

Possibilism in Geography

Possibilism is a concept that is most commonly associated with the work of the French geographer Vidal de la Blache. Vidal de la Blache developed this geographical approach as a reaction to a more traditional geographical way of thinking, which is known as environmental determinism. While this latter tradition “regarded all the facets of human activity (from farming practices to political systems) as ultimately determined in character by the natural-environmental context”, the former way of thinking about the relationship between people and their surroundings is shaped by the idea that “the natural environment offers possible avenues for human development, the precise one chosen being very much a human decision”. This is not to say that people are completely free to determine their own directions, but rather it assumes that there exists a “ongoing ‘dialogue’ between natural environments and the human communities they support” (‘milieux’ and ‘civilisations’), which, according to Vidal de la Blache, results in a “human world full of different genres de vie (‘lifestyles’), distinctive to particular people living in particular places”. Thus, Possibilism explains that the environment does not dictate what people would become, but rather that the environment offers the opportunities for people what they choose to be. People adapt to the different conditions the earth has to offer at different places and that is how different living conditions and habits arise.

It was the French historian Lucien Febvre who elaborated further on the concept of possibilism, by writing that, when it comes to human behaviour in relation to their environment, “there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities; and man, as a master of the possibilities, are the judge of their use. Thus, according to Febvre, because of the fact that men have the most influence as a geographical agent on the earth, we should put man in the

first place, and no longer the earth, nor the influence of climate, nor the determinant conditions of localities”

What is the Possibilism in Geography?

Possibilism is the philosophy introduced by Fabvre, to explain man and environment relationship in a different way of determinism, taking man as an active agent in environment; which asserts that natural environment provides options, the number of which increases as the knowledge and technology of a culture group. According to Fabvre, 'there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities'. The possibilism saw in the physical environment a series of possibilities for human development, but they argued that the actual ways in which development took place were related to the culture of the people concerned, except perhaps in regions of extremes like desert, tundra, equatorial and high mountains. The possibilism emphasize that it is impossible to explain the difference in human society and the history of that society with reference to the influence of environment; and they hold that man himself brings his influence to bear on that environment and changes it. According to them, nature is never more than an adviser. In marginal environments of equatorial forests, cold deserted areas and tundra region man's choice may be very extremely restricted; but in areas of the warm and cool temperate zones, man's techniques were highly developed, the possibilities were more numerous. Thus, Bowman asserted while the physical laws to which mankind response are available in their application and degree of effect yet this is also true that all man everywhere are affected to some degree by physical conditions.

Inspire of the fact that man has numerous possibilities in a given physical setting; he cannot go against the direction laid by the physical environment. Thus, the possibility approach was criticized by many scholars. G. Taylor, while criticizing possibilism stressed that the task of geography is to study the natural environment and its effect on man, not all problems

connected with man or the cultural landscape. Moreover, Possibilism does not encourage the study of geographical and it promotes over anthropocentrism in geography.

Who is the Father of Possibilism?

Alfred Hettner, a German Geographer known for his concept of chorology (the study of places and regions) is most widely considered as one of the pioneers of school of thought of Possibilism. However, even earlier than him, a French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache became the first active advocate of Possibilism.

Who gave the concept of Possibilism in Geography?

Vidal is credited with introducing geographic possibilism and defined it in the sense that in a given natural environment, humans have a range of potential actions available to them, which they can deploy to overcome the natural limitations placed upon them.

What is an example of Possibilism?

'Man Has Changed the Environment' – Examples of Possibilism

Man has brought changes to the environment by increasing its capacity to meet his largely increased needs and demands. The most visible and common examples in this regard are; industrial revolution, agricultural advancement, technological revolution.

Historical Background

- Since ancient times, determinism has been important notion defining the man-environment relationship. The idea was that man is a product of nature or physical environment moulds the human culture. Most of the early scholars like Aristotle, Eratosthenes, Strabo, and Hippocrates were deterministic in their approach. For

Example, Aristotle believed that the world's climatic zones – frigid, temperate and torrid; determined habitability of man.

- In medieval time, France scholar Montesquieu in his work *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) discusses how climatic conditions govern the degeneration and persistence of cultural traits. This philosophy even dominated the writings of Arab scholars especially Al- Masudi, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn- Khaldun. In the early modern period, Kant vehemently supported determinism.
- Ritter, one of the founding fathers of Modern geography also had a tilt towards anthropocentric approach and advocated geographical determinism. Ratzel (1844-1904) also propagated new determinism where he emphasized that man holds a higher position than other organisms; still accepting that determinism is a dominant force in explaining the man-environment relationship.
- In the second volume of 'Anthropogeographie', he analyzes socio-economic activities and culture of man in relation to the physical environment. This concept at the later stage became an inspiration for Vidal de la Blache.
- Apart from determinism, scientific concepts like deductive approach, Darwin's theory of evolution, Newtonian cause and effect relationships in the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century influenced a number of geographers in France. This led to the foundation of the modern school in France (France School of Geographical Thought) which had its roots in the philosophy of possibilism. Vidal de la Blache, Gallois, Brunhes, Demangeon, Emmanuel De Martonne, Blanchard, and all advocated the paradigm of possibilism. This philosophy is in direct contrast to determinism and puts a man in the first place that is a man and no longer the earth or climate influences man's habitability. Thus, presents man as an active rather than the passive agent.

The Rise of Possibilism

- The doctrine of possibilism tries to explain the relationship of a human being with the environment in a different way; it puts human at a higher level and regards it as an active agent. It is a principle which claims that environment provides opportunities and man being an economic man chooses from those possibilities. Febvre (1932) in 'A Geographical Introduction to History' stated 'there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities; and man, as the master of these possibilities, are the judge of their use'.
- The roots of possibilism can be traced back to the works of Plato, who is considered the master of deductive reasoning. Though his idea went into gloom for hundreds of years; the contrasting doctrine of determinism continued to grow and flourished. It got support in the writings of French scholar of the eighteenth century – Montesquieu, who is credited with developing a doctrine analogous to modern paradigm of possibilism. He opined that man possesses free will and has the ability to choose from a series of opportunities. Similar thoughts were also put forward by another eighteenth-century French philosopher, Comte de Buffon. He believed that man was ordered to conquer the earth and even transform it. Their views laid the base for crypto-possibilistic hypothesis.
- In the nineteenth century, George Perkins Marsh and Kirchoff made an attempt to put forward a non-deterministic approach to human geography; they focused on the man himself. It was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that under the leadership of Vidal De la Blache (1845 – 1918), a possibilistic view of man-environment developed. The focus of this philosophy was "Nature has set boundaries and has provided possibilities for human settlement, but the way a person responds to these conditions or adjusts it depends on the traditional way of life." Vidal rejected the

concept of material determinism and advocated favourability. He even rejected Durkheim's opinion of human geography as social morphology rather insisted that man was a partner and not a slave of the environment (Dikshit, 2009). He was critical of Darwinian Ratzelian heritage which proposed environmental determinism and put forth the concept of possibilism. He sought a scheme for understanding the interaction of nature and culture that eschewed both environmental determinism and radical possibilism to seek answers or solution for the dichotomy between the human and the environment.

- He vehemently rejected the idea that society and nature stood out as adversaries in the human-nature confrontation. For him, the man was part of nature and therefore, its most active collaborator. To resolve this dichotomy he generated the concept of 'genre de vie'. 'Genre de vie' (way of life) includes all activities, practices, and techniques that characterize the adaptation of a human group to the milieu – the natural surroundings of their habitat. Vidal pointed out that the same genre de vie had different interpretations for various human groups.
- Thus, his works gave a sound methodological as well as a philosophical foundation for the doctrine of possibilism. This growth somewhat weakened the hold of Darwinian Determinism within the geographical thinking.
- In the twentieth century, possibilism got stronghold after the publication of Blache's article in 1913 where he categorically states that geography as a discipline seeks to measure and role of man in modifying the earth surface. This was further strengthened when his book was published in 1921 (English translation in 1926), though posthumously. He observes that nature gives man materials which have their inherent needs as well as limitations thus leading them to limited uses.

- Possibilism was further flourished by acclaimed historian Lucien Febvre (1878-1956). He puts forward - "Whatever the men do in their own environment, they cannot completely get rid of themselves completely." Febvre emphasized human initiative and motivation against the environment, destroying the environmental deterministic reasoning and as part of the environment of any group, as well as other humans, because they belong to the next group's cultural surroundings or the constraints of the environment are influenced by such thinking. He stated that in the view of possibilists, a homogeneous region does not necessarily result in a homogeneous society. This is because people residing in any area have the choice of possibilities time to time and also in the quantity they want.
- Bruhnes followed Blache's ideas and took it to next step, he not only transmitted Blache's philosophy in France but also disseminated it to different parts of the world. In 1910, his monumental work *La Geographie de L'Histoire* was published. His prime focus was on the actualities of exploitation of the earth by man. Commented: "The power that is meant is limited, and it meets in it the bounds of nature that it cannot cross human activity can change within its boundaries and its environment. But it cannot be removed from its environment, it can only modify it, but it can never cross it, and it will always be conditioned by it. "He also stated that - "Nature is not compulsory but the approval." Futility is also associated with the French school of geography; French geographers saw a series of possibilities for human development in the physical environment, but argued that the development in the real development was related to the culture of related people, perhaps in the field of extremes like deserts and tundra.

Major thinkers of Geographical Possibilism

Geographical possibilism is a school of thought in cultural geography that says that although the natural environment places certain constraints and limitations on human life, culture is determined independently of nature by human social conditions.

Geographical possibilism replaced a long legacy of geographical determinism in geographical thought, which held that the natural environment places an all-encompassing influence on human activity, such that all of human life is dependent on the natural environment, in the characterization of the Earth organism.

Paul Vidal de la Blache: Representing one of the central epistemological conflicts within geographical thought, both geographical possibilism and geographical determinism form distinct approaches to the analysis of geographical phenomena. The contention has been developing since the 1920s, when geographical determinism began its decline, and its claims began to be countered more often. Geographical determinism was also frequently interpreted in terms that were politically racist and facilitated thought on empires and imperialism. This led to the formation of geographic possibilism through the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache who proposed that although the environment establishes limits on culture, it does not completely define culture. Geographical determinism by the 1950s had been replaced by geographical possibilism as the dominant school of thought in geography.

Talcott Parson: The imagination of societies characterized as organic with functional components proposed by geographical determinism came to pass even in sociological thought with the passing of Talcott Parson's dominant sociological theory of structural-functionalism by the 1970s. These began to be replaced by more critical perspectives on societies, bypassing the hierarchical mode of functioning of the Parsonian model that served to

universalize Western modernity at the time. Organic imaginings of culture were also widely seen as gradually reducing humanity to atavism.

With the development of knowledge and technology in human societies, geographical possibilism thinks that it would be improbable for contemporary human societies to be completely subservient to the natural environment. Geographical possibilism joins this general trend in social scientific thought by placing human beings as active agents in terms of the natural environment, instead of the passive organism imagined by geographical determinism representing a point in Earth's long evolutionary history.

Lucian Febvre: A central belief in geographical possibilism states that with the progress in the knowledge and technology of a cultural group, there is a corresponding increase in the options available by which they can interact with the natural environment. The movement was led by French geographers following Lucian Febvre attempting to provide a model for cultures and their dispositions towards interacting with the natural environment. Hence this movement in geographical thought was named geographical possibilism in terms of the possibilities for human interaction with the natural environment. There are notable thinkers associated with this movement which has branched into many different positions in contemporary times, which we shall discuss later.

Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918)



Famous Book - *Principes de Geographie Humaine* (Principles of Human Geography), 1922

Famous Quote - *“Nature sets limits and offers possibilities for human settlement, but the way man reacts or adjusts to these conditions depends on his own traditional way of life.”*

Contribution - Paul Vidal de la Blache is a French geographer known as the founder of French human geography. Vidal devoted his lifetime to the study of the activities of humans and their interactions with their natural environment. In this interaction, Vidal held that humans do not have a passive role in regard to the natural environment, and could modify this environment to achieve their own ends.

Vidal is credited with introducing geographic possibilism and defined it in the sense that in a given natural environment, humans have a range of potential actions available to them, which they can deploy to overcome the natural limitations placed upon them. Vidal held that humans cannot overcome their natural environment but can choose how to interact with it in the best possible manner. For example, when a mountain acts as a barrier, it is not possible to

move the mountain, but humans can build a bridge and a road or rail track to create a passage across the mountain.

A significant weakness of Vidal's possibilism was that it did not attempt to determine the exact succeeding environmental impacts of human interaction but tried instead to empirically determine what is possible. Although a long celebrated theory, Vidal's geographic possibilism was increasingly criticized from the 1960s onwards as new ideas abounded in geographical thought and literature.

Lucian Paul Victor Febvre (1878-1956)



Famous Book - *A Geographical Introduction to History, 1925*

Famous Quote - *“man is a geographic agent and not the least. He everywhere contributes his share towards investing the physiognomy of the earth with those changing expressions which is the special charge of geography to study.”*

Contribution - Lucian Febvre is a French historian who led a movement that advocated a global history and rejected all forms of determinism in the early modern period. The French geographers advocating geographical possibilism in this era were mostly following up on Febvre's work. Febvre, influenced by Vidal's theory of alternative methods of human interaction with the natural environment, added that that this should be based on the changing cultural dispositions in the progress of human history.

The object of thought for Febvre was not to be nature, but humankind and human nature itself. He believed that the object of study for human geographers thus should be the changing expressions of human culture and history in their interaction with the natural environment.

Herbert John Fleure (1877-1969)



Famous Book - *A Natural History of Man in Britain, 1951*

Famous Quote – *“When the peoples of Europe acquired the idea of spending the Earth's capital expressed in coal and minerals in order to accumulate social luxury and political*

power for successful businessmen, they also learned to think of themselves more highly than they ought.”

Contribution - Herbert John Fleure is a British geographer and anthropologist who is noted for attempting to design a model for classifying geographical regions across the world on the basis of human characteristics rather than on the basis of biotic factors. Fleure believed that the study of man and human societies could not be separated from the study of their natural environment and that an evolutionary approach to human beings and their culture is essential to an understanding of geography. Fleure identified geographical regions such as ‘regions of hunger’, ‘industrialized regions’, etc.

Carl Ortwin Sauer (1889-1975)



Famous Book/Paper - *The Morphology of Landscape*, 1925

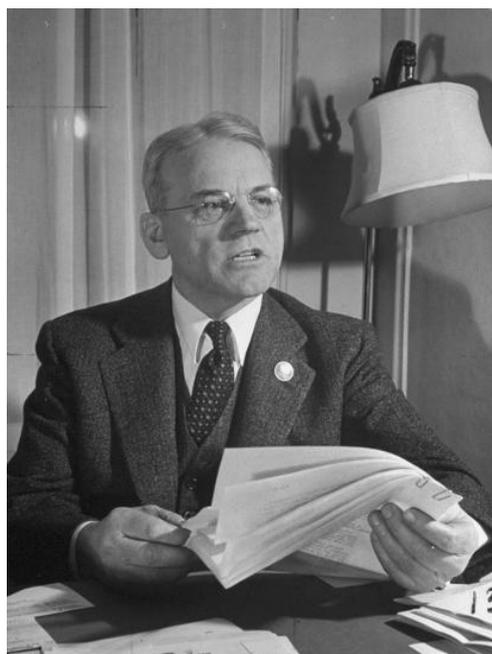
Famous Quote - *“Every field of knowledge is characterized by its declared preoccupation with a certain group of phenomena.”*

Contribution - Carl Sauer is an American geographer who specialized in the human geography of American Indians and native crops in the New World. Sauer is credited with establishing the Berkeley School of geographical thought during his time at the University of California, Berkeley, US.

In this geography moved ahead from physical and spatial studies and endorsed thought based on regional geography based on history, culture and landscapes, representing the legacy started by Vidal and Febvre. Sauer was especially interested in how humans interact with and change the natural environment and was able to align the university's geography department with its anthropology and history departments.

In his landmark paper *The Morphology of Landscape*, Sauer introduced a phenomenological basis of interpreting human influence on natural landscapes. Borrowing from sociology, he wanted the science of cultural geography to be associated with studying the phenomenological aspects of human interaction with the natural environment as a separate embodiment of human geography.

Isaiah Bowman (1878-1950)



Famous Book - *The Pioneer Fringe, 1931*

Famous Quote - *“Citizenship comes first today in our crowded world. No man can enjoy the privileges of education and thereafter with a clear conscience break his contract with society. To respect that contract is to be mature, to strengthen it is to be a good citizen, to do more than your share under it is noble.”*

Contribution - Isaiah Bowman is an American geographer and served as president of Johns Hopkins University between 1935 to 1948. The department of geography at Johns Hopkins University was established under his supervision. Bowman was influential in terms of the national policy of the US in his time. Bowman’s standout achievement was in transforming the American Geographical Society into a scholarly institution of high repute.

Bowman was instrumental in establishing the field of human geography also as political geography. An example of his work in this regard is *The Pioneer Fringe*, in which he commented on historians’ inference in the US Census Bureau’s decision in 1890 to not map a frontier line as the settlements were isolated.

The work developed after fieldwork in Garfield County, Montana on this aspect, in which Bowman elucidated how knowledge of geography in early settlers would have contributed to better social and political policies. Bowman commented on how just like the early settlers in America, those indulging in commercial and industrial occupations must also have knowledge of geography as a vital component of their learning.

Criticisms

Despite the fact that humans have many possibilities in some physical setting, they cannot go against the instructions set by the physical environment. Many contemporary thinkers have criticized the possibilistic approach. Griffith Taylor, criticizing the possibility, said that the

society should elect entirely, and since only one advisory role has been assigned to geography, therefore their work is not "plan of explanatory nature". Taylor was fairly right when he wrote that the work of geography is not the study of all the problems related to natural environment and humans, human or 'cultural landscape'. Apart from this, the possibilities do not encourage the study of the physical environment and promote humanism in geography.