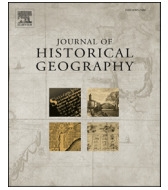




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'Retroactive effects': Ratzel's spatial dynamics and the expansionist imperative in interwar Germany

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ABSTRACT

This intervention examines the effects of spatial distribution on animal and human life forms as depicted in Ratzel's *Der Lebensraum*, and interrogates the reception of Ratzel's understanding of spatial dynamics in Germany between 1919 and 1939. Primary attention is given not to the often-studied reception of Ratzel by the German *Geopolitiker*, but to the impact of Ratzel's emphasis on large spaces in non-academic settings – Herman Sörgel's visions of Atlantropa, Colin Ross's aesthetic theorizing, Arthur Dix's colonialist nostalgia – and in particular to the relationship between Lebensraum and the rise of popular, pseudo-scientific demographic alarmism. The imprecise and often allusive nature of Ratzel's depiction of the relationship between large spaces and biological well-being, it is argued, endowed his ideas with utility across the interwar German political spectrum.

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At the risk of only minimal overstatement, the standing of Friedrich Ratzel's *Der Lebensraum* might be summarized in this formula: everyone knows the word, no one knows the work. Even a cursory review of writings which engage Friedrich Ratzel over the last century suggests that Tul'si Bhambray's fine translation of *Der Lebensraum*, which now renders the essay accessible to a much larger audience, will make an important contribution to scholarly appreciation of Ratzel's legacy. For it is a curious fact that the work, as opposed to the word, has been and remains conspicuously absent from talk about Ratzel. I do not refer here to professional scholarship on the history of the geographic discipline, where the essay itself is referenced with reasonable frequency, but to works which seek to incorporate Ratzelian perspectives or to integrate a discussion of his legacy into other fields. Although they mentioned many of Ratzel's writings, for example, neither Martha Krug Genthe nor Ellen Churchill Semple mentioned the essay in tributes published on the occasion of Ratzel's death in 1904.¹ The same goes for the 1933 *Brockhaus* encyclopedia, which in a lengthy discussion of Ratzel neither alludes to the essay nor includes it among his publications, an omission which is particularly surprising in light of the

term's currency in that fateful year.² The work is not referenced among many addressed in the extended consideration of Ratzel to be found in Stephen Kern's influential *The Culture of Time and Space*, from the 1980s.³ It does not appear among the dozen or so of Ratzel's publications treated in Rainer Sprengel's insightful *Kritik der Geopolitik* in the 1990s.⁴ Wolfgang Natter, in an extended and perceptive account of Ratzel's transition from zoologist to geographer from the early 2000s, also makes no mention of this essay.⁵ And the list could be easily extended. Ratzel's coinage – so common today that it may be found in American dictionaries – has, like so many of Freud's and Darwin's formulations, entered general usage divorced from the context in which it originated.

This commentary intends to engage Ratzel's essay in two ways. First, it will look briefly at some of the specific claims made in the essay about what space does, examining the effect that space conceived as an active force has on its biological occupants, both human and non-human. Second, it will examine some of the ways in which Ratzel's ideas about the impact of the 'living space' – a

³ S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918*, Cambridge MA, 1983, 224–226.

⁴ R. Sprengel, *Kritik der Geopolitik. Ein deutscher Diskurs 1914–1944*, Berlin, 1996.

⁵ W. Natter, Friedrich Ratzel's spatial turn: identities of disciplinary space and its borders between the anthropo- and political geography of Germany and the United States, in: H. van Houtum, O. Gramsch and W. Zierhofer (Eds), *B/ordering Space*, London, 2005, 171–188.

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¹ M.K. Genthe and E.C. Semple, Tributes to Friedrich Ratzel, *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 36 (1904) 550–553.

² Ratzel, Friedrich, *Der Grosse Brockhaus. Handbuch des Wissens*, Leipzig, 1933, volume 15, 404.

term which in use acquired a double meaning, as both the space in which beings live and a space that is, itself, also living – may have influenced and amplified an interwar German rhetoric of spatial expansion, not all on the far right, by any means, nor all directed to eastern Europe or Eurasia. Nor, it is worth noting, was this rhetoric by any means associated exclusively with the notorious interwar school of German *Geopolitik*, but also characterised an emerging and aggressive nationalist political agenda focused on space as a component of biopolitical, or what might perhaps be better described as ‘demopolitical’, action.

Ratzel's entire essay may of course be taken as an extended meditation on spatial dynamics, but three subsections at the heart of the work – the consecutive passages subtitled ‘Density of Life’, ‘Retroactive Effects’ and the ‘Struggle for Space’ – contain his most explicit and direct explorations of what space supposedly does. Here he defines the term *Lebensraum* – ‘the space which (every species) occupies on the earth and on whose size and shape its viability depends in part’.⁶ He asserts that space changes patterns of procreation, so that ‘privation of space ... [w]here animals live in colonies, tightly crowded like humans in city houses, leads to a decline in both quality and quantity of offspring.’⁷ He uses the term ‘overpopulation’ in describing the consequences of this ‘privation of space’, and asserts that this ‘narrowing down of living spaces’, among humans, ‘leads to social disintegration, economic decline and the effects of poverty and hunger’.⁸ This dynamic, in its turn, produces a second impact of space upon its inhabitants: space catalyzes struggle as it diminishes. As he puts it, ‘before inhabitants submit to this narrowing down, each one will try to extend its territory at the cost of its neighbors’.⁹

Ratzel here takes his place as the legitimate heir of Marx and Darwin, who also claimed to have located, in their respective spheres, the motor of transformation. The former found it in class struggle, the latter in resource scarcity, and Ratzel in space. The competition for space is the real battle in the eternal historical *Völkerrkampf*. Like Boas, Ratzel sees spatial distribution as a determining factor in cultural advancement, but he goes even further to find in space the locus of origin for such genetic qualities as the characteristic physical statures of peoples like the Laplanders. And, in Ratzel's final analysis, spatial possession is an existential matter. Loss of space, he declares, plays ‘the main role’ in the disappearance of life forms.¹⁰

Elements of the relationship between humanity and an active spatial setting conceived in this way may be found in Germany long before Ratzel. Kant's famous lectures on physical geography explored similar themes in 1765. However, Ratzel's scheme of cause and effect here reverses the Enlightenment's emphasis on human cultural agency in ways that would later encourage a sense of desperate urgency regarding spatial acquisition.¹¹ And, obviously, Ratzel's theorizing on the topic attained a resonance that surpassed anything prior to his essay, for many reasons, including its congruence with the Kaiserreich's ubiquitous Darwinian obsessions and, most importantly, its appearance on the eve of the Great War. These passages on space's ‘retroactive effects’ also illuminate three components of Ratzel's essay that facilitated its broad utility

for what would turn out to be a surprisingly diverse range of ambitious interwar thinkers.

First, there are the things he doesn't, or possibly can't, say about how space works. The positive depictions of spatial dynamics in *Der Lebensraum* often seem so qualified and circumspect that they leave the reader, finally, with a sense of frustration in regard to the specifics. For example, Ratzel declares that contracted space induces a decline in procreation. But how, exactly, does ‘space’ do this? One or two anecdotal examples are adduced as empirical evidence for such assertions but, in the human case, it is not difficult to find cases where high population density and high fertility rates coexist. He remarks effect and correlation, but there is a silence about how space as a material force produces this, or any other, effect. He is clearly taking pains to avoid a rank spatial determinism, and he is here perhaps slightly more conditional than had been the case in some of his earlier works. ‘National decay is in every instance’, he had written in 1898, ‘the result of a deteriorated conception of space’.¹² This contrasts with the cautious ‘in part’ tacked on to the end of his definition of *Lebensraum* cited above. But his insistence here that space determines the fate of life forms (including, for instance, the upright walk of human beings), coupled with his reticence on how the supposed laws of space operate, endowed the spatial rhetoric that Ratzel helped to popularize with a congenial adaptability that enhanced its utility in a variety of political and cultural settings for a postwar Germany conceived by many as spatially truncated. A discourse of spatial awareness adopted by architects, filmmakers and novelists, emphasizing the vaguely understood but widely acknowledged transformative powers of space, would complement the acquisitive spatial fantasies of politicians as part of Ratzel's legacy in the postwar era.¹³

Second, Ratzel in *Der Lebensraum* prepared the way for a kind of spatial mysticism through his repeated suggestions that we have in fact only begun to unveil the true power of space, and that there remain unrecognized consequences of spatial setting whose effects, while momentous, are not yet perceptible. He discusses the mysterious retreat and resurgence of the zebra mussel and the European vole, and concludes that these apparently inexplicable cases ‘suggest hidden causes for the ebb and flow in the movement of living organisms, which must not be taken lightly just because they still are few and far between’.¹⁴ He writes later in the same vein when discussing the inexplicable or apparently arbitrary limits to the range of certain species: ‘It is certainly possible that these simple spatial effects, which are rather easy to understand, conceal other effects – ones that are still entirely unclear to us because space interacts with life processes that we are not yet able to grasp’. As he concludes, ‘the true cause of this effect of space’ is not yet perceptible.¹⁵ Here he adumbrates what became in the interwar setting an almost gnostic inclination to attribute to space itself capabilities and effects which could not be explained in rational cause-and-effect terms.

Finally, Ratzel's emphasis on space's vastness would find echoes across the interwar German political spectrum. ‘Large territories’, he notes, ‘always offer a great choice of living spaces’. This is particularly significant, he argues, for the ‘advanced’ peoples: ‘A small Indian tribe in the South American virgin forest has needs and

⁶ F. Ratzel, *Lebensraum: a biogeographical study*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018) 13 (all references are to the Bhambray translation).

⁷ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 15.

⁸ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 16.

⁹ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 14.

¹⁰ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 16.

¹¹ See Kant's notes on physical geography and on racial differentiation in *Nachricht von der Einrichtung seiner Vorlesungen in dem Winterhalbjahre von 1765–1766*, in: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Ed.), *Kants Werke. Akademie-Textausgabe*, Berlin, 1968, volume II, 312–313 and 427–443.

¹² F. Ratzel, *Studies in political areas. II. Intellectual, political, and economic effects of large areas*, translated by E.C. Semple, *American Journal of Sociology* 3 (1898) 451.

¹³ See for example Thomas Mann's introductory description of the impact of space on Hans Castorp, the protagonist of *Der Zauberberg*, Stockholm, 1943, volume I, 4, or Hans Grimm's well-known bestselling colonialist novel, *Volk ohne Raum*.

¹⁴ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 10.

¹⁵ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 13–14.

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