

The Myth of Continents, or How our Grade-School Teachers Distorted the Truth

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How many continents are there? It seems like a simple enough question, and most of us who grew up in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century come prepared with a pat answer to which we give little thought: “There are seven continents: North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and Antarctica. Next question, please.” The official flag of the Olympic games, however, displays a famous symbol of interlocking rings, each ring intended to represent one of the *five* continents of the world, the two Americas treated as one and Antarctica simply forgotten. Rather than some sort of geographic maverick, this lineup of five continents, not seven, is a standard one taught throughout much of Europe. So what is the answer to our question? Is it five, or is it seven?

Well, the most thoughtful answer might actually be none of the above, or better yet, “it depends.” There are few terms in geography that are more loaded with implied meanings and biased world views than *continent*. As a common-sense concept, the idea is simple enough: pick up a globe and one can readily observe a half-dozen distinctive (if barely connected) land masses. The exact number is debatable, depending on one’s size threshold for when an “island” becomes a “continent”. Is Australia large enough to be a continent? How about Greenland? Madagascar? Personally, I’m inclined to answer these questions Yes, No, and No, giving me a list of six: North America, South America, Eurasia, Africa, Australia, and Antarctica. To my eyes at least, this half-dozen represents the world’s primary distinctive land masses, as opposed to islands.

While this list is debatable, one thing clearly isn’t: Europe is *not* a continent—at least as long as we continue to see “continent” as more or less a synonym for land mass. Without question, Europe is a distinctive world region, both in social-cultural terms and as an environmental *subcontinent* of Eurasia. If we insist on calling Europe a continent, though, then consistency demands we do so for other, analogous regions around the world, such as South Asia (India and its neighbors) and Mesoamerica (Mexico and its neighbors). Our original list of five, six, or seven continents now expands to a dozen or more.

The bigger lesson, though, is not that there are really six continents, rather than the usual list of five or seven. Instead, this whole subjective exercise in continental definition teaches us how fruitless the idea of dividing the world into continents really is. As a type of region, continents are intended to provide a classification scheme by which we make some sense of the world. But closer inspection reveals that continents provide us with, at best, only a limited and rather distorted sense of world geography.

There are two primary problems with the concept. First, the history of the continental idea is closely tied to ideas of European superiority. As geographers Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen discuss in their wonderful book, *The Myth of Continents*, Europeans defined Asia as a catch-all concept to hold the various non-Christian, non-“Western” peoples who didn’t live up to their notions of what modern civilization should be. Not only did the idea of Asia, or “Orientalism,” hide from view the great diversity of places, peoples, environments,

landscapes, and cultures that occupy the eastern three-quarters of Eurasia, but it served to simplify Europe's conception of itself. The idea of a continental divide between Europe and Asia became a tool for those seeking to excise Islam, Communism, Judaism, and any other ideologies and cultures that conflicted with their personal visions of what Europe was and should be.

The second problem with using continents, or even a more innocent notion of land masses free of the eurocentrism described above, as an organizational framework for understanding the world, is its implied environmental determinism. A major theme of geography is how physical environments help shape the cultures and societies that inhabit them—how climate and soil and topography and natural avenues of transportation influence agricultural and other economic activity and the location of cities and other human settlements. But one of the biggest geographic fallacies is to take such thinking to the extreme, to say that environmental conditions are the single, dominant determinant of human activity—the ultimate explanation for all the cultures, landscapes, and geographies of wealth and poverty that we see today. Such simplistic thinking geographers reject as “environmental determinism”.

What does this have to do with continents? It is all well and good to recognize that land and water on earth is grouped into a pattern we might identify as a geography of oceans and land masses. Even better, we might relate that geography both to the geologic process of continental drift which created it, as well as to its influence on the global-scale circulation of currents of hot and cold air and water in our oceans and skies. But that is about as far as the continental or land-mass idea can take us. There is no good reason why our attempts to understand world geography in general, particularly in its human dimensions, should be based on a framework of continents. Thus, it is no accident that college textbooks use an alternative, “world regions” scheme, identifying three or more Asias, two or more Europes, two or more Africas, and two or more Americas.

Even more importantly, the best world geography recognizes that world regions can be more than simply subcontinental units of a single land mass. Defining a mostly-Islamic realm that covers parts of both Africa and Eurasia is common practice. Somewhat less common, but just as instructive, are regions that bridge major bodies of water; the North Atlantic World, the Pacific Rim, and the greater Mediterranean are all concepts that make sense, even though they overlap with alternative classification schemes for regionalizing the world.

The bottom line: No scheme is perfect, and there is no single best way to broadly group the peoples and places of the world into geographic units. We therefore need to recognize multiple ways to group the world. Continents do make some sense as land masses, providing a visually-obvious physical ordering of land and water on earth which helps us understand processes of geomorphology and climate. Otherwise, dividing the world into continents is a meaningless and potentially distorting exercise.

Further Reading

- Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997)
- Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978)