customs. Despite that growing globalism in all facets of life and economy, however, the world is far from homogenized. Although an increased sameness of commodities and experiences is encountered in distant places, even common and standardized items of everyday life—branded soft drinks, for example, or American fast-food franchises—take on unique regional meanings and roles, conditioned by the total cultural mix they enter. Those multiple regional cultural mixes are often defiantly distinctive and separatist as recurring incidents of ethnic conflict, civil war, and strident regionalism attest. Rather than leveling and removing regional contrasts, as frequently predicted, globalization continues to be countered by powerful forces of regionalism, place identity, and ethnicity.

If a global culture can be discerned, it may best be seen as a combination of multiple territorial cultures, rather than a standardized uniformity. It is those territorially different cultural mixtures that are recognized by the culture realms suggested on Figure 2.4, which itself is only one of many such possible divisions. The spatial pattern and characteristics of these generalized realms will help us place the discussions and examples of human geography of later chapters in their regional context.

Interaction of People and Environment

Culture develops in a physical environment that, in its way, contributes to differences among people. In premodern subsistence societies, the acquisition of food, shelter, and clothing, all parts of culture, depends on the utilization of the natural resources at hand. The interrelations of people to the environment of a given area, their perceptions and utilization of it, and their impact on it are interwoven themes of cultural ecology—the study of the relationship between a culture group and the natural environment it occupies.

Cultural ecologists see evidence that subsistence pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, and gardeners adapted their productive activities—and, by extension, their social organizations and relationships—to the specific physical limitations of their different local habitats. Presumably, similar natural environmental conditions influenced the development of similar adaptive responses and cultural outcomes in separate, unconnected locales. That initial influence, of course, does not predetermine the details of the subsequent culture.

Environments as Controls

Geographers have long dismissed as intellectually limiting and demonstrably invalid the ideas of environmental determinism, the belief that the physical environment exclusively shapes humans, their actions, and their thoughts. Environmental factors alone cannot account for the cultural variations that occur around the world. Levels of technology, systems of organization, and ideas about what is true and right have no obvious relationship to environmental circumstances.

The environment does place certain limitations on the human use of territory. Such limitations, however, must be seen not as absolute, enduring restrictions but as relative to technologies, cost considerations, national aspirations, and linkages with the larger world. Human choices in the use of landscapes are affected by group perception of the feasibility and desirability of their settlement and exploitation. These are not circumstances inherent in the land. Mines, factories, and cities have been created in the formerly

Figure 2.4 Culture realms of the modern world. This is just one of many possible subdivisions of the world into multifactor cultural regions.
nearly unpopulated tundra and forests of Siberia as a reflection of Russian developmental programs, not in response to recent environmental improvement.

**Possibilism** is the viewpoint that people, not environments, are the dynamic forces of cultural development. The needs, traditions, and level of technology of a culture affect how that culture assesses the possibilities of an area and shape what choices the culture makes regarding them. Each society uses natural resources in accordance with its circumstances. Changes in a group’s technical abilities or objectives bring about changes in its perceptions of the usefulness of the land. Simply put, the impact of the environment appears inversely related to the level of development of a culture, while perception of environmental opportunities increases directly with growth in economic and cultural development.

Map evidence suggests the nature of some environmental limitations on use of area. The vast majority of the world’s population is differentially concentrated on less-than one-half of the earth’s land surface, as Figure 4.21 indicates. Areas with relatively mild climates that offer a supply of fresh water, fertile soil, and abundant mineral resources are densely settled, reflecting in part the different potentials of the land under earlier technologies to support population. Even today, the polar regions, high and rugged mountains, deserts, and some hot and humid lowland areas contain very few people. If resources for feeding, clothing, or housing ourselves within an area are lacking or if we do not recognize them there, there is no inducement for people to occupy the territory.

Environments that do contain such recognized resources provide the framework within which a culture operates. Coal, oil, and natural gas have been in their present locations throughout human history, but they were rarely of use to preindustrial cultures and did not impart any understood advantage to their sites of occurrence. Not until the Industrial Revolution did coal deposits gain importance and come to influence the location of such great industrial complexes as the Midlands in England, the Ruhr in Germany, and the steel-making districts formerly so important in parts of northeastern United States. Native Americans made one use of the environment around Pittsburgh, while 19th-century industrialists made quite another.