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## Mapping humans, or how to understand human diversity

Human Biogeography. Alexander H. Harcourt, 2012, University of California Press. 319 pp. £43.95 (hardback) ISBN: 9780520272118; <http://www.ucpress.edu/>

Having read Harcourt's 'Human Biogeography', I am glad that I was given the opportunity to review it. Not a specialist in biogeography, my interests lie in humans, especially in what makes us human. And this is what this book is about, as stated in the introduction: "This book is about how and why our species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, is distributed around the world in the way it is—why we are what we are where we are" (p. 1). Over the years, important works have been conducted in biogeography and important phenomena and their impact in shaping life have been described (e.g. Bergmann 1847, Wallace 1876, MacArthur and Wilson 1967, Rapoport 1982). However, their implications in shaping humanity in its complexity still remain unclear (e.g. Bromage and Schrenck 1999, Binford 2001). As scientific disciplines are more fragmented than ever and over-specialization in academia tends to create boundaries between fields of study, and researchers, this book is most welcome because it bridges the many topics that can be related to shaping human diversity and differences. It presents in a very clear manner the inter-correlation of geographical and temporal factors which may (or may not) contribute to understanding past and current human biological and cultural variability, as well as past and current human distribution on Earth.

After a brief introduction assessing the need to study humans in a biogeographical framework ('Humans and Biogeography'), Harcourt develops his ideas through three main parts. 'Why and How Are We Where We Are?' introduces anthropological studies in an historical perspective (i.e. historical biogeography, phylogeography), while the second and third parts are focused on mechanisms that explain our distribution and diversity in both biological ('Environmental Influences on Human Nature, Diversity and Numbers') and cultural perspectives ('Interaction Among Cultures and Species'). This organization brings the reader to understand the intricate and interconnected nature of human diversity in its historical,

biological and cultural dimensions. Harcourt's synthesis is extremely well documented (the bibliography references no less than 861 studies). It is a gold mine of information and large amounts of data are presented in the book itself. There is no simplification of the themes developed in the book, and Harcourt stresses particularly the complicated patterns that underlie the study of human biogeography. For instance while reviewing and describing the various 'rules' which may explain biological diversity and geographical distribution of species, Harcourt constantly reminds the reader that such 'rules' are never perfect "because not all comparisons show the relationships" (p. 96) in humans and other species. He underlines this important fact by calling those rules 'effects' (i.e. Bergmann effect, Darwin-Rapoport effect, etc.). Harcourt not only reviews these various 'effects' but also puts them in perspective with ongoing scientific debates about their applicability. As an example, both cultural and species diversity are higher in the tropics than at any other latitudes and controversies (e.g. Fincher and Thornhill 2008, Currie and Mace 2009, Fincher and Thornhill 2012, Mace and Currie 2012) exist in the scientific community about the many hypotheses that exist to explain this (e.g. biological mechanisms such as diversity of parasites, environmental heterogeneity, energy available, productivity; or physical, environmental mechanisms such as environmental stability, area). Harcourt offers additional hypotheses and perspectives that may help to resolve those debates. Furthermore, the book presents intricate hypotheses and patterns with clear and straightforward examples, which are not without humour: Harcourt often refers to his personal situation (being married with an American) and to the cultural difference existing between the English and the French.

I really enjoyed reading 'Human Biogeography'; Harcourt's clear writing brings the reader to understand the numerous mechanisms that may

explain our current condition as an ‘animal and cultural’ species. At the same time, the synthesis never overlooks complexity, and the book provides a precise yet accessible picture of human biogeography.

I end this review by coming back to Harcourt’s introductory words “Why humans? In many respect humans are biogeographically just another species. Why then concentrate on humans? In brief I hope that both biogeography and anthropology can benefit from a more specific and extensive concentration on the topic of biogeography of humans than so far attempted” (p. 2). I think that Harcourt succeeded and that ‘Human Biogeography’ is undoubtedly a book for anthropologists who want to know more about ecological mechanisms that shape life, as well as for biogeographers who are willing to expand their knowledge to anthropology in its many aspects.

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