

Determinism

In geographical literature, the notion of determinism is used in a rather particular way, which generates such ambiguities that the problems they raise should be mentioned in the first place.

The term "determinism" is indeed often used in order to designate what may be called a "mechanist determinism by natural factors". In its extreme form, such approach would consist in interpreting all aspects of geographical space in function of natural features of this space, or, as is often said, in starting from "physical causes". In this extreme form, this approach actually has rarely been recommended and used in the geographers works, except maybe in the very first development phases of the discipline; it is indeed hardly tenable, and has been subjected to relevant refutations. Many geographers however think that some more subtle forms of this may be seen in number of works; for example it has been often said that the structure of many geographical presentations, starting with presentation of natural aspects of a space, has something to do with "determinism" and is consequently criticisable.

One may think that this fairly constant use of the term in a rather limited meaning has largely obscured the debate, and hampered geographers in formalising problems of explanation and causality.

In its general meaning, determinism is a philosophical position considering that any effect has a cause or a range of identifiable causes, and that the scientific approach consists in searching for these causes. It is thus a basic element of the definition of science, and it may obviously be estimated as paradoxical and regrettable that geographers, due to the restrictive use they make of the notion, come as far as considering it as typical of non-scientific approaches.

Disputes around the role of natural aspects in explanation in geography seem to have partly eclipsed some important questions that may be asked regarding notions of causality, determination and explanation.

Among these questions, may be mentioned :

That of the limitations of determinism due to the intervention of random factors and to the moments and modes of intervention of these random factors.

That of the significance of those random aspects, which may be considered either as expressions of insufficiency of knowledge at a given moment, thus as temporary masks of ignorance, either as inherent features of reality. Whatever conception is built about random components, limits to determinism implied by their intervention do not necessarily lead to total indeterminism, in other words to abandoning any search for causes.

That of the relative part of linear causality and of interactions; or else of the relative part of simple causality or of reasoning based on multi-causality. (It may be thought that a number of critics concerning the use made of natural factors in geographic reflection are actually justified by use of linear and simple causalities ; but they should not lead to equally simplistic explanations based on other factors, such as those belonging to economy for example).

One is tempted to say that it would be regrettable that legitimate critics of a form of determinism should lead geographers to abandon the search for rules, or even for laws, the use of models and the reasoning combining induction and deduction.

Bibliographie