[Human geography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/human-geography" \o "Learn more about Human Geography from ScienceDirect's AI-generated Topic Pages)

[Human geography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/human-geography) is a major subdiscipline within the wider subject field of geography. Traditionally, geography is considered the study of the Earth's environments and peoples, and the interactions between them. ‘Geography’ comes from ancient Greek origins (Eratosthenes was the first to use it), literally translating as ‘to write or describe the world’. In classical and Enlightenment geography, humans and the ‘natural’ world were usually described in conjunction, often in a regional fashion, as Europeans encountered unfamiliar places in exploration and empire. Since the late nineteenth century, this conjoint understanding of geography – as describing the natural and human world, region by region – has gradually been augmented by more precise subdisciplinary pursuits and identities. The most basic of these describes geography as consisting two fundamental halves: physical and [human geography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/human-geography). Physical geography generally means the science of the Earth's surface, while human geography usually refers to the study of its peoples, and geographical interpretations of economies, cultural identities, political territories, and societies. Physical geographers classify and analyze landforms and ecosystems, explain hydrological, geomorphological, and coastal processes, and examine problems such as erosion, pollution, and climatic variability. Human geographers analyze population trends, theorize social and cultural change, interpret geopolitical conflict, and seek to explain the geography of human economic activities around the world. How exactly this [division of labor](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/division-of-labour) came to be is a most pivotal story of contemporary geography. It is a story about twentieth-century scientific fragmentation, and about different theories on the status of humans vis-à-vis nonhuman nature. It is also a more slippery and difficult story about how academic knowledges are produced, mutate, and travel (and how this happens in particular places), how knowledges find popularity, fade away, or are challenged in time and across space. The central division of labor in geography – produced by these means over more than a hundred years – has established and defined the space within which most human geographical practice now occurs. This article is an introductory overview of contemporary human geography and the stories underlying it.

The Emergence of National Schools: The Role of Human Geography in Germany and France

[Human geography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/human-geography) appeared in the 1880s and 1890s. Ratzel coined the term ‘anthropogeographie’ in 1882. French geographers began to speak of *la géographie humaine* from 1895.

Human distributions were studied by geographers since a long time. Thanks to the progress of [ethnography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/ethnology) and folklore studies, the knowledge of the diversity of tools, know-hows, techniques, and [human settlements](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/human-settlements) had much progressed from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ritter’s position analysis did not stress only the role of atmospheric and oceanic currents in the shaping of the diversity of the Earth, it focused also on the significance of ‘circulation’ and the role of steamships in contracting the Earth’s surface.

What motivated the birth of [human geography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/human-geography) as a semiautonomous field of enquiry within geography was, however, Darwin’s interpretation of evolution. Human geography was born as a kind of ecology of human groups in their relations to environments. The main aim of the new discipline was to answer a fundamental question: up to what point were human beings and human activities a reflection of environmental conditions? Human geography was born from a deterministic interpretation of man/milieu relationships.

It soon appeared that the influence of milieus on human groups could not be described as a one-way process. Ratzel, who had created human geography in an environmentalist perspective, held in fact an ambiguous position. In many cases, he stressed the strong control the physical constraints exercised on peoples, especially nature peoples. He had learned from Ritter, however, the role of exchange in escaping local conditions: cultured peoples freed themselves from the tyranny of nature, thanks to their sense of space, their *Raumsinn*, and the institution which allowed for mastering distance: the state.

The evolution in France was different, but the result was similar: the environmentalist perspective which had given human geography its *raison d’être* was transformed. In order to analyze the relations, human beings developed with their environment. Vidal de la Blache had introduced in the 1880s the idea of *genre de vie*, that is, the way people exploited the local resources. It was a tool not only for exploring ecological constraints but also for appreciating their limits: ways of life traveled with the groups who had developed them, and applied to environments for which they had not been devised; technical innovation allowed the introduction of new technologies and new links with the local environment. Last but not least, and as for Ratzel, trade allowed local people to find elsewhere what they were unable to produce locally. Because of the Lamarckian interpretation of evolutionism, which was very popular in the French geography in the 1890s, the idea of adaptation to local conditions seemed more significant than that of natural selection.

In Germany as well as in France, human geography lost almost immediately the scientific ambition out of which it was born: when doing field work, scholars discovered the wide variety of solutions different groups gave to similar environmental conditions. The interest of geography stemmed from the detailed views it offered on man/milieu relationships, their variety, their stability for long periods, their crises, etc. Because of the introduction of such a possibilist perspective, human geography had ceased to be a nomothetic discipline. It was transformed into an idiographic one.

In such a context, the study of human geography could be built on three paradigms since the environmentalist one has ceased to be exclusive: (1) it could be conceived in Kantian terms as a science of the regional differentiation of the Earth’s surface; (2) it could be presented in an evolutionist perspective as the analysis of man/milieu relationships; and (3) since many geographers disagreed with the breakdown of geography into human and physical parts, a new interest developed in landscapes.

These three conceptions could be combined. In Germany, emphasis was mainly put on the regional approach, according to Hettner’s views, and landscape studies along the lines developed by Schlüter. The Ratzelian legacy was lighter, except in [political geography](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/political-geography). In France, geography mainly combined the regional approach with the man/milieu perspective: the starting point of research was not the landscape, but density maps, since they showed in a simplified way how the environment was used by human groups.

There was another possibility to combine the three main approaches in human geography, but it did not develop in the 1890s or early 1900s. Its success came later and elsewhere, in North America. For Carl Sauer, the aim of human geography was mainly to focus on man/milieu relationships and to analyze them through landscape expertise. It meant that geographers were as much interested in the transformation of the ‘natural’ components of landscapes by men as in the influence of environment on human behavior.

The strength of the German and French schools of geography came from the fact that they expressed two ways of combining the paradigms of human geography when environmental determinism ceased to appear as the only entry to the discipline. The Berkeley school had a status similar to the German and the French ones, even if it was not a national school.