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The Myth of Continents

A Critique of Metageography

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CHAPTER 1

The Architecture of Continents

The Development of the Continental Scheme

In contemporary usage, continents are understood to be large, continuous, discrete masses of land, ideally separated by expanses of water. Although of ancient origin, this convention is both historically unstable and surprisingly unexamined; the required size and the requisite degree of physical separation have never been defined. As we shall see, the sevenfold continental system of American elementary school geography did not emerge in final form until the middle decades of the present century.

CLASSICAL PRECEDENTS

According to Arnold Toynbee, the original continental distinction was devised by ancient Greek mariners, who gave the names *Europe* and *Asia* to the lands on either side of the complex interior waterway running from the Aegean Sea through the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, the Bosporus, the Black Sea, and the Kerch Strait before reaching the Sea of Azov.[1] This water passage became the core of a continental system when the earliest Greek philosophers, the Ionians of Miletus, designated it as the boundary between the two great landmasses of their world. Somewhat later, Libya (or Africa) was added to form a three-continent scheme.[2] Not surprisingly, the Aegean Sea lay at the heart of the Greek conception of the globe; Asia essentially denoted those lands to

its east,[3] Europe those lands to its west and north, and Libya those lands to the south.

A seeming anomaly of this scheme was the intermediate position of the Greeks themselves, whose civilization spanned both the western and the eastern shores of the Aegean. Toynbee argued that the inhabitants of central Greece used the Asia-Europe boundary to disparage their Ionian kin, whose succumbing to "Asian" (Persian) dominion contrasted flatteringly with their own "European" freedom.[4] Yet not all Greek thinkers identified themselves as Europeans. Some evidently employed the term *Europe* as a synonym for the northern (non-Greek) realm of Thracia.[5] In another formulation, Europe was held to include the mainland of Greece, but not the islands or the Peloponnesus.[6] Still others—notably Aristotle—excluded the Hellenic "race" from the continental schema altogether, arguing that the Greek character, like the Greek lands themselves, occupied a "middle position" between that of Europe and Asia.[7] In any case, these disputes were somewhat technical, since the Greeks tended to view continents as physical entities, with minimal cultural or political content.[8] When they did make generalizations about the inhabitants of different continents, they usually limited their discussion to the contrast between Asians and Europeans; Libya was evidently considered too small and arid to merit more than passing consideration.

Twofold or threefold, the continental system of the Greeks clearly had some utility for those whose geographical horizons did not extend much beyond the Aegean, eastern Mediterranean, and Black Seas. But its arbitrary nature was fully apparent by the fifth century B.C.E. Herodotus, in particular, consistently questioned the conventional three-part system, even while employing it. Criticizing the overly theoretical orientation of Greek geographers, who attempted to apprehend the world through elegant geometrical models, he argued instead for an "empirical cartography founded on exploration and travel."[9] One problematic feature of the geography that Herodotus criticized was its division of Asia and Africa along the Nile, a boundary that sundered the obvious unity of Egypt.[10] After all, as he noted, Asia and Africa were actually contiguous, both with each other and with Europe: "Another thing that puzzles me is why three distinct women's names should have been given to what is really a single landmass; and why, too, the Nile and the Phasis—or, according to some, the Maeotic Tanais and the Cimmerian Strait—should have been fixed upon for the boundaries. Nor have I been able to learn who it was that first marked the boundaries, or where they got their names from."[11]

Similar comments, suggesting a continued awareness that these were

constructed categories, echoed throughout the classical period. Strabo, writing in the first century B.C.E., noted that there was "much argument respecting the continents," with some writers viewing them as islands, others as mere peninsulas. Furthermore, he argued, "in giving names to the three continents, the Greeks did not take into consideration the whole habitable earth, but merely their own country, and the land exactly opposite. . . ."[12]

Under the Romans, the continental scheme continued to be employed in scholarly discourse, and the labels *Europe* and *Asia* were sometimes used in an informal sense to designate western and eastern portions of the empire.[13] In regard to military matters, the term *europeenses* was deployed rather more precisely for the western zone.[14] *Asia* was also used in a more locally specific sense to refer to a political subdivision of the Roman Empire in western Anatolia.

MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE CONSTRUCTIONS

For almost two millennia after Herodotus, the threefold division of the earth continued to guide the European scholarly imagination. The continental scheme was reinforced in late antiquity when early Christian writers mapped onto it the story of Noah's successors. According to St. Jerome (who died circa A.D. 420), translator of the Vulgate Bible, "Noah gave each of his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, one of the three parts of the world for their inheritance, and these were Asia, Africa, and Europe, respectively."[15] This new theological conception had the merit of explaining the larger size of the Asian landmass by reference to Shem's primogeniture.[16] It also infused the Greeks' tripartite division of the world with religious significance. This sacralized continental model would persist with little alteration until the early modern period.

Medieval Europe thus inherited the geographical ideas of the classical world, but in a calcified and increasingly mythologized form. Whereas the best Greek geographers had recognized the conventional nature of the continents—and insisted that the Red Sea made a more appropriate boundary between Asia and Africa than the Nile River[17]—such niceties were often lost on their counterparts in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Martianus Capella, whose compilation of knowledge became a standard medieval text,[18] took it as gospel that the world was divided into Europe, Asia, and Africa, with the Nile separating the latter two landmasses.[19] Other influential encyclopedists of the period, including Orosius and Isidore of Seville, held similar views.[20]

During the Carolingian period, by contrast, the inherited framework of Greek geography began to recede from view. The term *Europe* (in one form or another) was sometimes used to refer to the emerging civilization in the largely Frankish lands of Latin Christendom, which were occasionally contrasted with an increasingly fabulous Asia to the east.[21] In fact, proponents of both Carolingian and Ottonian (German) imperialism, as well as the papacy, employed the concept of Europe as "a topos of panegyric, [and] a cultural emblem."[22] But until the late Middle Ages, reference to the larger formal continental scheme was largely limited to recondite geographical studies, finding little place in general scholarly discourse.[23] Africa in particular did not figure prominently in the travel lore and fables of medieval Europeans. The southern continent at the time was dismissed as inferior, on the mistaken grounds that it was small in extent and dominated by deserts.[24]

Scholarly geographical studies, of course, were another matter. Here the tripartite worldview of the Greeks was retained, but transposed into an abstract cosmographical model, abandoning all pretense to spatial accuracy. The famous "T-O" maps of the medieval period, representing the earth in the form of a cross, reflect the age's profoundly theological view of space. The cross symbol (represented as a T within the circle of the world) designated the bodies of water that supposedly divided Europe, Asia, and Africa; these landmasses in a sense served as the background on which the sacred symbol was inscribed. The Nile remained, in most cases, the dividing line between Africa and Asia. Classical precedence joined here with theological necessity, converting an empirical distortion into an expression of profound cosmographical order.[25]

With the revival of Greek and Roman learning in the Renaissance, the older continental scheme was revived as well, becoming endowed with an unprecedented scientific authority.[26] The noted sixteenth-century German geographer Sebastian Münster, for example, invoked "the ancient division of the Old World into three regions separated by the Don, the Mediterranean, and the Nile."[27] Despite the considerable accumulation of knowledge in the centuries since Herodotus, few Renaissance scholars questioned the boundaries that had been set in antiquity. On the contrary, it was in this period that the continental scheme became the authoritative frame of reference for sorting out the differences among various human societies.[28]

The elevation of the continental scheme to the level of received truth was conditioned in part by an important historical juncture. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, just as classical writings were being revalued, the geography of Christianity was in flux on several fronts at once. Turkish conquests at its southeastern edge were causing the remaining Christian communities in Asia Minor to retreat, while Christian conquests and conversions in the northeast were vanquishing the last holdouts of paganism in the Baltic region. Meanwhile, the rise of humanism was challenging the cultural unity of the Catholic world from within. These historical circumstances combined to give the Greek continental scheme new salience. On the one hand, as Christianity receded in the southeast and advanced in the northeast, the boundaries of Christendom increasingly (although never perfectly) coincided with those of the Greeks' Europe. On the other hand, humanist scholars began to search for a secular self-designation. As a result, these centuries saw Europe begin to displace Christendom as the primary referent for Western society.[29]

As Western Christians began to call themselves Europeans in the fifteenth century, the continental schema as a whole came into widespread use. But it was not long before the new (partial) geographical fit between Europe and Christendom was once again offset. Continuing Turkish conquests, combined with the final separation of the Eastern and Western Christian traditions, pulled southeastern Europe almost completely out of the orbit of the increasingly self-identified European civilization.[30]

OLD WORLDS, NEW CONTINENTS

Once Europeans crossed the Atlantic, they gradually discovered that their threefold continental system did not form an adequate world model. Evidence of what appeared to be a single "new world" landmass somehow had to be taken into account. The transition from a threefold to a fourfold continental scheme did not occur immediately after Columbus, however. First, America had to be intellectually "invented" as a distinct parcel of land—one that could be viewed geographically, if not culturally, as equivalent to the other continents.[31] According to Eviatar Zerubavel, this reconceptualization took nearly a century to evolve, in part because it activated serious "cosmographic shock."[32] For a long time, many Europeans simply chose to ignore the evidence; as late as 1555, a popular French geography text entitled *La Division du monde* pronounced that the earth consisted of Asia, Europe, and Africa, making absolutely no mention of the Americas.[33] The Spanish imperial imagination persisted in denying continental status to its transatlantic colonies for even longer. According to Walter Mignolo, "The Castilian notion of 'the Indies' [remained] in place up to the end of the colonial empire; 'America' [began]

to be employed by independentist intellectuals only toward the end of the eighteenth century."[34] Yet by the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese cosmographer Duarte Pacheco and his German counterpart Martin Waldseemüller had mapped the Americas as a continent.[35] While cartographic conventions of the period rendered the new landmass, like Africa, as distinctly inferior to Asia and Europe,[36] virtually all global geographies by the seventeenth century at least acknowledged the Americas as one of the "four quarters of the world."

As this brief account suggests, accepting the existence of a transatlantic landmass required more than simply adding a new piece to the existing continental model. As Edmundo O'Gorman has brilliantly demonstrated, reckoning with the existence of previously unknown lands required a fundamental restructuring of European cosmography.[37] For in the old conception, Europe, Africa, and Asia had usually been envisioned as forming a single, interconnected "world island," the *Orbis Terrarum*. The existence of another such "island" in the antipodes of the Southern Hemisphere—an *Orbis Alterius*—had often been hypothesized, but it was assumed that it would constitute a world apart, inhabited, if at all, by sapient creatures of an entirely different species. Americans, by contrast, appeared to be of the same order as other humans,[38] suggesting that their homeland must be a fourth part of the human world rather than a true alter-world. Thus it was essentially anthropological data that undermined the established cosmographic order.

In the long run, the discovery of a distant but recognizably human population in the Americas would irrevocably dash the world island to pieces. Over the next several centuries the fundamental relationship between the world's major landmasses was increasingly seen as one of separation, not contiguity. In 1570 Ortelius divided the world into four constituent parts, yet his global maps did not emphasize divisional lines, and his regional maps sometimes spanned "continental" divisions.[39] By the late seventeenth century, however, most global atlases unambiguously distinguished the world's main landmasses and classified all regional maps accordingly.[40] The Greek notion of a unitary human terrain, in other words, was disassembled into its constituent continents, whose relative *isolation* was now ironically converted into their defining feature. Although the possibility of an *Orbis Alterius* was never again taken seriously, the boundaries dividing the known lands would henceforth be conceived in much more absolute terms than they had been in the past. Even as the accuracy of mapping improved dramatically in this period, the conceptualization of global divisions was so hardened as to bring about a certain conceptual deterioration.

NEW DIVISIONS

As geographical knowledge increased, and as the authority of the Greeks diminished, the architecture of global geography underwent more subtle transformations as well. If continents were to be meaningful geographical divisions of human geography, rather than mere reflections of an ordained cosmic plan, the Nile and the Don obviously formed inappropriate boundaries. Scholars thus gradually came to select the Red Sea and the Gulf and Isthmus of Suez as the African-Asian divide. Similarly, by the sixteenth century, geographers began to realize that Europe and Asia were not separated by a narrow isthmus, that the Don River did not originate anywhere near the Arctic Sea, and that the Sea of Azov was smaller than had previously been imagined. While the old view was remarkably persistent, a new boundary for these two continents was eventually required as well.[41]

The difficulty was that no convenient barrier like the Red Sea presented itself between Europe and Asia. The initial response was to specify precise linkages between south- and north-flowing rivers across the Russian plains; by the late seventeenth century, one strategy was to divide Europe from Asia along stretches of the Don, Volga, Kama, and Ob Rivers.[42] This was considered an unsolved geographical issue, however, and geographers vied with each other to locate the most fitting divisional line. Only in the eighteenth century did a Swedish military officer, Philipp-Johann von Strahlenberg, argue that the Ural Mountains formed the most significant barrier. Von Strahlenberg's proposal was enthusiastically seconded by Russian intellectuals associated with Peter the Great's Westernization program, particularly Vasilii Nikitich Tatishchev, in large part because of its ideological convenience.[43] In highlighting the Ural divide, Russian Westernizers could at once emphasize the European nature of the historical Russian core while consigning Siberia to the position of an alien Asian realm suitable for colonial rule and exploitation.[44] (Indeed, many Russian texts at this time dropped the name *Siberia* in favor of the more Asiatic-sounding *Great Tartary*.)[45] Controversy continued in Russian and German geographical circles, however, with some scholars attempting to push the boundary further east to the Ob or even the Yenisey River, while others argued for holding the line at the Don.[46]

Tatishchev's and von Strahlenberg's position was eventually to triumph not only in Russia but throughout Europe. After the noted French geographer M. Malte-Brun gave it his seal of approval in the nineteenth century, the Ural boundary gained near-universal acceptance.[47] Yet this move necessitated a series of further adjustments, since the Ural Mountains do

not extend far enough south—or west—to form a complete border. In atlases of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the old and new divisions were often combined, with Europe shown as separated from Asia by the Don River, a stretch of the Volga River, and the Ural Mountains.[48] From the mid-1800s on the most common, although by no means universal,[49] solution to this problem was to separate Asia from Europe by a complex line running southward through the Urals, jumping in their southern extent to the Ural River, extending through some two-thirds the length of the Caspian Sea, and turning in a sharp angle to run northwestward along the crest of the Caucasus Mountains.[50] Indeed, as recently as 1994, the United States Department of State gave its official imprimatur to this division.[51] The old usage of the Don River, arbitrary though it might have been, at least required a less contorted delineation. Moreover, the new division did even more injustice to cultural geography than did the old, for it included within Europe such obviously "non-European" peoples as the Buddhist, Mongolian-speaking Kalmyks.

While this geographical boundary between Europe and Asia is now seldom questioned and is often assumed to be either wholly natural or too trivial to worry about, the issue still provokes occasional interest. In 1958, for example, a group of Russian geographers argued that the true divide should follow "the eastern slope of the Urals and their prolongation the Mugodzhar hills, the Emba River, the northern shore of the Caspian Sea, the Kumo-manychskaya Vpadina (depression) and the Kerchenski Strait to the Black Sea"[52]—thus placing the Urals firmly within Europe and the Caucasus within Asia. Other writers have elected to ignore formal guidelines altogether, placing the boundary between the two "continents" wherever they see fit. The 1963 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for example, defines the Swat district of northern Pakistan as "a region bordering on Europe and Asia"[53]—"Europe" perhaps connoting, in this context, all areas traversed by Alexander the Great. Halford Mackinder, on the other hand, selected a "racial" criterion to divide Europe from Africa (although not from Asia), and thus extended its boundaries well to the south: "In fact, the southern boundary of Europe was and is the Sahara rather than the Mediterranean, for it is the desert land that divides the black man from the white."[54]

THE CONTINUING CAREER OF THE CONTINENTAL SCHEME

Despite the ancient and ubiquitous division of the earth into Europe, Asia, and Africa (with the Americas as a later addition), such

"parts" of the earth were not necessarily defined explicitly as continents prior to the late nineteenth century. While the term *continent*—which emphasizes the contiguous nature of the land in question—was often used in translating Greek and Latin concepts regarding the tripartite global division, it was also employed in a far more casual manner. In fact, in early modern English, any reasonably large body of land or even island group might be deemed a continent. In 1599, for example, Richard Hakluyt referred to the West Indies as a "large and fruitfull continent."[55] Gradually, however, geographers excluded archipelagos and smaller landmasses from this category, adhering as well to a more stringent standard of spatial separation. By 1752 Emanuel Bowen was able to state categorically: "A continent is a large space of dry land comprehending many countries all joined together, without any separation by water. Thus Europe, Asia, and Africa is one great continent, as America is another."[56]

The division of the world into two continents certainly forces one to recognize, as Herodotus did many centuries earlier, that Europe, Asia, and Africa are not separated in any real sense. Indeed, perspicacious geographers have always been troubled by this division. As early as 1680, the author of *The English Atlas* opined: "The division seems not so rational; for Asia is much bigger than both of the others; nor is Europe an equal balance for Africa."[57] Several prominent nineteenth-century German geographers, Alexander von Humboldt and Oskar Peschel among them, insisted that Europe was but an extension of Asia; many Russian Slavophiles, perennial opponents of the more influential Westernizers, concurred.[58] Such clear-headed reasoning was not to prevail, however. By the late nineteenth century the old "parts of the earth" had been definitively named "continents," with the separation between Europe and Asia remaining central to the scheme. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (compiled in the decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century) recounts the transition as follows: "Formerly two continents were reckoned, the Old and the New; the former comprising Europe, Asia, and Africa, which form one continuous mass of land; the latter, North and South America, forming another. These two continents are strictly islands, distinguished only by their extent. Now it is usual to reckon four or five continents, Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, North and South; the great island of Australia is sometimes reckoned as another."[59]

Regardless of the term used to denote them, the standard categories of antiquity, with the addition of the "new world(s)," continued to comprise the fundamental framework within which global geography and history were conceived.[60] Yet minor disagreements persisted as to the exact number of units one should count. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world

atlases, which generally printed the world's major units in different colored inks, one can find fourfold, fivefold, and sixfold divisional schemes. North and South America might be counted as one unit or two, while Australia ("New Holland") was sometimes colored as a portion of Asia, sometimes as a separate landmass, and sometimes as a mere island.[61] All things considered, however, the fourfold scheme prevailed well into the 1800s.

Whatever the exact form it took on maps, the division of the world into great continents became an increasingly important metageographical concept in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Montesquieu, the foremost geographical thinker of the French Enlightenment, based his social theories on the absolute geographical separation of Europe from Asia, the core of his fourfold continental scheme.[62] The most influential human geographer of the mid–nineteenth century, Carl Ritter, similarly argued (in his signature teleological style): "Each continent is like itself alone . . . each one was so planned and formed as to have its own special function in the progress of human culture."[63] Ritter also attempted to ground the entire scheme in physical anthropology. Conflating continents with races, he viewed Europe as the land of white people, Africa that of black people, Asia of yellow people, and America of red people[64]—a pernicious notion that still lingers in the public imagination.

It was with Arnold Guyot, the Swiss scholar who introduced Ritter's version of geography to the United States in the mid-1800s, that continent-based thinking reached its apogee. Guyot saw the hand of Providence in the assemblage of the continents as well as in their individual outlines and physiographic structures. The continents accordingly formed the core of Guyot's geographical exposition—one aimed at revealing "the existence of a general law, and disclos[ing] an arrangement which cannot be without a purpose."[65] Not surprisingly, the purpose Guyot discerned in the arrangement of the world's landmasses entailed the progressive revelation of a foreordained superiority for Europe and the Europeans. From his position on the faculty of Princeton University, Guyot propagated his views on the subject for many years, influencing several generations of American teachers and writers.

As the continental system was thus formalized in the nineteenth century, its categories were increasingly naturalized, coming to be regarded, not as products of a fallible human imagination, but as real geographical entities that had been "discovered" through empirical inquiry.[66] E. H. Bunbury, the leading Victorian student of the history of geographic thought, went so far as to label Homer a "primitive geographer" for his failure to recognize "the division of the world into three continents."[67]

Bunbury also took Herodotus to task for his "erroneous notion" that Europe was of greater east-west extent than Asia and Libya [Africa] combined. Herodotus came to this conclusion, however, not because his spatial conceptions were any less accurate than those of his peers, but because he eschewed using the north-south trending Tanais (Don) as the continental border, preferring instead east-west running rivers such as the Phais and Araxes (in the Caucasus region). To the Victorian Bunbury, this was not an issue on which educated people could disagree.[68] What nineteenth-century geographers had lost was Herodotus's sense that the only reason for dividing Europe and Asia along a north-south rather than an east-west axis was convention. In fact, by scientific criteria, Herodotus probably had the better argument. Certainly in physical terms, Siberia has much more in common with the far north of Europe—where Herodotus's boundary would have placed it—than with Oman or Cambodia.

INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Since the early eighteenth century, one of the most problematic issues for global geographers was how to categorize Southeast Asia, Australia, and the islands of the Pacific. Gradually, a new division began to appear in this portion of the world. According to one popular Victorian work of world history, "It was usual until the present century to speak of the great divisions of the earth as the Four Quarters of the World, VIZ; Europe, Asia, Africa, and America," while insisting that a "scientific distribution" of the world's "terrestrial surfaces" would have to include Australia and Polynesia as separate divisions.[69] By the middle of the nineteenth century, Australia was usually portrayed as a distinct part of the world, albeit often linked with the islands of the Pacific.[70] The notion of Oceania as a fifth (or sixth, if the Americas were divided) section of the world grew even more common in the early twentieth century, when several cartographers marked off insular Southeast Asia from Asia and appended it to the island world.[71]

In the early twentieth century, world geography textbooks published in Britain and the United States almost invariably used the continental system as their organizing framework, typically devoting one chapter to each of these "natural" units. This pattern may be found in works on the natural world as well as in those concerned with human geography. Scanning through these textbooks, one notices only slight deviations from the standard model. *The International Geography*, edited by Hugh Robert Mill,[72] for example, places Central and South America in a single chap-

ter, while devoting another to the polar regions. Leonard Brooks, in *A Regional Geography of the World,* follows the conventional scheme—with successive chapters on Europe, Asia, North America, South America, Africa, and Australia—but devotes an additional chapter to the British Isles alone.[73] Here Eurocentrism yields pride of place to Britanocentrism, suggesting the emergence of a new virtual continent in the north Atlantic.

Yet not all geographical writers in the early twentieth century viewed continents as given and unproblematic divisions of the globe. In the popular *Van Loon's Geography* of 1937, for example, the author describes the continental scheme with a light and almost humorous touch, concluding that one might as well use the standard system so long as one remembers its arbitrary foundations. Van Loon viewed the standard arrangement as including five continents: Asia, America, Africa, Europe, and Australia.[74] While it might seem surprising to find North and South America still joined into a single continent in a book published in the United States in 1937, such a notion remained fairly common until World War II.[75] It cannot be coincidental that this idea served American geopolitical designs at the time, which sought both Western Hemispheric domination and disengagement from the "Old World" continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa.[76]

By the 1950s, however, virtually all American geographers had come to insist that the visually distinct landmasses of North and South America deserved separate designations. This was also the period when Antarctica was added to the list, despite its lack of human inhabitants,[77] and when Oceania as a "great division" was replaced by Australia as a continent along with a series of isolated and continentally attached islands.[78] The resulting seven-continent system quickly gained acceptance throughout the United States. In the 1960s, during the heyday of geography's "quantitative revolution," the scheme received a new form of scientific legitimization from a scholar who set out to calculate, through rigorous mathematical equations, the exact number of the world's continents. Interestingly enough, the answer he came up with conformed almost precisely to the conventional list: North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Oceania (Australia plus New Zealand), Africa, and Antarctica.[79]

Despite the implicit European bias of the continental scheme, its more recent incarnations have been exported to the rest of the world without, so far as we are aware, provoking any major critical response or local modification. In the case of Japan, a European-derived fourfold continental schema came into use in the 1700s and was ubiquitous by the middle 1800s.[80] Subsequent changes in Japanese global conceptualization closely followed those of Europe—with the signal difference that Asia almost always ranked as the first continent.[81] Geographers in the Islamic realm, for their part, had adopted the ancient threefold global division from the Greeks at a much earlier date,[82] although the continents generally played an insignificant role in their conceptions of the terrestrial order before the twentieth century.[83] South Asians and others influenced by Indian religious beliefs employed a very different traditional system of continental divisions, one much more concerned with cosmographical than with physical geographical divisions.[84] With the triumph of European imperialism, however, the contemporary European view of the divisions of the world came to enjoy near-universal acceptance. Scholars from different countries may disagree over the exact number of continents (in much of Europe, for instance, a fivefold rather than a sevenfold scheme is still preferred), but the basic system has essentially gone unchallenged.

Paradoxically, almost as soon as the now-conventional seven-part continental system emerged in its present form, it began to be abandoned by those who had most at stake in its propagation: professional geographers. Whereas almost all American university-level global geography textbooks before World War II reflected continental divisions, by the 1950s most were structured around "world regions" (discussed in chapter 6).[85] Yet the older continental divisions have persisted tenaciously in the popular press, in elementary curricula, in reference works, and even in the terminology of world regions themselves. Anyone curious about the contemporary status of the continental scheme need only glance through the shelves of cartographic games and products designed for children.[86] Nor is such pedagogy aimed strictly at the young. A recently published work designed primarily for adults, entitled *Don't Know Much about Geography,* locates the "nations of the world" according to their "continental" positions. The author further informs us that cartographers only "figured out" that Australia "was a sixth continent" in 1801. And his repetition of the familiar claim that Australia is at once "the world's smallest continent and its largest island"[87] confirms as well the continuing invisibility of the "world island," encompassing Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The Modern Continental Scheme—and Its Exception

THE IRRELEVANCE OF CONTINENTS

When it comes to mapping global patterns, whether of physical or human phenomena, continents are most often simply irrelevant. In regard to the distribution of life-forms, for instance, most con-

temporary continental boundaries are trivial. The animal communities of North and South America were indeed dissimilar when the two landmasses were actually separate in the Tertiary period, but with the emergence of an isthmus between them several million years ago, they melded together in what paleontologists call "the great faunal interchange." The more important modern-day zoogeographical boundary in the Americas, separating the Nearctic from the Neotropical faunal realms, lies well to the north, in central Mexico. Similarly, the fauna of northern Africa is more closely allied to that of northern Eurasia (the two areas together constituting the zoogeographer's Palearctic region) than it is to the "Ethiopian" fauna of sub-Saharan Africa and southern Arabia. Madagascar, on the other hand, while conventionally classified as merely a large African island, unambiguously forms its own faunal realm. Floral realms, too, fail to conform to the structure of continents.[88]

Even in the field of geology, continental divisions have only minor utility. Immediate visual evidence notwithstanding, tectonic plates—the true physical building blocks of the earth's surface—do not respect the geographer's continental framework. India is tectonically linked, not to its neighbors in Asia, but to distant Australia, which lies on the same "Indo-Australian" piece of lithic crust. Africa, on the other hand, is in the process of splitting in two along the Rift Valley. Geologically speaking, continents are momentary assemblages of land that continually grow, divide, and reform; the visually obvious major landmasses of the globe thus only partially reveal the underlying processes of tectonic motion.[89] In fact, the term *continental* is used in geology in a technical sense to describe blocks of granitic crust separated by expanses of "oceanic" (basaltic) crust. By this definition, such "islands" as Madagascar and New Zealand[90] should have continental status, while there is a less-clear continental divide between North America and Eurasia (which are connected by an expansive, if submerged, shelf of "continental" rock under the Bering Sea).[91]

Explanations are never offered as to why Madagascar—or certain other large, discrete areas of land composed of continental rock—are routinely considered islands and not continents in their own right. Greenland,[92] Borneo, and New Guinea may reasonably be denied continental status due to their connection, via continental shelves, with much larger landmasses. Such a distinction, however, cannot be applied to Madagascar, New Zealand, or even New Caledonia. Indeed, the noted paleontologist Björn Kurtén has pronounced that "Madagascar is a minor continent rather than an island,"[93] but his remains distinctly the minority view. Evidently, some unspecified minimum size implicitly differentiates an island from a continent. Yet in practice few scientists seem concerned with the issue or even with maintaining consistent usage. Edward O. Wilson, for example, writes that "in biogeographical terms Australia is only an extremely large island," but then goes on to assert in the same text that Madagascar—which is less biogeographically distinct than Australia—should be considered "a small continent."[94]

THE EUROPEAN ANOMALY

If continents are simply irrelevant for physical geography, however, they can be positively pernicious when applied to human geography. Pigeonholing historical and cultural data into a continental framework fundamentally distorts basic spatial patterns, leading to misapprehensions of cultural and social differentiation. Nowhere is such misrepresentation more clearly exemplified than in the supposed continental distinction between Europe and Asia.

In current usage, continents are defined not as absolutely distinct bodies but as *more or less* discrete masses of land. North and South America, for instance, have been accorded continental status (at least by U.S. geographers) on the grounds that they are *almost* distinct landmasses (with the additional pedigree of separate geological histories). Their connection at the Isthmus of Panama—like the narrow linkage tying Africa to Asia—can be easily overlooked or dismissed as insignificant. Indeed, over time, the continental scheme has grown increasingly faithful to this fundamentally visual definition. Shifting the boundary between Africa and Asia from the narrow Nile to the broad Red Sea, acknowledging the distinctiveness of both Australia and Antarctica, and dividing North from South America have all made the continental classification system increasingly congruent with the basic patterns of land and sea that spring to the eye from a world map.

The one glaring exception to this rule is the boundary between Asia and Europe. Since Europe is by no stretch of the imagination a discernible landmass, it can hardly be reckoned a continent according to the dictionary definitions of that term. The Ural and Caucasus ranges, which are said to form its eastern border, are separated by an embarrassing 600-mile gap. Moreover, the Urals themselves are hardly a major barrier. (The Cossacks managed to invade Siberia by carrying their river boats over a brief portage "across the Urals crest.")[95] As a result, conscientious geographers sometimes group Europe and Asia together as the single continent of Eurasia, whittling down the list of major landmasses from seven to six.[96] It was the growing popularity of this view that drove Oscar Halecki—a determined champion of European civilization—to lament in 1950 that

it had already become "commonplace to say that Europe is nothing but a peninsula of Asia."[97]

But Halecki's lament was premature. While a few professionals may regard Europe as a mere peninsula of Asia (or Eurasia),[98] most geographers—and almost all nongeographers—continue to treat it, not only as a full-fledged continent, but as the *archetypal* continent. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is a prime case in point. While admitting that Europe forms an anomalous landmass, the encyclopedia nonetheless explicitly deems its civilization distinctive enough to warrant extended consideration as a continent.[99] Likewise, world atlases, the source of our most enduring continental imagery, virtually never portray Eurasia as a single division of the earth.[100] Although it creates considerable awkwardness in dealing with Russia (a state that contains large portions of both supposed continents), cartographic practice stubbornly persists in keeping Asia and Europe categorically distinct. Nor is it only the staid publishing establishment that participates in policing this boundary. Even the most au courant postmodern geographers sometimes treat Europe as a distinct continent.[101] In short, despite the pragmatic adjustments that have been made elsewhere to an increasingly rationalized continental scheme, Europeans and their descendants continue blithely to exempt their own homeland from its defining criterion.

That Europe's continental status may be denied with a wink but then continually confirmed in practice does not indicate a simple oversight. Nor can it be dismissed as a mere convenience, a simplification necessary for making sense of a complex world. Rather, Europe's continental status is intrinsic to the entire conceptual scheme. Viewing Europe and Asia as parts of a single continent would have been far more geographically accurate, but it would also have failed to grant Europe the priority that Europeans and their descendants overseas believed it deserved. By positing a continental division between Europe and Asia, Western scholars were able to reinforce the notion of a cultural dichotomy between these two areas—a dichotomy that was essential to modern Europe's identity as a civilization. This does not change the fact, however, that the division was, and remains, misleading. Not only do Europe and Asia fail to form two continents, they are not even comparable portions of a greater Eurasian landmass. Europe is in actuality but one of half a dozen Eurasian subcontinents, better contrasted to a region such as South Asia than to the rest of the landmass as a whole. (It would be just as logical to call the Indian peninsula one continent while labeling the entire remainder of Eurasia—from Portugal to Korea—another.)

Granted that Europe is not a separate landmass, however, it can still be argued that it does form a coherent cultural region. It is on these

grounds, as noted, that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us Europe is to be regarded as a continent. But to define Europe as a continent in cultural terms is to imply that the other continents can be similarly defined—which would require that Asia, too, be united by a distinctive culture or civilization. Unfortunately, identifying this common culture has not proven an easy task. As Élisée Reclus, an encyclopedic French geographer of the nineteenth century, recognized, Asia is internally divided to an extraordinary degree: "Nor does it, like Europe, present the great advantage of geographical unity. . . . Asia may have given birth to many local civilizations, but Europe alone could have inherited them, by their fusion raising them to a higher culture, in which all of the peoples of the earth may one day take part. . . . Isolated from each other by plateaux, lofty ranges or waterless wastes, the Asiatic populations have naturally remained far more distinct than those of Europe."[102]

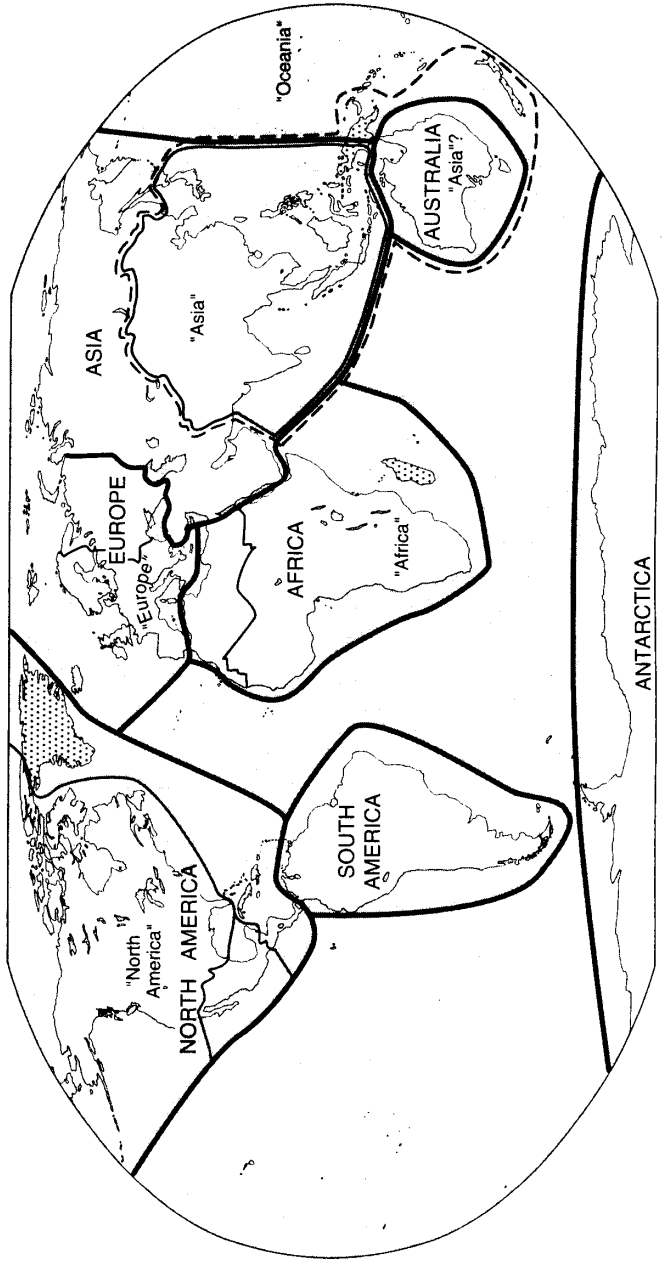
As this passage suggests, of all the so-called continents, Asia is not only the largest but also the most fantastically diversified, a vast region whose only commonalities—whether human or physical—are so general as to be trivial.[103] Yet clever geographers have turned this around, seeing such diversity either as a kind of fault (as in the case of Reclus) or as the essence of Asian identity.[104] On the one hand, this is easier than looking for substantive traits that could be said to characterize such diverse places as Saudi Arabia, India, Thailand, Korea, Tibet, Uzbekistan, and Yakutia in northern Siberia. On the other hand, it has allowed Europeans to see the disproportionate diversity of the Asian "continent" as a challenge *for Asian civilization*, rather than as a challenge to their own system of geographical classification. Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself forwarded the truly remarkable argument that one of the things that made Europe "so special" was the fact that its various nations constituted a real society, whereas the other continents were but collectivities with nothing but a "name in common."[105] As Andrew March brilliantly argues, this intellectual maneuver says far more about the psychology of European scholars than it does about the geographical entity known as Asia.[106]

If Asia's internal cohesion has been difficult to ascertain, specifying its geographical limits has proven problematic as well. The conventional southeastern boundary of this so-called continent, while perhaps more obscure than that separating it from Europe, is no less contrived. Extending east-southeast from the Malay Peninsula is a continuous chain of islands, large and small, which eventually attenuates in eastern Melanesia. The western portion of this island group, contemporary Indonesia, is conventionally included as part of Asia (although in former times this was not always the case), while the eastern portion, Melanesia, is ex-

cluded.[107] On cultural and historical grounds such a division might be supportable, but in practice the boundary between the two zones is not consistently dictated by cultural criteria. Rather, New Guinea is typically sliced cleanly down the middle, along the political boundary between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, and the western half of this unambiguously Melanesian island is ceded to Asia.[108] Nor is such a cartographic absurdity limited to political atlases; among other manifestations, it is enshrined on the walls of no less a venerated cultural institution than the Smithsonian's Sackler Museum of Asian Art. This continental bifurcation of New Guinea can be justified neither on physical nor on cultural grounds. Its sole claim to legitimacy is the political incorporation of western New Guinea (Irian Jaya) into the "Asian" state of Indonesia. Given that most of the people of Irian Jaya resent their subjugation (and that many are in open rebellion against it), this easily overlooked cartographic maneuver has troubling political implications.

CONTINENTAL REORIENTATIONS IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION

Few Americans, of course, notice such niceties. In cases where the gap between official boundaries and popular conceptions is particularly large, many people increasingly ignore the official continental scheme altogether (see map 2). Despite the fact that our encyclopedias lump



Map 2. *The Seven "Continents" and Their Displacement in the Popular Imagination.* Heavy lines mark the official continental boundaries of U.S. geography, while lighter lines denote the areas commonly associated with these labels in the popular imagination. Thus Asia as commonly perceived includes only the southeastern portion of the standard continent (although it is extended in some contexts to encompass Australia and New Zealand, as indicated by the broken line). Likewise, the official Europe-Asia boundary at the Urals is often shifted westward in popular use to exclude Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus from Europe. Africa, as a category in U.S. journalism, usually excludes the northern tier of African countries, while North America is conceptually truncated far north of the Panama Isthmus (either at Mexico's northern or southern boundary)—excising large areas that are officially within the continent's boundaries.

Problematic "islands" have been shaded with small dots. New Guinea is typically counted as half in Asia and half in Oceania, but by geological criteria it is unambiguously part of Australia (a continent with which it is virtually never associated). New Zealand, on the other hand, is usually grouped with Australia, if it is not overlooked altogether. Madagascar is almost always linked with Africa, though the reason for this maneuver is never spelled out. Greenland is officially classified as part of North America, but it is often forgotten when that "continent" is discussed.

all "Asian" lands and peoples together, for instance, most Americans routinely excise large sections of the conventional continent from their mental maps. Few today would identify the residents of Syria and Saudi Arabia, much less Israel, as Asians. Even the Association for Asian Studies, the principal academic group devoted to the study of the area, excludes Southwest Asia—as well as North Asia (Siberia)—from its scholarly purview. The academic journal *Modern Asian Studies,* according to a map on its advertising flier, similarly excludes the southwestern quadrant of the official continent, although it appears to include eastern Siberia.[109] Journalistic conventions as well often limit Asia to the southeastern half of the official continent. In the *Economist,* for example, Pakistan counts as part of Asia, but stories on Iran are published under the catchall heading "international." In the most extreme reduction, "Asia" becomes essentially limited to East and Southeast Asia—and even then such countries as North Korea and Myanmar may be excluded if convenient. The Asia-Europe summit (or "Asem") of March 2, 1996, for example, included on the Asia side only the seven countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) along with Japan, South Korea, and China.[110]

In regard to North America one can detect a similar shift between official designation and popular conception. Strictly speaking, the North American continent includes Panama and all points north, but in common parlance Central America is usually excluded, while in some circumstances Mexico is deleted as well.[111] Most Spanish-speaking peoples of the Western Hemisphere likewise reserve the term *Norte America* for the United States and Canada. Less noticed is the fact that, when deployed in this way, North America is no longer a continental category.

In many respects, Australia is the only unambiguous inhabited continent; it alone is surrounded by water. Moreover, until the coming of Europeans, Australian peoples were nearly isolated, maintaining only a tenuous connection with New Guinea through the Torres Strait Islands. Aboriginal Australia formed a coherent (if diverse) cultural region, and one can easily argue that modern-day Australia, transformed though it may be, retains such a distinction. In contemporary usage, however, Australia is often accorded less than full continental status. The joining of Australia with various Pacific islands to form the quasi continent of Oceania is an old gambit. More recently, news magazines like the *Economist* have begun to classify Australia as part of Asia, presumably by virtue of its growing economic ties to Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Many Australian politicians, seeking to intensify such connections, concur.

These various adjustments to received continental categories have incrementally improved the fit between major geographical divisions and sociocultural features. But distortions stubbornly persist. In particular, the new conception of the world does not eliminate the problem of false comparability between Europe and Asia. While careful writers no longer elevate the European peninsula to a position of equivalence with the massive zone extending from the Bosporus to Kamchatka, Europe does continue to be juxtaposed with a much-reduced "monsoon Asia," anchored by India and China. This may be a step in the right direction, but the comparison still does not wash. The historically constituted cultural region of far western Eurasia simply cannot usefully be compared with the vast and heterogeneous swath of terrain from Afghanistan to Japan. And even the new Asia of popular imagination, pared down though it may be, still lacks the unifying features that are expected to characterize a human-geographical region. In essence, it remains little more than a flattering mirror to Europe, conceptualized more by its supposed lack of Europeanness than by any positive attributes of its own.

Finally, as the boundaries of the continents have come loose from their geophysical moorings, these categories have become increasingly vague in the public imagination, reducing their usefulness even as locating devices. A survey one of us conducted at the beginning of an introductory world geography course at Duke University indicates the pervasiveness of the problem. When asked to identify Europe on an unlabeled political map of the Eastern Hemisphere, only thirty percent of the students circled the standard continent; more than half excluded all of Russia, while a few excluded such areas as southern Europe, the British Isles, Scandinavia, and even (in one case) France. A larger proportion (forty percent) correctly identified the standard continent of Asia, but those who did not offered a much more wildly divergent set of readings. Nor were such disagreements limited to distant places. When asked to draw a line around North America on a map of the Western Hemisphere, a third of the students circled only the United States and Canada, and another third included Mexico but not Central America. While this is hardly a scientific sample, it does raise very real doubts about the uniformity of the categories that underlie our inherited geographical scheme.

The Roots of Geographical Determinism

CONTINENTS AND REGIONS

What ultimately damns the continental system, however, is not its vagueness or its tendency to mislead us into making faulty as-

sociations among human cultural groupings. Most insidious in the long run is the way in which this metageographical framework perpetuates a covert form of environmental determinism.

Environmental (or geographical) determinism is the belief that social and cultural differences between human groups can ultimately be traced to differences in their physical environments. As this philosophy took definitive shape in the Anglo-American academy at the turn of this century, it tended to support the self-serving notion that temperate climates alone produced vigorous minds, hardy bodies, and progressive societies, while tropical heat (and its associated botanical abundance) produced races marked by languor and stupefaction. Such overtly racialist claims disappeared several generations ago from respectable works.[112] Yet we would argue that a more subtle and largely unrecognized variant of environmental determinism lurks behind the myth of continents.

The reason for this is simple. In practice, the continental system continues to be applied in such a way as to suggest that continents are at once physically and culturally constituted—i.e., that natural and human features somehow correspond in space. Nineteenth-century geographers regarded this notion as a virtual article of faith; the long-running debate over Russia's true continental position was animated by precisely this assumption.[113] It is hardly surprising that the same idea doggedly persists in the public imagination. Having been taught that continents are the basic building blocks of global geography, our students slide easily into assuming that the configuration of landmasses must correspond to the distribution of cultural traits and social forms. Surely there must be something identifiably African about all people who live in Africa, as distinct from the Asianness of those who inhabit Asia. This slippage of categories suggests that the continent itself, through some unspecified process, imparts an essence to its human inhabitants. The result is that actual cultural connections and distinctions across the complexly variegated human landscape are made to seem pale before the arbitrary divisions of continental terrain.

Once this natural-seeming conception takes hold, it becomes a Herculean task to dislodge it. Arnold Toynbee certainly attempted to do so, devoting strenuous arguments to the task. Concerning the distinction between Europe and Asia, Toynbee rightly pointed out that "the geographers' error here lay in attempting to translate a serviceable piece of navigational nomenclature into political and cultural terms." He attempted to disabuse scholars of this notion by insisting that "the historian cannot lay his finger on any period at all, however brief, in which there was any

significant cultural diversity between 'Asiatic' and 'European' occupants of the all but contiguous opposite banks of a tenuous inland waterway."[114] Toynbee's work, however, is seldom read these days, and his geographical arguments have never received much attention. Like other attempts to expose the faulty logic behind the continental scheme, his too evidently met with very little success.

As a result, contemporary geographers, while distancing themselves deliberately from the racialist thinking that once dominated the discipline, sometimes fall back into an environmentalist position simply by remaining faithful to continental categories. This may be seen, for instance, in the persistent idea that a distinctly "Asiatic Mode of Production" formerly prevailed all the way from the Ottoman Empire to China. Even in the 1990s, a prominent scholar can argue, following Karl Marx and Karl Wittfogel, that the need for large-scale irrigation—an imperative ultimately attributed to physical geography—was significantly responsible for the development of Asia's "despotic" forms of rule.[115] As will be demonstrated at greater length in chapter 5, careful scholarship has thoroughly discredited this thesis; just as there is no Asia, neither is there an Asiatic Mode of Production or a characteristically Asian form of despotic power. More subtle examples of modern geodeterminism may be found in the introductory chapters of textbooks on Asian history and culture. A recent work by Rhoads Murphey, for instance—in many ways a fine piece of historical geographic synthesis—begins by specifying its field of reference as South, Southeast, and East Asia, positing that this constitutes a coherent frame for historical analysis based on climatic criteria (namely, monsoonal circulation).[116] While one could quibble with Murphey's climatic regionalization,[117] the more important point is that "monsoon Asia" cannot be regarded as a primary cultural or historical region unless one accepts the basic tenets of environmental determinism.[118]

EUROPE AND METAGEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM

As Andrew March shows, however, proponents of geographical determinism have often construed the intensity of environmental influence as varying according to continental location—opening the way for exempting Europeans from the strict rule of nature. Since at least the time of Montesquieu, Europe has been pictured as a land of moderate climate and diverse landforms, allowing unusual scope for human freedom. In other words, Europe has been depicted as the arena of environmental *possibilism*. Asia and Africa, by contrast, have been often

viewed as continents of climatic rigor and physiographic uniformity, whose people have been subject to a corresponding set of "iron physical laws."[119] In this view, the bonds of geographical concordance, especially those linking human developments with physiographic features, can be asserted to be much stronger in Asian countries than in those of Europe.[120]

This kind of theorizing reached its peak in the Victorian period, when Henry Thomas Buckle wrote his massively influential *History of Civilization in England*. The cornerstone of Buckle's history was the supposed fact that the "feebleness" of nature in Europe allowed for the development of "thought," whereas on other continents a rougher nature held humanity in its thrall.[121] Buckle also suggested an additional reason why "it was easier for Man to discard the superstitions which nature suggested to his imagination" in Europe: namely, the European continent was "constructed upon a smaller plan" than the other landmasses.[122] (Such a line of thinking would lead us to suppose that Madagascar should enjoy even greater advantages—if only it too could be defined as a continent.) This notion—that diversity in a small place somehow promoted cultural development—has often been repeated by nationalistic geographers on behalf of individual European states as well. No less a scholar than Paul Vidal de la Blache, often considered the founder of French geography, could baldly claim that "because of the extremely varied physical environment of Europe in general, and *France in particular*, higher civilization came to exist in these places."[123]

The idea that Europe alone escaped geographical determination persists to this day, albeit in more subtle forms. Europe's physiographic and climatic diversity are now sometimes viewed merely as having prevented the consolidation of large empires and allowed scope for the development of a market-driven economy. Paul Kennedy, in his widely acclaimed book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, expresses this view succinctly:

> For [its] political diversity Europe had largely to thank its geography. There were no enormous plains over which an empire of horsemen could impose its swift domination; nor were there broad and fertile river zones like those around the Ganges, Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, Yellow and Yangtze, providing the food for masses of toiling and easily conquered peasants. Europe's landscape was much more fractured, with mountain ranges and large forests separating the scattered population centers in the valleys; and its climate altered considerably from north to south and west to east. . . .
>
> Europe's differentiated climate led to different products, suitable for exchange; and in time, as market relations were developed, they were transported along the rivers or the pathways which cut through the forest between one area of settlement and the next. . . . Here again geography played a crucial role, for water transport of these goods was so much more economical and Europe possessed so many navigable rivers.[124]

The many misconceptions in this brief passage betray the geographical myopia associated with the myth of continents. From Kennedy's avowedly Eurocentric perspective,[125] Europe's geographical features are seen in fine detail, suggesting great diversity across the region. The rest of the world, by contrast, appears on the edges of his mental map as a vague blur, looking highly monotonous. The discrepancy becomes evident as soon as one looks carefully at a map of southern and eastern Eurasia, focusing on precisely the features Kennedy emphasizes. To begin with, both South and East Asia show at least as much topographic diversity as does Europe. While both subsume large expanses of flat land, neither the north Indian nor the north Chinese plain dwarfs the great European plain (which extends, after all, from Aquitaine to the Urals). Climatic variation is also comparable in all three regions; China's climate, in fact, exhibits greater differentiation than does Europe's, ranging as it does from truly tropical to subarctic. Similarly, all three areas feature navigable rivers, those of China in particular having been more highly developed for transportation than their counterparts in Europe in premodern times.[126] And as for Kennedy's claim that Europe's forests served as an impediment to conquest, it is hard to imagine how this could have been true after the "great age of forest clearance" in the Middle Ages—a period of massive deforestation such as South Asia, at least, did not experience until modern times.

If the passage quoted above nonetheless remains persuasive, even to a college-educated American audience, it does so in part because most of Kennedy's readers have only the sketchiest knowledge of the global environment. At the level of continental units, the kinds of spatial correlations that he and others assert between features of the physical and the human worlds are simply insupportable. For late-twentieth-century Americans to sustain belief in a sweeping fit between cultural and natural features requires turning a blind eye to the most basic findings of geographical research.

The standard sevenfold continental division of the world, commonsensical though it may appear, obscures rather than clarifies the essential patterns of global geography. It represents a parochial conception of the world, rooted in the limited ecumene of the classical Mediterranean world and elaborated by a European culture that was as proud of its conquests

as of its cultural accomplishments. For a global community seeking a truly cosmopolitan conceptual scheme, the continental formula has clearly outlived its usefulness.

If Americans are to think clearly about the world and about our place within it, we must relinquish the final vestiges of environmental determinism, especially in our definition of sociocultural units. Our division of the human community into large-scale regional aggregations must be based on criteria appropriate to humankind, rather than those suggested by the configurations of the physical world. Human history is no more molded by the rigid framework of landmasses and ocean expanses than it is determined by the distribution of "ideal climates." As scholars in many disciplines are now arguing, the imperative of the moment is to "denaturalize" the categories through which we apprehend the human experience.[127] It is time for geographers to join in this multidisciplinary endeavor by dismantling the myth of continents.