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# The Myth of Continents

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A Critique of Metageography

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## Introduction

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In a country where high school graduates strain to locate Australia on a globe, conveying basic information about the world has become the overriding pedagogical imperative for university-level courses in global geography. But fulfilling that imperative is harder than it might appear. For it is precisely the most basic information—the highest level of our geographical taxonomy—that is the most problematic. Whether we parcel the earth into half a dozen continents, or whether we make even simpler distinctions between East and West, North and South, or First, Second, and Third Worlds, the result is the same: like areas are inevitably divided from like, while disparate places are jumbled together.

Such niceties are beside the point when geography is being introduced to ten-year-olds. Constructs of utmost simplicity are essential starting points for learning the map of the world. But to continue teaching these categories at the university level as if they were nonproblematic is to deny our students the tools they need to think clearly about the complicated patterns that actually mark the earth's surface. Even less excusable is the continued recourse to simplistic geographical frameworks at the highest levels of scholarly discourse. Otherwise sophisticated and self-critical works habitually essentialize continents, adopting their boundaries as frameworks for analyzing and classifying phenomena to which they simply do not apply. Dividing the world into a handful of fundamental units in this way may be convenient, but it does injustice to the complexities of global geography, and it leads to faulty comparisons. When used by those who wield political power, its consequences can be truly tragic.

## The Myth of Continents

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The myth of continents is the most elementary of our many geographical concepts. Continents, we are taught in elementary school, form the basic building blocks of world geography. These large, discrete landmasses can be easily discerned by a child on a map of the earth. One has simply to spin the globe and watch them pass by: the massive triangles of North and South America, tenuously linked by the Panamanian isthmus; the great arch of Africa, neatly sundered from Europe and Asia by the Mediterranean and Red Seas; the squat bulk of Australia, unambiguously disjoined from other lands; the icy wastes of Antarctica, set alone at the bottom of the world.

But continents are much more than the gross elements of global cartography. The continental structure also guides our basic conceptions of the natural world. We talk of African wildlife as if it constituted a distinct assemblage of animals, and we commonly compare it with the fauna of Asia or South America. The continents are also held to reveal fundamental geological processes, the “fit” between Africa and South America being the prime visual evidence for geology’s unifying theory of plate tectonics. Even more important is our tendency to let a continental framework structure our perceptions of the human community. Thus Africans become a distinct people, who can be usefully contrasted with Asians or Europeans, and we imagine Africa’s problems to be unique to its landmass, as though tied to it by some geographical necessity. Similarly, the cultural distinction between Europe and Asia has long guided our historical imagination. Each continent is accorded its own history, and we locate its essential nature in opposition to that of the other continents.

Perhaps because continents are such obvious visual units, their utility is seldom questioned. The continental scheme is reproduced and reinforced ubiquitously in atlases, encyclopedias, and bibliographic reference tools, virtually all of which routinely employ these divisions as their organizing geographical framework. The signal role of continents in American education is nowhere more evident than in Rand McNally’s *Educational Publishing Catalog*, a primary source of maps, globes, and other geographical paraphernalia for the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Here one finds not only that a “beginner’s political” map of the world prominently marks each standard continent with a bright color, but that all of the more specialized political and physical maps are designed within the continental scheme as well. Europe and Asia are thus each accorded one identically

sized map (50 by 68 inches) in the Level III series—ensuring that Europe will be mapped in far greater detail.

Despite its ubiquity and commonsensical status, there are many reasons to believe that the standard seven-part continental scheme employed in the United States obscures more than it reveals. An obsolete formulation, this framework is now wholly inadequate for the load it is routinely asked to carry. Equally in the realms of natural history and human geography, the most important distributional patterns and structuring processes are not based on continental divisions. The Isthmus of Panama, separating North from South America, is of little importance for either social history or the animal and plant kingdoms; most of what is unique about Africa begins south of the Sahara Desert, not south of the Mediterranean Sea; and the division between Europe and Asia is entirely arbitrary. Only by discarding the commonplace notion that continents denote significant biological or cultural groupings can a sophisticated understanding of global geography be reached.

## The World’s Worlds: Global Economic and Political Divisions

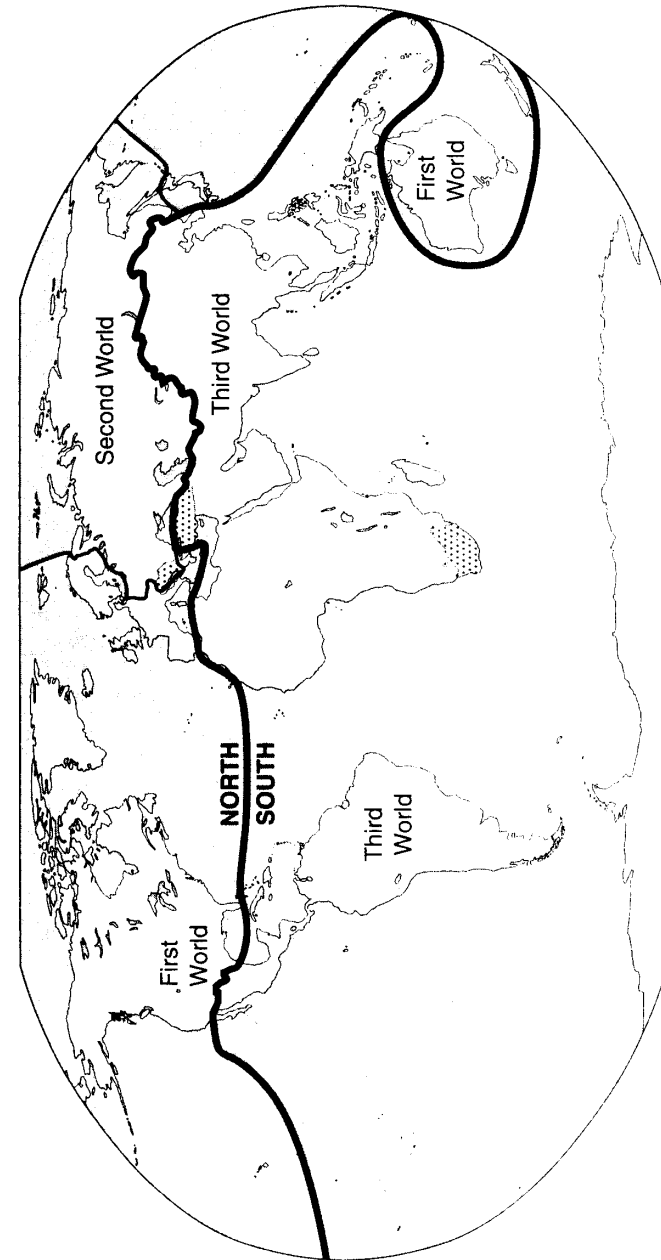
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Twofold or threefold economic partitions of the world are less objectionable than the continental system in the important sense that they are overtly limited in scope. The “Third World” is essentially a political-economic category, and no one would presume the existence of Third World vegetation or Third World geology (although there has been vociferous debate about the category of Third World literature).<sup>2</sup> But even as a politico-economic category, the Third World is unduly monolithic, and its boundaries too simply drawn to be of much utility.<sup>3</sup> Most attempts at global economic mapping place the relatively poor nations of Ireland, Portugal, and Greece within the First World, while labeling the dynamic states of Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea as Third World, despite their higher levels of economic activity.<sup>4</sup> Such erroneous distinctions in part reflect inertia; it would be a taxing endeavor to revise a basic classification system quickly enough to reflect the latest data on changing national fortunes. But residual continental thinking is also partly to blame.<sup>5</sup> Ireland and Portugal lie within Europe, and since Europe is a wealthy “continent,” its constituent states are often considered “developed” by definition, regardless of their actual circumstances. Owing to such difficulties,

Carl Pletsch not unfairly argues that “the scheme of three worlds is perhaps the most primitive system of classification in our social science discourse.”<sup>6</sup>

Problems of categorization within the three-worlds model have given rise to heated debates concerning how to categorize any number of borderline cases. In a recent exchange in the *New York Review of Books*,<sup>7</sup> for instance, economist Robert Solow excoriated author Edward Luttwak for implying that Chile and Argentina are not members of the developed world; “surely,” he informs the reader, these are not “third world countries.” In many ways, Solow is right. Chile has experienced dramatic economic growth in recent years, and Argentina has long boasted relatively high levels of social welfare. Yet neither is routinely counted among the members of the First World, and for good reason. If Solow is able to argue that Argentina does not belong in the Third World, it is mainly because the latter is ultimately a highly fungible category, amenable to any author’s desire for enlargement or reduction.<sup>8</sup> Such imprecision may prove polemically convenient, but it does not necessarily advance geographic understanding.

Parcing the globe into First, Second, and Third Worlds is now anachronistic in any case, since the political criterion used to define the Second World (namely, government by a communist regime) has all but disappeared.<sup>9</sup> Yet the categorization scheme has survived far longer than was ever warranted, in large part because it served the ideological needs of both Cold War American partisans and, on the opposite side of the political spectrum, the most vigorous opponents of American neo-imperialism.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the emerging preferred alternative (see map 1), distinguishing a developed North from a less developed (or actively underdeveloped) South, is equally problematic.<sup>11</sup> To begin with, the labels *North* and *South* are fantastically imprecise. China, reaching 58 degrees north latitude, is



Map 1. *Cold War Metageography: North, South, and the Three Worlds.* On this 1993 base map, the heaviest line separates the “developed” First World and Second World (the North) from the “less-developed” or “underdeveloped” Third World (the South). A secondary boundary distinguishes the First World from the Second World.

Three problematic countries are indicated with small dots. Turkey is usually considered Third World but is sometimes annexed to the First World in geopolitical discussions. South Africa has occasionally been appended to the First World, while the former Yugoslavia occupied an unstable position between the Second World and the First World.

routinely placed within the South, while Australia and New Zealand are commonly grouped with the North.<sup>12</sup> The more fundamental problem, however, is again that of joining unlike entities into massively agglomerated categories.<sup>13</sup> The category North was originally based on the notion that industrial economies of the Soviet Union, Europe, Japan, and North America were fundamentally similar. With the collapse of the Soviet state—and economy—such a system of categorization no longer makes any sense.<sup>14</sup> It requires some stretch of the imagination to regard the economies of Russia and Japan as essentially similar enough to warrant the inclusion of both into a meaningful North, but it requires concerted ignorance to place Tajikistan and Albania in the same category with them—all the while relegating Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United Arab Emirates to the South. Nor is it instructive (as Robert Solow would insist) to regard the southern nation of Argentina as having more in common with Lesotho and Mozambique than with Portugal or southern Italy. Nonetheless, many scholars are so taken by the fantastic simplicity of the North-South scheme that they have come to believe that the Southern *Hemisphere* actually constitutes the uniform zone of global poverty.<sup>15</sup>

The North-South distinction, like that between the First, Second, and Third Worlds, is essentially defined in economic terms. Cultural and political matters are more often framed as East versus West: a far older and more important division. Indeed, the notion of a First World is itself deeply rooted in the idea of a distinctive Western realm; in many works, the Third World is thus contrasted, not to the First or Second Worlds, but rather simply to the West.<sup>16</sup> When such a scheme is carried to its logical extreme, the world is again divided into two sections: the West and the non-West. As Bernard Cohn remarks, this maneuver entails “a neat ethnocentrism which defines nine-tenths of the people of the world in a single negative term.”<sup>17</sup>

While the “West” is often contrasted simply with the “rest,” its historical counterpart is of course the “East.” The myth of continents is also implicated in this binary longitudinal division, for the West is conventionally defined as Europe (plus its direct colonial offshoots), while the East in many instances is simply a proxy for Asia—with Africa, in this view, threatening to fall off the map altogether. The East-West opposition maps a huge array of human attributes onto a stupendously simplified set of geographical coordinates, but its staple feature has historically been the linking of the West with reason and progress and the East with spirituality and stagnation. Baseless though it may be, this purported correspondence ultimately forms a central structure of our metageographical mythology.

Like other metageographical concepts, the East-West split is remarkably protean, and on certain occasions a completely different referent system is implicated by these terms: one differentiating eastern from western Europe. Inevitably, however, the two referents of *East* tend to be conflated, implying that eastern Europe is somehow Asian in its essence. While one can argue that Russia shares certain characteristics with Central Asia, no criterion of Asianness can reasonably be extended to Slovenia, Bohemia, or Thuringia. Yet the geopolitical category East does precisely this, riding roughshod over previous cultural divisions by giving undue weight to a political grouping that existed only between 1946 and 1989.

The metageographical distinction between the West and the rest of the world is particularly debilitating when married to a key metahistorical concept: the notion that the West is coincident with modernity and that the non-West can enter the modern world only to the extent that it emulates the norms established in Europe and northern North America. In a powerful exposé, J. M. Blaut labels these linked constructs “the colonizer’s model of the world” and shows that they rest on a rarely acknowledged substrate of “geographical diffusionism” (where progress is seen as flowing endlessly out of the center [Europe] toward the otherwise sterile periphery).<sup>18</sup> But while Blaut convincingly argues that this is a central geographical myth of the modern age, it is hardly the only one. Ultimately, all received metageographical constructs need to be subjected to similarly sustained geographical and historical scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, while Blaut is to be commended for showing that the “colonizer’s model” has often been embraced by Marxists no less than by liberals and conservatives, we would add that similar geohistorical visions of the world are not uncommonly encountered even in post-Marxist social theory.<sup>20</sup> Like the classical Left, the cultural Left of poststructuralists, postmodernists, and radical environmentalists often perpetuates the West-rest binarism—only in the form of rhetoric that disparages the West and celebrates the rest.

### The Myth of the Nation-State and the Eurocentric Perspective

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Similarly simplistic assumptions are also encountered at other levels of geographical analysis. After the myth of continents and the fable of an enduring East-West division, the most debilitating geographical misconception is probably the myth of the nation-state.<sup>21</sup> The

nation-state idea—i.e., the assumption that cultural identities (nations) coincide with politically sovereign entities (states) to create a series of internally unified and essentially equal units—replicates at a smaller scale many of the errors found in continental thinking. To be sure, countries, unlike continents, are real entities, with armies to prove the point. For this reason alone, the global framework of sovereign states is essential for analyzing political affairs. But very few countries are nation-states in the strict sense of the term; seldom is an independent political territory coterminous with the territory of a self-consciously united people. That we elect to call such internally divided countries as India, Nigeria, or even Switzerland nation-states shows a determined desire to will uniformity out of diversity. In the process, states—like continents—become reified as natural and fundamental building blocks of global geography, rather than being recognized as the constructed, contingent, and often imposed political-geographical units that they are.<sup>22</sup>

The inevitable result is that state boundaries are evoked in innumerable arenas where their usefulness is truly circumscribed. Features of the natural world seldom conform to political terrains, and even patterns of human culture more often than not crosscut country boundaries. In few parts of the world, for example, does a map of language distribution bear much resemblance to the political map, and only in exceptional areas like Japan or Iceland do the two correlate more or less precisely. (Moreover, in the case of Japan, it has required centuries of concerted state effort to make them correspond.) Yet most of our encyclopedias, textbooks, atlases, and almanacs portray states as holistic entities, unified and distinct. While this may seem an innocuous device for classifying knowledge, it can lead to real mischief when its limitations are ignored. A country like Sudan is simply not a basic unit of the human community, despite its ubiquitous portrayal as such; northern Sudan has far more in common with Egypt than it does with southern Sudan, which has greater affinity with Uganda. To assume that northern and southern Sudan form a “Sudanese nation,” as the myth of the nation-state leads us to do, is to reduce the struggle currently being waged there to the status of a civil war—an internal affair that need not concern the global community to any great extent. In fact, the Sudanese war is a rather clear case of one people (those in the north) brutally attempting to impose its will on another. Clearly, countries do not cohere on all the levels we commonly imagine. At its best, the myth of the nation-state obscures internal difference. At its worst, it can become a tool of genocide.

In economic terms as much as cultural ones, countries are not neces-

sarily the essential units that we often imagine them to be. It is sometimes observed, for instance, that while northern Italy belongs to the First World, southern Italy might be better classified with the Third. Similar divisions may be seen in many other states. Disparities of economic activity can be particularly extreme within poor countries; India’s relatively well-off Punjab is a world away from Bihar, for instance, while the booming Guangdong region of China contrasts dramatically with poor Gansu. Meanwhile, contemporary economic evolution is making state boundaries highly porous. Capital can be shifted from one world-city to another with alacrity, while trading blocks and currency unions increasingly challenge national economic sovereignty. To make meaningful maps of economic activity and socioeconomic development requires violating the principle of state indivisibility. While this might seem an obvious point, it is routinely ignored in both journalism and scholarship. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, for example, the American public was informed that the new country of Slovenia faced “special problems of economic viability” because of its limited territorial extent.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is absolutely no evidence of any correlation between a country’s size and its economic success; what matters for a small state’s survival is whether it occupies a viable niche in the global division of labor. Luxembourg, Singapore, and even Liechtenstein have hardly been economically paralyzed by their exiguous areal extent.

For these and related reasons, the nation-state is a dubious concept for economic as much as for cultural analysis. But the mischief of this myth is compounded when nation-states and continents are misunderstood as constituting elements of the same, naturalized geographical taxonomy. Political maps that also highlight continents encourage us to imagine that nation-states are the building blocks of these higher-order entities, and therefore must nest neatly within them. States, in a word, are seen as constituent units of continents; South America can thus be defined simply as the collection of South American states. Such thinking leads to two errors. The first is a tendency to see “transcontinental” countries (i.e., states like Turkey, Egypt, Russia, and Kazakhstan, all of which straddle the conventional continental divides) as unduly anomalous. The second and more serious error, however, is what might be called the fallacy of unit comparability. Because France and Germany are to Europe as India and China are to Asia (i.e., large and important countries within their respective continents), a fundamental parity is assumed between these four countries. But the analogy is deadly false. In physical, cultural, and historical diversity, both China and India are comparable to the entire European land-

mass, not to a single European country. A better (if still imperfect) analogy would compare France, not to India as a whole, but to a single Indian state, such as Uttar Pradesh.

This comparison demonstrates a third pernicious by-product of the continental and nation-state myths: together, they work to consistently and unduly exaggerate the importance of Europe. By elevating Europe's position on the world map, metageographic categories make more plausible the notion of Europeans' priority in the history of human affairs, effectively serving as visual propaganda for Eurocentrism. Throughout the pages that follow, we shall see how these taken-for-granted and seemingly innocuous notions of world geography covertly function to magnify the "Western" portions of the globe and correspondingly to reduce all others. Geographical myopia is the inevitable result; Europe and the United States appear in swollen importance, while the rest of the world is shrunk into a distorting miniature.

In one sense there is nothing unusual about Eurocentrism; all geographical traditions are rooted in local concerns and ethnocentric conceits,<sup>24</sup> and had China emerged as the hegemon of the modern world system, our metageographical concepts would surely reflect Sinocentrism. (Actually, our common ideas about Central and East Asia *do* powerfully reflect Sinocentrism.) We are accordingly suspicious of any historical reading that would regard Eurocentric global geographies as stemming from some sort of grand intellectual conspiracy. But what we do strenuously argue is that it is now necessary to relinquish all such notions and to reach instead for a cosmopolitan and ecumenical perspective. By continuing to employ Eurocentric concepts uncritically, even at the highest levels of academic discourse, scholars only perpetuate a conception of the earth that is both arrogant and faulty. An increasingly integrated world demands a more modest, honest, and accurate geographical depiction.

### The Roots of Geographical Confusion

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To this point we have looked at three specific kinds of metageographical concepts: continents, nation-states, and supracontinental blocks, such as East and West. Despite their differences, we would argue that all three of these conceptual formations share two fundamental characteristics. The first is a jigsaw-puzzle view of the world; the second is an assumption that geographic phenomena are necessarily and neatly hier-

archically ordered. Together, these intellectual errors constitute the source of much metageographical mischief.

By a jigsaw-puzzle view of the world, we mean the expectation that a proper map will always show a set of sharply bounded units that fit together with no overlap and no unclaimed territory. The paradigm for such a picture may well be the map of American states, which is taught to every American child. Having never been exposed to a critique of the simple geography taught in elementary school, we continue to seek correspondingly simple maps for much more problematic phenomena, expecting to see their spatial patterns conveniently arrayed in large, contiguous, colorful blocks. Implicated in this jigsaw-puzzle image are two further expectations: (1) that the discrete pieces thus delineated are fully comparable and can be abstracted from their contexts for analytical purposes, and (2) that the world order thus described is essentially stable. For underlying the myth of continents, the myth of the nation-state, the overgeneralization of world regions, and other related errors is a conception of global geography as fundamentally static. Mapping is accordingly seen as a purely technical exercise, a matter of simple description; while the boundaries may need to be located with more precision, the world (in this view) can still be mapped by drawing simple lines around preexisting units. Although such a perspective seemed supportable to many in the postwar decades, the years since 1989 have revealed it as bankrupt.

A second and related error of conventional geographical thinking is to treat the earth's surface as if it were amenable to taxonomic classification in neat hierarchies of territorial units. Such a vision may be traced back to the Enlightenment cartographic tradition of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it has probably never been expressed so completely as in Nicolas Sanson's world atlas of 1674. To use the language of contemporary social theory, what we have inherited from the Enlightenment is a totalizing spatial framework, a "metastructure" that strives to impose its own rigid order. To use an older formulation, our map of the earth is a Procrustean bed, in which the complexities that make real places interesting have been violently deformed to fit a set of standardized shapes that do not accommodate them well.

As with the jigsaw-puzzle view of the world, the taxonomic principle comes with a host of corollary expectations. For one, viewing the world as divided into a hierarchy of fundamentally equal units suggests comparability among what are often grossly unequal terrains. Consider, for instance, the odd balance of coverage in popular U.S. atlases, which often devote one page to each state—with the result that Connecticut is

shown at more than ten times the scale of Texas.<sup>25</sup> The same sort of problem takes a more insidious form when it distorts our perceptions of spatial relations among countries and continents. It is in world almanacs that such unit-egalitarianism reaches its extreme, with microstates like Monaco and Liechtenstein routinely receiving almost the same print space as China or India.<sup>26</sup> In all such cases, the expectation of geographical comparability paradoxically yields extreme bias.

The source of this bias ultimately lies in the unwarranted application of natural science models to the study of spatial phenomena. Plant and animal species may be assimilable into a neat sequence of species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, and kingdom (although even this taxonomy, as experts know, is far from perfect).<sup>27</sup> But places, unlike birds or trees, simply do not relate to each other in straightforward hierarchical terms. To be sure, there are exceptions. The territorial units of political structures (states, provinces, districts, and the like) do characteristically form nesting hierarchies, and the same is also true, although to a lesser extent, for economically defined regions. But even economic linkages have horizontal components that often crosscut the vertical connections of place-based hierarchies, and many other equally important facets of global geography, such as the distribution of cultural patterns, are not so neatly structured at all. Linguistic geography, long thought of as a straightforward matter of mapping nested groups of language "families" or "sub-families," individual languages, and dialects, is now understood to be much more complex; the simple spatial projection of evolutionary relationships is confounded by long-term borrowing and recombinations.<sup>28</sup>

The ultimate problem for the taxonomic model, however, stems from the fact that global geography can never be derived from a single phenomenon, for the simple reason that there are no geographical phenomena *per se*. Since everything that varies over space has a geographical dimension (just as everything that varies over time has a historical dimension), global geography encompasses an enormous array of disparate elements, all of which have their own distributional patterns. Understanding the patterning of the earth's surface thus requires synthesizing all manner of disjunct distributions and developing a sense of the interaction between spatial patterns in a whole range of fields. For this reason above all, our expectation of a neat taxonomy is foiled at every turn. Like the jigsaw-puzzle view of discrete, bounded territories, the assumption that spatial relationships will naturally assume a hierarchical form must also be overturned if we are to think clearly about the globe.

The main problem with abandoning a set structure of nonproblem-

atic geographical entities, in exchange for an open-ended mélange of overlapping and incommensurable distributional patterns, is the danger of losing our ability to talk about the world effectively. For all its artificiality, a geographical shorthand of large-scale and comprehensive territorial blocks must be delineated simply to facilitate communication. Moreover, a quasi-taxonomic organization, one based on smaller regions nesting within larger ones, is also often appropriate. Where possible, regionalization schemes should be context-specific; when analyzing economic issues, for instance, it is best to employ a system of global division based on genuinely economic criteria. Still, there are occasions when it is useful to refer to a general-purpose scheme as well: one that can be invoked for heuristic purposes, when discussing the interaction of disparate spatial phenomena, or when specificity is not required.<sup>29</sup> We believe that the best available alternative for such general-purpose frameworks is a refined version of the so-called world regional scheme.

### World Regions: A Way Out?

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World regions are multicountry agglomerations, defined not by their supposed physical separation from one another (as are continents), but rather (in theory) on the basis of important historical and cultural bonds. Common world regional categories include such entities as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, all of which are already widely used in the popular press. Area studies centers at universities across the country are usually organized around such groupings, as are many college geography courses. Such schemes have two features to their credit: (1) they ignore the dictates of landmass shape, and (2) they demote Europe to its proper place (Europe being usually represented as one or two world regions, while Asia is partitioned into as many as six).

While some form of world regional categorization is appropriate for basic geographical education and for academic organizational purposes, the schemes currently in use remain weakened by a number of faulty presuppositions. For one thing, world regions are usually distorted by the reification of the nation-state. Since states are still considered primary units, world regional configurations are almost never allowed to violate their borders. Thus all of China is routinely classified as part of East Asia, even though its Islamic, Turkish-speaking northwest quadrant more properly belongs with the south-central portion of the former USSR in



the distinctive region of Central Asia. Second, world regions are often overgeneralized, taken as all-purpose frameworks for analysis. If they are to help us understand our planet, these entities must be treated, not as natural or suprahistorical entities, but as approximate intellectual constructs, imperfectly reflecting cultural and historical relationships. It is also crucial not to regard separate world regions as fully comparable with each other. In fact, different regions are inevitably defined on the basis of different and incommensurable criteria. South Asia, as we shall see, is in fundamental respects a different *kind* of region than is Southeast Asia. While it defies our desire for logical consistency, this incommensurability between world regions is one of the most important lessons that global geography should be teaching. Finally, it is essential to maintain a cross-regional comparative perspective. The various area studies complexes at American universities sometimes encourage a certain insularity in scholarship, making it unnecessarily difficult for scholars to investigate processes that transcend conventional world regional boundaries.

Despite these caveats, however, we would insist that world regions—more or less boundable areas united by broad social and cultural features—do exist and that their recognition and delineation are essential for geographical understanding. Such macrogeographical units may not be *fundaments*, in the sense that they can simply be taken as given. But they are nonetheless *fundamental* to understanding how the world is put together. Abstracting a world region called South Asia may be a tricky intellectual exercise, but it is necessary if we are to come to terms with the spatial unfolding of world history. If recent history tells us anything, it is that globalization does not obviate such regional culture blocks;<sup>30</sup> in some ways, it has even heightened their distinctiveness as a reaction to “Western” cultural hegemony. In a word, while macroregions are imperfect intellectual constructs, they are not entirely made up; real patterns in the world precede the attempt to understand them. And it is only by reference to those real patterns that we can judge the resulting attempts.

### World Geography and the Postmodern Mood

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It is here that we part ways with the academic movement known by the name of postmodernism. Scholarship in a postmodernist (or, more precisely, poststructuralist) vein has thoroughly reconfigured the humanities over the past decade and has had a major impact on geogra-

phy in the process. More a sensibility than a coherent theoretical stance, postmodernism in geography emphasizes fluidity, contingency, movement, and multiplicity, questioning the rigid spatial frameworks that have limited and constrained our geographical imagination. Geographers who adopt this approach have made many of the general points that are argued here, particularly regarding the need to break down conventional, static, and objectified regional schemes. Here is one important segment of the discipline calling for liberation from the myth of continents, the myth of the nation-state, and the imprisoning thesis of European priority—all heretofore taken-for-granted frameworks for geographical inquiry.

The postmodernist approach, however, presents pitfalls as well as promises. In the more extreme versions of poststructuralism, any attempt to come to a systematic understanding of the world is attacked, and any notion of unity, similarity, or locality-transcending process becomes suspect. Not surprisingly, many geographers, beholden to the insights of postmodernist scholarship, “appear to have lost the desire (and the confidence?) to say anything about this empirical social world.”<sup>31</sup> The alternative is to pursue the deconstruction not only of categories but of their referents in the physical world. As one recent text would have it, the natural environment itself “is first and foremost an artifact of language.”<sup>32</sup> Another article claims that “modern human geography is the pulped corpse of a paranoid and schizophrenic masochist” that “must be deconstructed in order to live.”<sup>33</sup> This might be dismissed as a morbid joke, though it is hardly one to inspire much mirth. More worrisome, and ironic, is the tendency of postmodern scholars to mirror the very theories that they arraign themselves against.<sup>34</sup> Not uncommonly, contemporary critics accept the Eurocentric conceit that science, technology, and “rationality” are defining and characteristic features of the West. Only the ethical signposts are reversed, with the supposedly nonrational ways of the non-West being upheld as morally and intellectually superior.

We would contend that such Eurocentric concepts are best avoided, in their denigrating as well as their celebratory guises. While following the postmodern impulse in our concern to expose the socially and culturally constructed nature of taken-for-granted geographical categories, we resist the notion that the attempt at geographical classification should be abandoned altogether as merely another instance of Western objectification. To borrow the words of historian William Cronon, “Social constructionism tells us something important about the world, but it does not tell us everything, for the redoubt of realism is not quite so ruined as [the postmodernists] would have us believe. The realist-idealist,

objectivist-relativist dualism has been around since at least the fifth century B.C., and despite the best efforts of postmodern critics it is not likely to be vanquished simply by amputating its polarities. One transcends such paradoxes by passing through them, not by wishing they would go away.<sup>235</sup>

### The Ironies of Geographical Ecumenicalism

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It is our aim here to attempt to transcend the *sic et non* paradox of global divisions primarily by historicizing the categories through which we think about the world. To do this it is necessary to go back at least to the fifth century B.C.E., for just as in the case of epistemology, the foundational ideas of world geography are rooted in the debates of the ancient Greeks. This is not merely true, it is essential to note, for contemporary European and American societies; Greek geography has been to a certain extent globalized, and what were originally Western categories—such notions as Europe, Asia, and Africa—are now employed throughout the world. This was, of course, not always the case, and investigating alternative systems of global division is an essential project for a critical metageography. But to transcend Eurocentrism initially requires very close engagement with the history of European thought.

Nor is this the only irony of our project. Equally problematic is the fact that we cannot but continue to use terms that we make great efforts to debunk. While arguing, for example, that there is no logically constituted geographical category called Asia, we find this term an indispensable element of many world regional labels (South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the like), and occasionally we write about “Asia” as if it were a whole—sometimes even forgoing the use of the quotation marks. In some cases this is simply a matter of referring to a set of geographical ideas that has a very real existence, even if the qualities and phenomena that they purport to locate do not; Asia has an important position in the map of intellectual history, if not on the map of the world. At other times, however, we continue to employ problematic terms because it is our intention to debunk only certain of their connotations. “Europe,” for example, may not be a continent, but it does effectively label an area that can be defined as a cultural region or a civilization. Similarly, we believe it is defensible to isolate an intellectual tradition that may be called Western, so long as we realize, first, that there is no corresponding Eastern tra-

dition, and second, that the roots of this tradition are far more entangled and geographically complex than is commonly imagined.

We therefore attempt here both to deconstruct and to conserve; to highlight fluidity and indeterminacy, but also to map out real geographical structures that we consider independent of anyone’s attempt to understand them; to point out the conventional and constructed nature of the fundamental ideas of global geography, while yet denying that they are *nothing but* social constructs; and finally, to uncover the political motivation behind metageographical conceptualizations, without implying that they are all reducible to strategic interests. Problems of language are inevitable in such a project; in order to continue talking about the world, we must have the cake of metageography while deconstructing it, too. Moreover, such tensions are heightened by dual authorship. While this book is wholly a joint product, its authors are not in complete agreement on all the issues it raises, and some formulations represent the exigencies of compromise. Whether such compromises fundamentally vitiate our analysis is for the reader to judge.

The empirical exposition of our argument begins in the following chapter, where we trace the history of the idea of continents, the most basic of all global divisions. This is followed by a two-chapter look at the notion of binary opposition, focusing on the division of the world into a West and an East. Chapter 4 examines how two particular continents, Europe and Africa, have been construed by contending intellectual camps as the primary reference points for human history, while chapter 5 explores the framework of “civilizations” that is traditionally invoked by world historians. The final chapter examines the system of world regions employed in contemporary American area studies. Before proceeding with this analysis, however, a number of caveats are in order.

First, we want to acknowledge the pioneering work of several scholars who precede us: William McNeill, John Steadman, Andrew March, Jack Goody, and especially the late Islamicist Marshall Hodgson. After having completed roughly half of the initial manuscript for this book, we were thrilled to discover Hodgson’s early essays on global history, which propounded a vision in close concordance with our own. Excitement was accompanied by bemusement, however, as we could not help wondering whether there was any point in making these arguments again. If several key passages now seem (to those familiar with Hodgson’s work) merely to reiterate and extend his arguments, our defense is that these ideas deserve a much broader public debate than they have so far been accorded. Although his novel approach to world history is at long last receiving some

recognition, Hodgson's equally bold ideas about world geography remain almost unnoticed. The evening news offers a poignant reminder of his failure to reach a broad audience, for proudly displayed behind the newscasters on all three major American networks is a distorted version of the Mercator projection: a map Hodgson denounced some forty years ago as a "Jim Crow" depiction of the world.<sup>36</sup>

A second caveat concerns a bias in our coverage. No effort is made in this book to grant equal consideration to all important metageographical constructs—or to all portions of the globe. As the reader will soon discover, we dwell at most length on the concept of European, or Western, society. In chapter 1, extended consideration is given to the notion of Europe as a continent; both chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with the distinction between the West and the rest of the world; the ideology of Eurocentrism occupies a large portion of chapter 4; and repeated reference is made in chapter 5 to the notion of European civilization. While all major portions of the earth are examined to a certain extent, Europe clearly occupies a prominent position here. The reason for this gambit is straightforward: more than anything else, we believe it is the reification of the Occidental realm, as geographically no less than culturally and historically distinct from all others, that warps the prevailing geographical imagination.

We would also warn the reader that the following survey of metageographical thought is suggestive rather than exhaustive. Our concern here is to identify the foundational ideas of global human geography, to trace the main outlines of their development, and to examine their implications for present-day conceptualizations of the earth. We do not study the precise pathways along which such ideas were passed down, nor do we delve into their many branching byways or comb through their many nuanced expressions. We even largely bypass in the substantive chapters some of the key metageographical constructs of the modern age, notably the political-economic distinction between a realm of power and a realm of poverty (North versus South, First World versus Third World). While these divisions are essential components of contemporary global discourse, they are also of very recent coinage, are growing rapidly obsolete, and are ultimately rooted in the East-West divide, which is explored here in detail. Nor do we dwell at length on the myth of the nation-state, another key metageographical idea of our time. This construct is in itself complex enough to warrant an entire book-length exploration. All that we can do here is identify those instances in which nation-state ideology conspires with other metageographical formulations to further confuse the received ideas of global geography.

In sum, ours is neither the first word on this subject, nor the last. If we have nonetheless been emboldened to venture into this difficult terrain, it is because of a growing sense that its importance is inadequately appreciated. While we cannot present a definitive history of metageographical ideas, we can at least try to stir broader interest in the subject, in the hope that more complete historical expositions—and a more accurate geographical schema—will eventually follow.