe, according to Strabo Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strabo



Part III. What Shapes Culture?

The medieval Muslim scholar **Ibn Khaldun (1332-1407 AD)** also pointed out the influence of climate on society, as well as on human biological adaptation. In his **Muqaddimah** (1377), he refuted the biblical 'Curse of Ham' myth[1] that the sons of Ham were cursed to be black, and argued that black skin was due to the hot sun of sub-Saharan Africa.

Ibn Khaldun also believed that physical environment influences people's non-physical characteristics. He explained the differences between societies, whether nomadic or sedentary, with all their customs and institutions, in terms of their "physical environment – habitat, climate, soil, food, and the different ways in which they are forced to satisfy their needs and obtain a living."

Ibn Khaldun's ideas reverberate in the writings of the great Enlightenment thinkers, notably, Boileau and Montesquieu:

Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711), the French literary critic and poet, wrote in his ***L'Art Poetique*** (The Art of Poetry):

"*Des siècles, des pays, étudiez les moeurs; Les climats font souvent les diverses humeurs*" (III, v. 113-114);

which means,

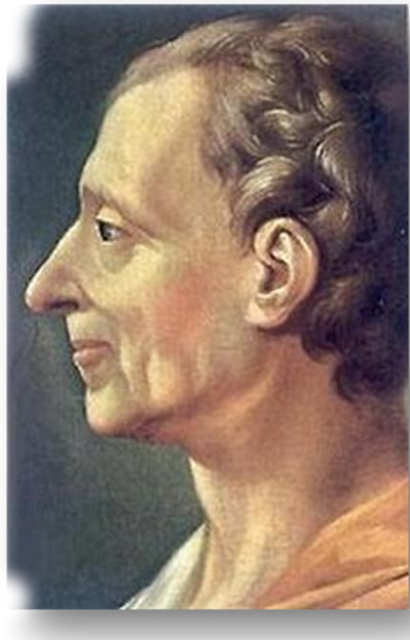
"Of Countryes and of Times the humors know;
From diff'rent Climates, diff'ring Customs grow."

Boileau believed that the Italian Renaissance (the re-awakening of Classical Knowledge) first started in the south of Europe because the warm climate there allowed the residents of Florence more time to devote to the Arts. Powerful families like the Medici were strong patrons of the arts and sciences in Florence. The harsher climate of the North, on the other hand, stimulated more pragmatic technologies, designed to ease the effects of cold winter (i.e., heating, building, food storage, etc.).

[1] When Ham dishonored his father, Noah put a curse on him, saying that the descendants of his son Canaan will be "servants of servants". Of Ham's four sons, Canaan fathered the Canaanites, while Mizraim fathered the Egyptians, Cush the Cushites, and Phut the Libyans. During the Middle Ages, Ham was believed to be the ancestor of all Africans, and common belief attributed the visible racial features in Ham's offspring to the Curse of Ham. The sixth-century Babylonian Talmud states that "the descendants of Ham are cursed by being Black and depicts Ham as a sinful man and his progeny as degenerates." Both Arab and later European and American slave traders used this story to justify African slavery. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamitic

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

Montesquieu[2] (1689-1755) also believed that climate and geography affect the temperaments and customs of people and their society. Montesquieu was particularly interested in the correlation between climates and governments; in his view, the laws of every society should take into account environmental influences, accommodating them whenever necessary, and counteracting their worst effects.



In his ***De l'Esprit des Lois*** (The Spirit of the Laws), first published in 1748, Montesquieu argued that a "cold climate constricts our bodies' fibers, and causes coarser juices to flow through them. Heat, by contrast, expands our fibers, and produces more rarefied juices. These physiological changes affect our characters. Those who live in cold climates are vigorous and bold, phlegmatic, frank, and not given to suspicion or cunning. They are relatively insensitive to pleasure and pain; Montesquieu writes that "you must flay a Muscovite alive to make him feel" (SL 14.2). Those who live in warm climates have stronger but less durable sensations. They are more fearful, more amorous, and more susceptible both to the temptations of pleasure and to real or imagined pain; but they are less resolute, and less capable of sustained or decisive action. The manners of those who live in temperate climates are "*inconstant*", since "*the climate has not a quality determinate enough to fix them*" (SL 14.2). These differences are not hereditary: if one moves from one sort of climate to another, one's temperament will alter accordingly."[3]

Montesquieu thought some climates to be superior to others, the temperate climate of France being (for him) ideal. His view is that people living in very warm countries are "too hot-tempered," while those in northern countries are "icy" or "stiff." He therefore considered the climate of 'middle' Europe to be the best.

It is easy to see how the 'slippery slope' of Montesquieu's generalizations led some subsequent ideologues to espouse **geographical determinism.**[4]

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[2] English pronunciation: /ˈmɒntɨskjuː/, French pronunciation: [mɔ̃tɛskjø]

[3] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/montesquieu/

[4] **a doctrine that regards geographical conditions as the determining or molding agency of group life.** http://universalium.academic.ru/119907/geographic_determinism

III.2 Geographical determinism

Geographical determinism, a.k.a. *climatic/ environmental determinism*, is the view that climate, landform, and other physical characteristics of an area strongly influence the thinking and behavior of the people who live there, and that climate/ physical environment, therefore, determine the culture of the society.

For instance, climate determinism holds that areas in the tropics are less developed than those of higher latitudes, because the warm weather makes life easier, so people living there do not have to work as hard to ensure their survival. Tropical climates, therefore, were thought to cause laziness, relaxed attitudes and promiscuity, while the inconstant weather of the temperate climes was believed to encourage hard work and self-reliance.

The proponents of environmental determinism include two American geographers, **Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932)** and **Ellsworth Huntington (1876–1947)**, as well as the British/ Australian anthropologist **Thomas Griffith Taylor (1880-1963).** To understand the extent of the shocking racial prejudice that existed until so recently, and how climate determinism served to promote it under the guise of scientific objectivity, let us take a closer look at some of their ideas.

Thomas Griffith Taylor →

Taylor wrote a lot about the role of environment in shaping race and about human migrations. Taylor saw the 'out of Africa' hypothesis as antiquated thinking from the 19th century. In his ***Environment, Race, and Migration*** (1937), Taylor put forward a theory that the "Mongolian" race is the race truest to their past in the hearth of modern humans: Central Asia. Taylor postulated that Australoid and Negroid races were the first to branch off during the evolution of humanity from the Neanderthal and that they were racially adapted to live on the 'margins of the world.' The Negrito race was never related to Neanderthals and thus developed more directly from apes. "During the million years of Post-Pliocene" time, humans were forced to migrate during four major migrations related to the expansion of the "Great Ice Sheet." As humans moved to different areas of the world they adapted to the environment they encountered. Taylor rejected the theory of the Continental Drift,

writing that human races evidently migrated into world's regions separately and over time. They moved out over the world, the world didn't move them (he wrote this before the knowledge of plate tectonics). Taylor linked skin pigment to temperature and collected extensive data from the period on geology, topology, meteorology, and anthropology. Taylor saw geography in a synthesizing role between explanations of the physical world and the diffusion and evolution of the human species.

"The fittest tribes evolve and survive in the most stimulating regions; i.e., where living is not so hard as to stunt mental development, and not so easy as to encourage sloth and loss of initiative. The least fit are ultimately crowded out into the deserts, the tropical jungles, or the rugged mountains" (Taylor: 1937, p. 6).

The most suitable parts of the world for habitation are, according to Taylor, in Europe, Western Siberia, the Americas, and Eastern China. These are the places where the world's masses must one day move into. Places least adaptable to European styles of agriculture and settlement Taylor considered as "useless." In the final section of the book, Taylor hypothesizes about the future expansion of the white race, which he saw as most viable. Though he wrote that no Europeans would wish to extinguish or force native people from their lands, "these primitive people are doomed to extinction..." Whites would eventually settle all "useful lands."

Taylor disagreed with theories that put the Nordic race as the apotheosis of mankind. By his theory, Asiatic races would be the most pure. He gives great accolades to the Chinese race. He links Europe's historical accession in the global sphere to a)command of the seas and b) easy access to plentiful surface coal. Taylor takes a seemingly contradictory viewpoint by both decrying miscegenation and saying that white Australian women who married Chinese men were OK to do so. Mixing of more advanced races was, ostensibly, acceptable, while miscegenation with more primitive races was to be abhorred."

All citations from this section from the book "Environment, Race, and Migration."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Griffith_Taylor

Ellsworth Huntington (1876-1947) put forth the 'general hypothesis that climate has been a determining factor in the geographical distribution of human progress.' He argued that climate influenced health and energy, which in turn influenced civilization. For example, he attributed the decline of the Greek and Roman civilizations, in part, to the spread of malaria in the region around 200 BC (Huntington: Civilization and Climate, pp. 393-394).

Despite his deterministic outlook, Huntington did concede that human action could affect and shape the environment to some extent:

“Nevertheless, there seems to be much truth in the idea that man's social progress constantly alters his relation to climate. In the past great inventions have helped chiefly in enabling man to overcome low temperature; in the future, perhaps, they will help him in equal measure to overcome high temperature, dryness, and monotony” (Huntington: Civilization and Climate, p. 398).

The general trend of his argument, though, reduced human progress to the mechanics of physiological response to environmental factors, making unwarranted and hasty generalizations about whole races of people. His lack of logic, however, is not easy to detect behind the gloss of dispassionate objectivity and high-horse moral concerns:

To those who accept the climatic hypothesis, it may seem depressing. … If our reasoning is correct, man is far more limited than he has realized. He has boasted that he is the lord of creation. He has revelled in the thought that he alone among created beings can dwell in the uttermost bounds of the earth. One more of the bulwarks of this old belief is now assailed. Man can apparently live in any region where he can obtain food, but his physical and mental energy and his moral character reach their highest development only in a few strictly limited areas. The location of those areas appears to have varied greatly in the past ; it may vary greatly in the future. In a thousand years, for all that we can tell, so the prophet of evil will say, no highly favorable region may exist upon the globe, and the human race may be thrown back into the dull, lethargic state of our present tropical races. …

If climatic conditions influence character as we have inferred, does not our hypothesis weaken man's moral responsibility? Will not people more than ever ascribe their failings to nature, and so excuse themselves? In the favored regions will not men become increasingly arrogant and overbearing, because they will be surer than ever that the rest of the world cannot resist them? If all these sad results are possible, is it well to know that climate so strongly influences us? We cannot change the climate, so why ascribe to it such great effects merely to destroy hope in some and moral responsibility in others? (Ibid., pp. 403-404).

The climate of many countries seems to be one of the great reasons why idleness, dishonesty, immorality, stupidity, and weakness of will prevail. If we can conquer climate, the whole world will become stronger and nobler (Ibid., p.411).

Ellen Churchill Semple (1863-1932) seems to have a more balanced approach, with a feminine touch, in the opening passage of her influential work, ***Influences of Geographic Environment*** **(1911)**:

"Man is a product of the earth's surface. This means not merely that he is a child of the earth, dust of her dust; but that the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, given him his problems of navigation or irrigation, and at the same time whispered hints for their solution."

The title of Sempel's 1897 publication, ***Civilization is at bottom an economic fact***, suggests that she may have viewed human civilization from a slightly broader perspective; yet, the idea that climate and environment are the main causes of human behavior and, therefore, of human cultures was simplistic and controversial (even then). In fact, the Nazis cited Semple's theory of environmental determinism as evidence for the inferiority of the Jewish race, saying that her theory proved that certain people and societies are more civilized and better than others. http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/alumni/ellen-churchill-semple.html

Under the guise of scientific objectivity, environmental determinism has served to validate the 'evolved' superiority of the 'whites'; Christianity, the religion of the colonial masters, naturally upheld these beliefs (God supports 'his own' people). Both ideology and religion thus justified slavery and racial discrimination.

The Age of European expansion that brought about colonization of Africa and brutal slavery in America also threw different races together. Inevitably, prejudice and fear gave way, over time, to better understanding between the races and recognition of common humanity. In the second half of the twentieth century, racism and racial segregation, fed by ignorance and prejudice, were finally rejected by society and officially discredited; this made the racially tainted theory of environmental determinism unpopular and even 'politically incorrect.' The idea that environment influences people and has shaped their cultures was revived relatively recently, particularly in the popular writings of Jared Diamond.

Jared Diamond: "Environment Molds History"

This claim, even though **Jared Diamond** ostensibly rejects racist and eurocentric theories of development, commits the same old logical error – hasty generalization.

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

Jared Mason Diamond (b. 1937) is an American scientist and author whose work draws from a variety of fields. His best known popular science book, **Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies (1997**) seeks to explain Eurasian dominance throughout history. Using evidence from ecology, archaeology, genetics, linguistics, and various historical case studies, Diamond argues that the imbalances in power and technology between human societies do not reflect cultural or racial differences, but rather originate in environmental differences.

Going back 13,000 years, Diamond explains how food production ensured success. Because farming communities produced more food and domesticated animals, they could feed non-food producers like professional soldiers, bureaucrats, writers and craftsmen.

Diamond argues that the east-west axis of Eurasia's land mass meant a shared latitude and similar growing conditions, which enabled one of the first domesticated crops, wheat, to spread relatively quickly from the Fertile Crescent to Europe; more than twice as fast, for example, as corn and beans spread from Mexico northward to what would become the eastern United States.

Fewer barriers like mountains also made it much easier for livestock and, eventually, writing, the wheel and other inventions to spread than in the Americas or Africa, which both have a north-south axis. For example, cattle, sheep and goats, first domesticated in the Fertile Crescent, stopped short for 2,000 years at the northern edge of the Serengeti Plains with their deadly, disease-carrying tsetse flies. And of the 14 large mammals domesticated before the 20th century, Eurasia had 13 of them, including sheep, goats, cows and horses, which provided meat, fertilizer, wool, leather, transport, plowing power and military assault vehicles.

Domesticated animals also served as the **petri dish**[5] for nasty epidemics like smallpox and measles to which Europeans over time developed immunity. So when the Europeans arrived in the New World, up to 99 percent of the unexposed native populations were killed -- instead of the reverse. It wasn't virtuosity but viruses that helped pave the way for conquest.

[5] A **Petri dish** (cell culture dish) is a shallow glass cylindrical lidded dish that biologists use to culture cells. It was named after German bacteriologist Julius Petri, who invented it.

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

Diamond's next book, **Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed** (2005) examined a range of past civilizations in an attempt to identify why they either collapsed or succeeded, and considers what contemporary societies can learn from these historical examples. As in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, he argues against traditional historical explanations for the failure of past societies, and instead focuses on ecological factors.

Interesting...

Vengeance Is Ours (2008)

On 21 April 2009, Henep Isum Mandingo and Hup Daniel Wemp of Papua New Guinea filed a $10 million USD defamation lawsuit against Diamond over a 2008 New Yorker magazine article entitled "Vengeance Is Ours: What Can Tribal Societies Tell Us About Our Need to Get Even?"[7] The article is an account of feuds and vengeance killings among tribes in the New Guinea highlands which Mandingo and Wemp claim have been misrepresented and embellished by Diamond.[8] The lawsuit came in the wake of an investigation by Rhonda Roland Shearer which alleged factual inaccuracies in the article, most notably that Mandingo, the alleged target of the feud who was said to have been rendered wheelchair-bound in the fighting recounted by Diamond, is fit and healthy.[9]

Diamond and the New Yorker stand by the article. They maintain that it is a faithful account of the story related to Diamond by Wemp while they worked together in 2001 and in a formal interview in 2006, based on "detailed notes", and that both Diamond and the magazine did all they reasonably could to verify the story. Furthermore they claim that in a taped phone interview conducted in August 2008 between Daniel Wemp and Chris Jennings, a fact checker for the New Yorker, Wemp failed to raise any significant objections.[10] Wemp contends he told Jennings the story was "inaccurate, inaccurate".[9] Anthropologist Pauline Wiessner, an expert on tribal warfare in Papua New Guinea, points out that young men often exaggerate or make up entirely their exploits in tribal warfare, and that Diamond would be naïve to accept and publish Wemp's stories at face value.[10]

7. Diamond, J. (July 1999). "How to get rich".
8.^ Buckle, H.T. (1861). History of Civilization in England. Appleton & Co.. ISBN 1432661434. Retrieved 2008-07-09.
9.^ Cohen, P. (March 21, 1998). "Geography Redux: Where You Live Is What You Are". The New York Times. Retrieved 2008-07-09.
10.^ "The Pulitzer Prizes for 1998".

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guns,_Germs,_and_Steel

Diamond's generalizations have come under attack from historians and social scientists who argue that the 'truly important causes' of European progress were cultural and not environmental (Blaut: 1999):

> *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is influential in part because its Eurocentric arguments seem, to a general reader, to be so compellingly "scientific." Diamond is a natural scientist (a bioecologist), and essentially all of the reasons he gives for the historical supremacy of Eurasia and, within Eurasia, of Europe, are taken from natural science. I suppose that environmental determinism has always had this cachet of scientism. I dispute Diamond's argument not because he tries to use scientific data and scientific reasoning to solve the problems of human history. That is laudable. But he claims to produce reliable, scientific answers to these problems when in fact he has no such answers, and he blithely ignores the findings of social science while advancing old and discredited theories of environmental determinism. That is bad science.

What are these 'truly important' (cultural) causes of human progress? Culture, we remember, is basically what people think, what they do, and what they produce as a society. Human needs are universal, but there are many different ways of satisfying them, as the history of the diverse human cultures shows us. Cultural causes of social development, therefore, comprise what people think of the physical world and how they act upon it (in it) as a society.

In the past few years, the Internet has revolutionized human communications, dissolving the age old divides and mixing the melting pot of humanity into one Global Village. The new awareness of our common humanity and shared destiny has enabled us to view human societies through the wide-angle lens of dialectics – as an indivisible union of intertwined physical (environmental/biological) and psychological (cultural) factors, interconnected in their change, development and evolution, beginning and end.

Social history, the lives of societies and civilizations are shaped by *both* physical and psychological factors.

Societies are like individuals, each with its own character, personality, ways of thinking and habits. Individuals may live in the same social and physical environment, yet they all look, think and behave very differently. Societies, too, may live in similar climatic/ geographical environments, and yet look, think, and behave differently.

As individuals, we act to satisfy our human needs within the society that we are born into. Collectively, societies also act upon the physical environment that they have to both adapt to, and change, in order to survive.

Part III. What Shapes Culture?
Each person has 'body and soul'; each society, collectively, also has its 'body and soul': the people and what they do and produce make up its 'body'; the 'soul' of each society is its collective consciousness, its 'heart and mind' (i.e., what people think and feel).

Environmental determinism argues that 'Environment Molds History' – in other words, 'Where You Live Is What You Are.' We know, however, that our personal (and collective) welfare depends a lot on both luck and good judgment in solving life's problems. The welfare of societies is no different. In the next chapter, we will look into the 'soul' of societies, to examine how their 'hearts and minds' shape their cultures.

Further Reading:

Appenix III

Reading 1. Jared Diamond: *Guns, Germs and Steel.* Summary by Michael McGoodwin