The Myth of Continents

Source: Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 2, 3, 33-34, 35, 36, 41-42, 43-45, 186, 188.

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.

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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.

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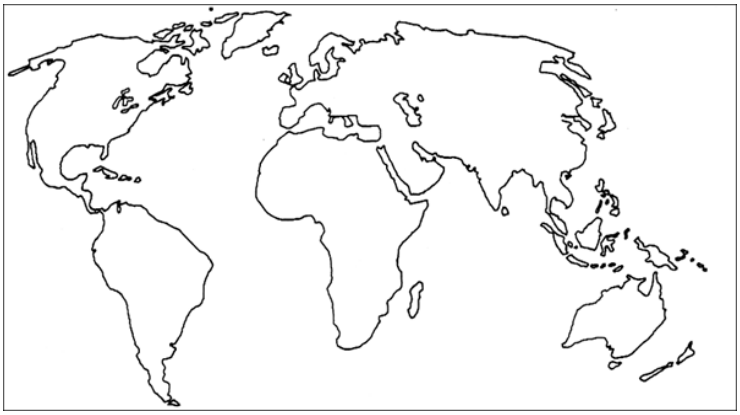
When it comes to mapping global patterns, whether of physical or human phenomena, continents are most often simply irrelevant. In regard to the distribution of life-forms, for instance, most contemporary continental boundaries are trivial.



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.

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In current usage, continents are defined not as absolutely distinct bodies but as more or less discrete masses of land.

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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 riverboats over a brief portage "across the Urals's crest.") 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.

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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.)

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

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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....
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> 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.

The many misconceptions in this brief passage betray the geographical myopia associated with the myth of continents. From Kennedy's avowedly Eurocentric perspective, 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. And as for Kennedy's claim that Europe's forests served as an impediment to conquest, it is hard to image 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.

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So long as these methodological points are addressed, we believe that the world regional paradigm can be reformed and should be retained. But a number of caveats are still in order. First, as we have insisted throughout this critique, any

scheme of global geographical division is only a rough approximation, a convenient but crude device for making sense of particular patterns of human life. World regions are better approximations for most purposes than continents or civilizations, but they are no more naturally given. Second, we would emphasize that this scheme has evolved essentially as a pedagogical tool: a vehicle for talking and teaching about basic global patterns of sociocultural geography at the college level. We claim no authority for it beyond those uses. Third, we would note that while our map by necessity shows seemingly rigid boundaries separating world regions, many of those boundary zones themselves function almost like hybrid regions in their own right. Finally, we would ask the reader to see this scheme, like all similar efforts, as but one contribution to an ongoing dialogue. Our purpose is not to settle the many delicate issues of metageography, but to advance the discussion of those issues.