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WHAT IS HUMAN GEOGRAPHY?

Human geographers study people and places. The field of **human geography** focuses on how people make places, how we organize space and society, how we interact with each other in places and across space, and how we make sense of others and ourselves in our localities, regions, and the world.

Advances in communication and transportation technologies are making places and people more interconnected. Only 100 years ago the fastest modes of transportation were the steamship, the railroad, and the horse and buggy. Today, people can cross the globe in a matter of days, with easy access to automobiles, high-speed railroads, airplanes, and ships.

Economic globalization and the rapid diffusion of elements of popular culture, such as fashion and architecture, are making many people and places look more alike. Despite the push toward homogeneity, our world still encompasses a multitude of ways in which people identify themselves and others. The world consists of nearly 200 countries, a diversity of religions, thousands of languages, and a wide variety of settlement types, ranging from small villages to enormous global cities. All of these attributes come together in different ways around the globe to create a world of endlessly diverse places and people. Understanding and explaining this diversity is the mission of human geography.

Because the world is so interconnected, we cannot look solely at the characteristics of individual places. Instead, we must recognize that places all over the world are fundamentally affected by the “globalization” of many phenomena.

Globalization is a set of processes that are increasing interactions, deepening relationships, and accelerating interdependence across national borders. It is also a set of outcomes that are felt from these global processes—outcomes that are unevenly distributed and differently manifested across the world.

All too often, discussions of globalization focus on the pull between the global, seen as a blanket covering the world, and the local, seen as a continuation of the traditional despite the blanket of globalization. Geographers are well placed to recognize globalization as something significantly more complex. Geographers employ the concept of “scale” to understand individual, local, regional, national, and global interrelationships. What happens at the global scale affects the local, but it also affects the individual, regional, and national, and similarly the processes at these scales influence the global. Reducing the world to “local” and “global” risks losing sight of the complexity that characterizes modern life. In this book, we study globalization, but as geographers we are sensitive to the fact that the same globalized process has different impacts in different places because no two places are the same. Moreover, whenever we look at something at one scale, we always try to think about how processes that exist at other scales may affect what we are looking at, and vice versa (see the discussion of scale later in this chapter).

Globalizing processes occur at the world scale; these processes bypass country borders and include global financial markets and global environmental change. However, the processes of globalization do not magically appear at the global scale: *what happens at other scales (individual, local, regional, national) helps create the processes of globalization and shape the outcomes of globalization.*

Some argue that the impacts of globalization are exaggerated, but as geographers Ron Johnston, Peter Taylor, and Michael Watts explain, “Whatever your opinion may be, any intellectual engagement with social change in the twenty first century has to address this concept seriously, and assess its capacity to explain the world we currently inhabit.” We integrate the concept of globalization into this textbook because processes at the global scale, processes that are not confined to local places or national borders, are clearly changing the human geography of the planet. At the same time, as we travel the world and continue to engage in fieldwork and research, we are constantly reminded of how different places and people are from one another—processes at the individual, local, regional, and national scales continue to change human geography and shape globalization.

No place on Earth is untouched by people. As people explore, travel, migrate, interact, play, live, and work, they make places. People organize themselves into communities, nations, and broader societal networks, establishing political, economic, religious, linguistic, and cultural systems that enable them to function in space. People adapt to, alter, manipulate,

and cope with their physical geographic environment. No environment stands apart from human action. Each place we see is affected by and created by people, and each place reflects the culture of the people in that place over time.



Imagine and describe the most remote place on Earth you can think of 100 years ago. Now, describe how globalization has changed that place and how the people there continue to shape it and make it the place it is today.

Changing Landscape Subdisciplines of Geography

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