

Evolution of Social Geography

Part II (1+1+1 System) Geography Hons.

Paper: V

Module: VII

Topic: 1.2

Definition

Fitzgerald, who first tried to define social geography in 1946, equated it with almost whole of human geography. J. W. Watson in 1957 defined it 'as the identification of different regions of the earth according to associations of social phenomena related to the total environment'. R.E. Pahl in 1965 gave the definition of social geography as 'the study of the pattern and processes in understanding socially defined populations in their spatial setting'. There were further attempts to define the discipline by geographers like A. Buttimer (1968), J. Eyles (1974) and E. Jones (1975) in recent years. Without going into polemics, we may, however, gainfully say that social geography is concerned with the patterns of the attributes and activities of people.

Social geography deals with the analysis of social phenomena in space. Social geography is a recent sub discipline; explicit concern with social phenomena has developed mainly since 1945. The antecedents of social geography can, however, be traced to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The term social phenomena encompass the whole framework of human interaction with environment, leading to the articulation of social space by diverse human groups in different ways.

Early phase of social geography

The main theme of 'Possibilism' is that the nature or physical surroundings provide a range of possibilities to man and man makes a choice. This choice depends on his needs, aspirations and capacities. Man establishes relationships with nature not as an individual, but as a group or society. In other words, man views this relationship through the filter or prism of culture. 'Culture' here includes beliefs, institutions, traditions, attitudes, religion, language, diet, habits, customs, skills and technology, etc. In this way, man creates his own habitat, the local modified environment within which the man lives, works or acts. This habitat is a distinct landscape created or developed because of man's occupancy, imprint and usage. The present ways of life of a society, its cultural, socio-economic and overall development, is the result of the history of its occupation of the physical surroundings.

Upto to 1945, social geography was mainly concerned with the identification of different regions, themselves reflecting geographic patterns of associations of social phenomena. In fact, during the twenties and the thirties of the 20th century, social geography started its agenda of research with the study of population as organised in settlements, particularly urban settlements. The process of urbanisation had thrown up issues of social concern such as access to civic amenities and housing and the related socio-pathological issues, such as incidence of crime, juvenile delinquency and other expressions of mental ill-health. Socio-geographical studies of population distribution and ethnic composition in urban areas emerged as a major trend during this phase. The underlying idea was to examine the social content of the urban space which resulted from coming together of diverse ethnic groups within a city. The city with its specific functional specialization cast these social groups in its mould, resulting in the assimilation of diverse elements into a universal urban ethos.

Emphasis on population characteristics remained a major preoccupation of social geographers till the fifties of this century. During the fifties, the tradition continued with social geographers mainly

preoccupied with population characteristics. Social geographers differentiated between regions on the basis of the dominant patterns as social phenomena, mostly based on the population characteristics.

Later, under the influence of the rising tide of quantification, social geographers started employing area-specific data in order to discover spatial patterns. This focus on pattern identification received a major impetus in the early and mid 1960s with the application of quantitative methods in geography. During the phase of development, the major focus of research remained on the analysis of the social data for the cities. American sociology adopted social area analysis as a technique for relating social structure with urban patterns. In this connection reference may be made to the pioneering work of two American sociologists, E. Shevky and W. Bell. The technique was criticized for being mechanistic as there was no link between the social scaling and differentiation of population within the urban space. As a method social area analysis was abandoned in favour of what came to be known as factorial ecology. Its importance, however, lies in the fact that at a certain stage in the historical development of social geography it played a highly seminal role furnishing a basis for systematic analysis of urban social space.

Modern phase of social geography

The late 1960s saw rapid and radical social change, dominated by such events as the Vietnam War and wars of liberation in remaining colonies. The social relevance movement in the contemporary social sciences also affected geography and issues such as race, crime, health and poverty received an increasingly large attention. The progress of social geography in the decades since 1960 has taken into several main paths, each cluster of research acquiring the status of a school of thought in its own way.

1. A welfare or humanistic school mainly concerned with the state of social well-being as expressed by territorial indicators of housing, health and social pathology largely within the theoretical framework of welfare economics. Humanistic geography studies human awareness and human agency, human consciousness and human creativity. It, therefore, deals with the meaning, value and human significance of life events.
2. A radical school which employed Marxian theory to explain the basic causes of poverty and social inequality. This school of thought related the contemporary social problems to the development of capitalism. For example, cities and the communities within the city were perceived as organised spatially in response to the class relations and the Marxian interpretation was that a welfare approach might not be helpful.
3. The main theme of 'Possibilism' is that the nature or physical surroundings provide a range of possibilities to man and man makes a choice. This choice depends on his needs, aspirations and capacities. Man establishes relationships with nature not as an individual, but as a group or society. In other words, man views this relationship through the filter or prism of culture. 'Culture' here includes beliefs, institutions, traditions, attitudes, religion, language, diet, habits, customs, skills and technology, etc. In this way, man creates his own habitat, the local modified environment within which the man lives, works or acts. This habitat is a distinct landscape created or developed because of man's occupancy, imprint and usage. The present ways of life of a society, its cultural, socio-economic and overall development, is the result of the history of its occupation of the physical surroundings.
4. Behavioral approach to social geography attempts to understand human activity in space, place, and environment by studying it at the disaggregate level of analysis-at the level of the individual person. Behavioral geographers analyze data on the behavior of individual people, recognizing that individuals vary from each other. This approach holds that models of human activity and interaction can be improved by incorporating more realistic assumptions about human behavior.

Conclusion

It is obvious that contemporary social geography is in line with the theoretical development in human geography as a whole. This does not mean that the welfare or humanistic concerns or the quest for the causes of social inequality and class based exploitation or phenomenological perceptions of space have replaced the traditional concerns of areal differentiation and regional identification. All these approaches have continued to co-exist.

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