HUMAN GEOGRAPHY: KEY CONCEPTS

1. MOST OF US ARE BORN GEOGRAPHERS. We are curious about the distinctive character of places and peoples. Recall what you have seen when you came to school from home. The residential houses and commercial buildings, streets and roads, gardens and lawns, the electric posts and wires all tell us something interesting and profound about who we are as a culture. If you travel to other places, to another town, province, city, island or to another country that view, which you have noticed along the highway as you came to school will change, sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically. Our geographical imaginations will push us to look and think and begin to make sense of what is going on in these different places, environments, and landscapes. It is this curiosity about the world—about HOW and WHY it is structured the way it is, WHAT it means, and how we have changed it and continue to change it—that is at the heart of human geography.

2. HUMAN GEOGRAPHY examines the relationships between people and the places and spaces in which they live using a variety of scales ranging from the local to the global. Human geographers explore how these relationships create the diverse spatial arrangements that we see around us, arrangements that include homes, neighborhoods, cities, nations and regions.

3. Generally, there are three different PERSPECTIVES geographers have taken in regard to studying and understanding the complexity of the human mosaic: (1) Spatial Models, (2) Sense of Place, and (3) Power and Ideology. Each of these perspectives brings a different emphasis to studying the diversity of human patterns on the Earth.

4. SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE. Some geographers seek patterns and regularities amidst the complexity of things and apply the scientific method to the study of people. They devise theories and seek regularities or universal spatial principles that apply across cultural lines, explaining all of humankind. These spatial principles become the basis for laws of human spatial behavior. Unlike physicists and chemists who do their work primarily in confined laboratories, human geographers dealing with space (physical gap or interval between two objects) or perhaps with what is in and between spaces face difficulties in controlling the effects of diverse factors. To solve this problem, geographers build models (imaginary situation, proposed by geographers) to simulate laboratory conditions so that they may isolate certain causal forces for detailed study.

5. SENSE OF PLACE. Other geographers seek to understand the uniqueness of each region and place. Just as space identifies the perspective of the model-building geographer, place (a specific point on earth distinguished by a particular characteristic) is the key word connoting this more humanistic view of geography. This perspective focuses on understanding the complexity of different cultures and how those cultures give meaning to and derive meaning from particular places. Yi-Fu Tuan coined the word topophilia, literally “love of place,” to describe people who exhibit a strong sense of place and the geographers who are attracted to the study of such places and peoples.

6. POWER & IDEOLOGY. For other geographers, uncovering and analyzing the connections between ideology and power are often integral to their task of understanding the diversity within a culture. For example, some geographers study ideology—a set of dominant ideas and beliefs—in relationship to place, environment, and landscape in order to understand
how power works culturally. Often certain groups of people have more power (the ability to affect the actions or attitudes of another) in society, and their beliefs and ways of life dominate and are considered the norm, whereas other groups of people with less power may participate in alternative cultures. These divisions are often based on gender, economic class, racial categories, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

7. From the SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE of studying geography, The National Geographic Society, in 1986, introduced five themes of studying geography (both physical and human geography): location, the geographical position of people and things on the earth’s surface; human-environment interactions, the relationship between humans and the physical world; region, an area where some geographic features are concentrated; place, a specific point on earth distinguished by a particular human and physical characteristics; and, movement, the mobility of people, goods, and ideas across the surface of the planet.

8. Applying a CULTURAL APPROACH to human geography, the geographer examines the ways in which culture is expressed and symbolized in the landscapes we see around us, including homes, commercial buildings, roads, agricultural patterns, gardens, and parks. He analyzes the ways in which language, religion, the economy, government, and other cultural phenomena vary or remain constant from one place to another and he provides a perspective for understanding how people function spatially and identify with place and region. Hence, using a cultural approach, some geographers identified five themes of human geography: region, mobility, globalization, culture, and cultural landscape.

9. FIVE THEMES OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY. Region. How are people and their traits grouped or arranged geographically? How and why are places alike or different? How do they mesh together into functioning spatial networks? How do their inhabitants perceive them and identify with them?—these are the core questions of the theme region. There are three types of regions: (1) formal region- an area inhabited by people who have one or more traits in common, such as language, religion, or a system of livelihood, that is, an area, that is relatively homogeneous in terms of cultural traits; (2) functional region- an area that has been organized to function politically, socially, or economically as one unit. A city, an independent state, a precinct, church diocese or parish, a trade area, a farm are examples (note: these regions have nodes, or central points where the functions are coordinated and directed); and, (3) vernacular region- one that is perceived to exist by its inhabitants, as evidenced by the widespread acceptance and use of a special regional name; it grows out of people’s sense of belonging and identification with a particular region.

Mobility. How and why do different cultural elements move through space and locate in particular settings? Are there some patterns to these movements? How are regions and places changing as people, ideas, practices, and technologies move around in space? These are the questions of the theme mobility. To study mobility, geographers talk about the concept of diffusion—movement of people, ideas, or things from one location outward toward other locations where these items are not initially found. There are types of diffusion; they are: (1) relocation diffusion, occurs when individuals or groups with a particular idea or practice emigrate from one location to another, thereby bringing the idea or practice to their new homeland; and, (2) expansion diffusion, ideas or practices spread throughout a population, from area to area, in a snowballing process (subdivided into three: hierarchical diffusion, ideas leapfrog from one important person to another or from one urban center to another, temporarily bypassing other persons or rural territories; contagious diffusion involves the wavelike spread of ideas in the manner of a contagious disease, moving
throughout space without regard to hierarchies; and, *stimulus diffusion*, which occurs when a specific trait is rejected but the underlying idea is accepted).

**Globalization.** How and why are different cultures, economies, and societies linked around the world? And given all these new linkages, why are there so many differences that exist between different groups of people in the world? Does globalization make people around the world more alike or more different? Globalization refers to a world increasingly linked, in which international borders are diminishing in importance resulting to expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space. These increasingly linked economic, political, and cultural networks around the world might lead many to believe that different groups of people around the globe are becoming more and more alike. But what these new global encounters have enabled is an increasing recognition of the differences between groups of people, and some of those differences have been caused by globalization itself.

**Hyperglobalizers**, either pessimistic or optimistic, claim that we are witnessing the rise of an increasingly homogenized popular culture underwritten by a Western ‘culture industry’ based in New York, Hollywood, London, and Milan. **Pessimistic hyperglobalizers** express their concern on the on-going ‘Americanization of the world’, explaining that Western norms and lifestyles are overwhelming more vulnerable cultures. UNESCO echoed a similar tone when it posited that the homogenizing influence of globalization on local culture may also bring with it a loss of uniqueness of local culture, which in turn can lead to loss of identity, exclusion and even conflict. This is especially true for traditional societies and communities, which are exposed to rapid ‘modernization’ based on models imported from outside and not adapted to their context. On the other hand, **optimistic hyperglobalizers** welcome the global spread of Anglo-American values and lifestyles, equating the Americanization of the world with the expansion of democracy and free markets. But contrary to the hyperglobalizers’ claim of homogenization of culture, others contend that global cultural flows often reinvigorate local cultural niches. Instead of being totally obliterated by the Western consumerist forces of sameness, local difference and particularity still play an important role in creating unique cultural constellations. Sociologist Roland Robertson argues that actually is happening is **glocalization**—a complex interaction of the global and local characterized by cultural borrowing, which is resulting to ‘cultural hybridity’ as manifested in fashion, music, dance, film, food, and language.

**Nature-Culture.** How do groups of people interact with the earth’s biophysical environment? How do the culture, politics, and economies of those groups affect their ecological situation and resource use? Human geographers view the relationship between people and nature as a two-way interaction. People's cultural values, beliefs, perceptions, and practices have ecological impacts, and ecological conditions in turn influence cultural perceptions and practices. Through the years, human geographers have developed various perspectives on the interaction between humans and the land. Four schools of thought have developed: environmental determinism, possibilism, environmental perception, and humans as modifiers of the Earth. **Environmental determinism** is the belief that the physical environment is the dominant force shaping cultures and that humankind is essentially a passive product of its physical surroundings. **Possibilism** claims that any physical environment offers a number of possible ways for a culture to develop. A society’s way of life ultimately depends on the choices people make among the possibilities that are offered by the environment. These choices are guided by cultural heritage and are shaped by a particular political and economic system. **Environmental Perception** refers to the
mental images of the physical environment, shaped by knowledge, ignorance, experience, values, and emotions. The choices people make will depend more on what they perceive the environment to be than on the actual character of the land. Perceptions may be expressed in two views: organic (held by many traditional groups which claims that people are part of nature; hence, the habitat possesses a soul, is filled with nature-spirits, and must not be offended); and, mechanistic (held by most non-traditional Western people which claims that humans hold dominion over nature; thus, the habitat is an integrated system of mechanisms governed by external forces that can be rendered into natural laws and understood by the human mind). Humans as Modifiers of the Earth—Geographers who study the human impact on the land assert that humans mold nature through such activities as mining, logging, and irrigation. Access to energy and technology is the key variable that controls the magnitude and speed of environmental alteration.

Cultural Landscape. What are the visible expressions of culture? How are peoples’ interactions with nature materially expressed? What do regions actually look like? The human or cultural landscape is comprised of all the built forms that cultural groups create in inhabiting the Earth—roads, agricultural fields, cities, houses, parks, gardens, commercial buildings, and so on. Every inhabited area has a cultural landscape, fashioned from the natural landscape, and each uniquely reflects the culture or cultures that created it. Landscape mirrors a culture’s needs, values, and attitudes toward the Earth and the human geographer can learn much about a group of people by carefully observing and studying the landscape. It also contains valuable evidence about the origin, spread, and development of cultures because it usually preserves various types of archaic forms. Dominant and alternative cultures use, alter, and manipulate landscapes to express their diverse identities. According to geographer Pierce Lewis, “the cultural landscape is our collective and revealing autobiography, reflecting our tastes, values, aspirations, and fears in tangible forms.” Geographical studies focus on three principal aspects of landscape: settlement forms, land-division patterns, and architectural styles. In the study of settlement forms, human geographers describe and explain the spatial arrangement of buildings, roads, and other features that people construct while inhabiting an area. Two settlement forms are observed: nucleated, and dispersed. Land-division patterns indicate the uses of particular parcels of land and as such reveal the way people have divided the land for economic, social, and political uses. In studying architectural styles of culture, geographers look at the exterior materials and decoration, as well as the layout and design of the interiors. Examining architectural style is often useful when trying to date a particular landscape element or when trying to understand the particular values and beliefs that cultures may hold.

10. DOING GEOGRAPHY. Geographic skills provide the necessary tools and techniques that enable us to think geographically. They are essential to understanding physical and human patterns and processes in our world. They are central to our ability to engage in geographic inquiry and to think critically about phenomena on earth. The basic geographic skills involve:

- **Asking geographic questions**: ability and willingness to ask questions
- **Acquiring geographic information**: locate, collect, observe, read, record, interpret
- **Organizing geographic information**: map, graph, tabulate, present, narrate
- **Analyzing geographic information**: seek patterns, relationships, trends, and connections
- **Answering geographic questions**: development of generalizations and conclusions
**Geographer's tools.** Maps are flat representations of the earth. They are the product of cartography (the art and science of making maps). These maps are collected in books that are called atlases, which present details of places, countries, and continents. **Globes** are three-dimensional models of the earth. **Geographic Information System** (GIS) is a computer system capable of capturing, storing, analyzing, and displaying geographically referenced information; that is, data identified according to location. It has the ability to combine information from a variety of sources and display it in ways that allow the use to visualize the use of space in different ways. The information gathered by GIS could include maps, aerial photographs, and satellite images. **Global Positioning System (GPS)** is a satellite-based navigation system. GPS satellites circle the earth twice a day in a very precise orbit and transmit signal information to earth. GPS receivers take this information and use triangulation to calculate the user’s exact location. **Fieldwork and surveys.** Geographers also use questionnaires as an indirect way of gathering information about spatial phenomena or they can also directly involve themselves in fieldwork, observing or participating while observing as they investigate a particular area.

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