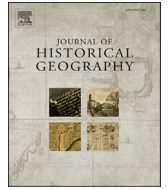




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Mastering space: laws of movement and the grip on the soil

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 November 2017

Received in revised form

3 May 2018

Accepted 9 May 2018

Keywords:

Friedrich Ratzel

Lebensraum

Darwinism

Bodenhaftung

ABSTRACT

In the early phase of the establishment of geography as a discipline, Friedrich Ratzel developed a biogeographical theory of space that was shaped by Darwinism and the theory of migration proposed by Moritz Wagner. In this contribution I will try to illuminate the nineteenth-century intellectual backgrounds which affected Ratzel's work and especially his concept of *Lebensraum*. With this theory, Ratzel sought not only to install *Lebensraum* as a concept for political action, he also transferred the idea of the compression parameter as a result of modernization to the context of political territoriality. Ratzel can best be described as a kind of transitional figure linking the nineteenth-century imperial notion of *Lebensraum* with twentieth-century concepts of expansion and extermination based on spatial ideas.

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Friedrich Ratzel was a scholar of the nineteenth century. He was an important figure in the establishment of political geography, a field which, from the standpoint of the history of knowledge, might be seen as a key transition from geopolitical to biopolitical theories. In this contribution I will try to illuminate the nineteenth-century intellectual backgrounds which affected Ratzel's work and especially his concept of *Lebensraum*. His theory, which he first conceptualized as anthropogeography and later extended to form political geography, was based on the assumption that the coexistence of human beings, just like that of other living organisms, could be grasped systematically and also predicted with the help of developmental laws. In his *Lebensraum* essay Ratzel asserted that 'All earthly being rests on one single law: the greatest and the smallest being depend on the basic properties of the planet'.¹ As I will show in what follows, Ratzel himself could best be described as a transitional figure linking the nineteenth-century imperial notion of *Lebensraum* with twentieth-century concepts of expansion and extermination. The political, and in many cases destructive, explosiveness of this transfer was intensified considerably in the course of the reorganization of Europe's political order after 1918.

Life is movement

In the second half of the nineteenth century, geography was one of several academic disciplines that were only gradually taking

shape. The autonomy of geography, as a field in the process of becoming established via empirical as well as theoretical work, remained precarious until the turn of the century. Carl Ritter was involved in transferring philosophical ideas about the relationship between humans and nature into geographical thought and had established an anthropocentric perspective with his notion of the earth as the 'house of education' (*Erziehungshaus*) for human beings. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, developmental concepts proposed by Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer became influential. Progress and development were the ideas that linked these concepts to the discipline of history. Alfred Kirchhoff, Ferdinand von Richthofen and Oskar Peschel were instrumental in ensuring the dominant role of positivism in geography, and shaped it as an empirical field that positioned itself among the natural sciences. The significance of Friedrich Ratzel's work emerges from this fundamental constellation, in which the object of geographical research was constituted and which was shaped by intra-disciplinary conflicts. In his *Anthropo-Geographie*, published in 1882, Ratzel formulated a concept of the dominant developmental dynamic based on thinking from the natural sciences as the centerpiece of geographical thought. According to Ratzel, the significance of geographical factors in history corresponded to the superiority of nature over human beings.²

Of fundamental importance for Ratzel's *Lebensraum* concept is the idea that humanity should be seen as a mass that is constantly in motion. In his *Lebensraum* essay Ratzel wrote that 'Talking about

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¹ F. Ratzel, *Lebensraum: a biogeographical study*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018) 2.

² F. Ratzel, *Anthropo-Geographie oder Grundzüge der Anwendung der Erdkunde auf die Geschichte*, Stuttgart, 1882, 41.

the mobility of living things, we posit movement as a general characteristic of life. Life is movement that always returns to a given form; ... and every movement is a mastering of space'.³ Ratzel himself used the term biogeography (*Biogeographie*) for his research and related it, among other things, to the state as an autochthonous organism. His understanding of science was grounded in a concept of life that had emerged in biology, zoology and physiology in the course of the nineteenth century and before. Life was considered to be a fundamental category for observing, describing and analyzing the developmental processes that were considered to be natural. The organic as a metaphor acquired substantial significance, in more ways than one. In Ratzel's theory of Lebensraum, the state is, on the one hand, an organism that develops due to specific natural conditions; and, on the other hand, its territory is an elementary component of the state itself. In his view, the state is not only an organism 'because it is a connection between the living people and the immobile soil, but also because this connection is consolidated to the extent that the two merge and can no longer be thought separately without life taking flight'.⁴ According to this understanding, border violation is defined as a personal injury and not as a material damage. Seen from this perspective, state territory became a key subject for geography as a discipline based on concepts of natural space and with a vocabulary that transformed political space into a category of life and, consequently, a category of substance.

In the course of the nineteenth century the organism analogy was reshaped within the context of concepts of the state grounded in theories of evolution that were developed by Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, Rudolf Virchow and others. The transfer of the evolutionary principle to the social sciences by Spencer and Haeckel was of decisive importance for the development of Ratzel's theories. In *The Principles of Biology* (1864) Spencer had asserted that in human societies, just as in the animal and plant kingdoms, the traits which would prevail were those that contributed to the survival of the organism.⁵ In Ratzel's first full-length academic publication, *Sein und Werden der organischen Welt* (1869), the strong influence of Darwin and, in particular, Haeckel, whose lectures he had heard at the University of Jena, are apparent. Ratzel reproduced in this text a theory of descent that drew heavily on Haeckel's *Schöpfungsgeschichte*.⁶

When Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he presumably had no inkling what revolutionary effect his theory of the emergence of species would have over the course of the following one hundred and fifty years. It is not possible to review in detail here the spectrum of widely diverging, by no means congruent, and in part contradictory responses to Darwin's work. Nonetheless, one can agree with historian Christian Geulen, who has argued that 'the reception of Darwin that focused on controlling the evolutionary process, steering progress, and instrumentalizing the selection principle' was of fundamental importance for

the ideological complex that is described rather inadequately as 'social Darwinism' (*Sozialdarwinismus*).⁷ Those who inferred the existence of racial orders in society from Darwin's theories and propagated policies to ensure that evolutionary processes would be regulated no doubt found a basis for their ideas in *The Descent of Man* (1871). However, they clearly contradicted some of Darwin's own statements about the origin of the human 'species'. In view of the extremely limited knowledge available in the nineteenth century about human differences and common traits, Darwin was rather skeptical about the category of race. He noted that human 'subspecies' differed in appearance, and continued that 'Nevertheless, all the races coincide in so many unimportant details of structure and in so many mental peculiarities, that these can be accounted for only through inheritance from a common progenitor'.⁸ Consequently, Darwin was more apt to assume that there was a single human 'species' with common traits that he considered more significant than the differences, since he did not view these external differences as a manifestation of anything 'substantial'. However, Darwin did use inconsistent terms to label human sub-categories, referring at times to 'subspecies' and at other times to 'races'. This lack of terminological clarity was, in Darwin's view, the result of 'long-standing habit', which favored the use of the term 'race', although he viewed 'subspecies' as the more appropriate term.⁹

Spatial separation

The work of Moritz Wagner, a naturalist and geographer, also emerged within the context of the critical reception of Darwin's ideas. Wagner was, until his death by suicide in 1887, Ratzel's close friend. His book *Die Darwin'sche Theorie und das Migrationsgesetz der Organismen* presented a theory of isolation that both complemented and criticized Darwin's theory of the origin of species. According to Wagner, spatial separation, rather than natural selection, as Darwin had proposed, was the decisive mechanism for the formation of new species. In contrast to Darwin, Wagner perceived the tendency to migrate to be not merely a further condition for evolutionary development but in fact a necessary, indeed indispensable, condition. Constant varieties and new species therefore emerge not so much via natural selection but rather by virtue of the fact that subpopulations are forced to migrate to other areas due to competition. It was, he thought, primarily the strongest and weakest individuals of a species that were destined to be involved in these migration processes. The strongest individuals would be driven by their desire for more food supplies, the weakest ones would seek to avoid competitive pressure by migrating. Wagner viewed migration as a 'well-founded necessity of nature' through which organisms secured their survival.¹⁰

Darwin also give a certain significance to geographical isolation in the process of evolution, but considered its effects to be rather limited. At first, Wagner perceived his law of migration to be a supplement to Darwin's theory of evolution, but over time a sharp conflict developed and became increasingly entrenched. Darwin denied more and more adamantly that the theory of separation played any substantial role in the emergence of species, whereas Wagner lost sight of the variability within species and focused almost exclusively on the principle of migration. Moreover, Wagner characterized the processes of migration and adaptation as necessary by claiming that species that did not migrate would sooner or

³ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 5.

⁴ F. Ratzel, *Politische Geographie*, third edition, Munich, 1923, 4.

⁵ H. Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, London, 1864.

⁶ E. Haeckel, *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, Berlin, 1868; F. Ratzel, *Sein und Werden der organischen Welt. Eine populäre Schöpfungsgeschichte*, Jena, 1869.

⁷ C. Geulen, *Wahlverwandte. Rassendiskurs und Nationalismus im späten 19. Jahrhundert*, Hamburg, 2004, 78. Pertinent literature includes P.J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, Berkeley, 1989; P. Weingart, J. Kroll and K. Bayertz, *Rasse, Blut und Gene: Geschichte der Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in Deutschland*, Frankfurt am Main, 1988; J. Sandmann, *Der Bruch mit der humanitären Tradition: Die Biologisierung der Ethik bei Ernst Haeckel und anderen Darwinisten seiner Zeit*, Stuttgart, 1990; E.-M. Engels, *Darwins Popularität im Deutschland. Die Herausbildung der Biologie als Leitwissenschaft*, in: A. Barsch and P.M. Hejl (Eds.), *Menschenbilder. Zur Pluralisierung der Vorstellungen von der menschlichen Natur (1850–1914)*, Stuttgart, 2000, 91–145; S.J. Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Cambridge, 2002.

⁸ C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, London, 1871, volume 2, 388.

⁹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, volume 2, 389.

¹⁰ M. Wagner, *Die Darwin'sche Theorie und das Migrationsgesetz der Organismen*, Leipzig, 1868, 18–19.

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