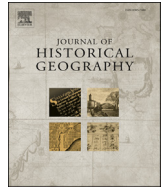




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhgFriedrich Ratzel, *Lebensraum* and the death motif

Ian Klinke

School of Geography and Environment, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3QY, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 November 2017

Received in revised form

24 April 2018

Accepted 18 May 2018

ABSTRACT

This intervention explores 'death' as an interpretive key both to Friedrich Ratzel's *Lebensraum* essay and his oeuvre more generally. Ratzel, I argue, was preoccupied with death in a number of ways, including a biogeographical concern with extinction, an ethnological interest in cannibalism and a fascination with the ruins of exterminated civilisations. Indeed, Ratzel grappled with the aesthetics of death itself in the later stages of his life. An appreciation of Ratzel as a thanatological thinker, I argue, opens the door to a recognition of his place not just at the inception of modern geopolitics but as an early thinker of biopolitics too.

Crown Copyright © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Whether it is in examinations of global biosecurity, the global war on terror or of more-than-human connectivities, the politics of life and earth continues to preoccupy early twenty-first-century geographers. Whereas geo- and biopolitics are frequently said to be intimately intertwined forms of power, they are in fact often approached as analytically dissimilar phenomena.¹ Whilst geopolitics is predominantly understood as a discourse on international statecraft, biopolitics is read as a governmental practice of domestic politics. And yet, there are perhaps few places in which the entanglement of geo- and biopolitics is as unambiguous as in Friedrich Ratzel's 1901 *Lebensraum* essay. Indeed, even the most cursory reader of his essay will note the degree to which biology, geology and politics are inextricably interlinked. It is thus perhaps no surprise that both terms – geopolitics and biopolitics – were popularised by one of Ratzel's keenest followers, the Swede Rudolf Kjellén.²

This commentary on the *Lebensraum* essay offers an examination of Ratzel not as a geopolitical thinker – this, after all, is a well-trodden path – but as a political theorist of life and death. I want to foreground in particular the question of death, which has of course played a crucial role within the most widely known conceptual articulations of biopolitics. As social theorists like Giorgio Agamben

and Michel Foucault have argued, we can find within the seemingly protective practice of biopolitics, the concern for the health and growth of populations, a much less benign policy of excluding forms of life that are deemed dangerous and unworthy.³ If we want to explore Ratzel and his *Lebensraum* concept as crucial to the history of modern biopolitics we have to address the question as to whether we can find in Ratzel the seeds of thanatopolitics.

As I will show in what follows, this question must be answered in the affirmative. Indeed, the dead frequently perform crucial roles in Ratzel's writing, ranging from the ways in which fossils and skeletons are invoked as archaeological evidence to his more obscure speculations about 'bloated animal corpses' that he believed inspired humans to build inflatable boats.⁴ Indeed, Ratzel's social Darwinian preoccupation with the logic of survival necessarily means that he is always also writing about survival's opposites – disappearance and extinction. Whereas much of Ratzel's writing examines extinction in the animal and plant world, he was also mesmerised by the ruins of fallen civilisations. Indeed, in the final stages of his own life he became interested in the aesthetics of death itself. The death motif has crucial implications for the history of biopolitics, within which Ratzel, or so I argue, deserves a more prominent position. Given the notable absence of biological racism from his work, his political geography has long been seen as being

E-mail address: ian.klinke@ouce.ox.ac.uk.

¹ M. Dillon and L.E. Lobo-Guerrero, Biopolitics of security in the 21st century: an introduction, *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008) 265–292; S. Elden, Secure the volume: vertical geopolitics and the depth of power, *Political Geography* 34 (2013) 35–51; P. Giaccaria and C. Minca, Life in space, space in life: Nazi topographies, geographical imaginations, and *Lebensraum*, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 22 (2016) 151–171.

² R. Kjellén, *Grundriss zum einem System der Politik*, Leipzig, 1920, 94.

³ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, 1998; M. Foucault, 'Society Must Be Defended': *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*, New York, 2003. See also the further elaboration of these ideas in R. Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, 2008.

⁴ F. Ratzel, *Die Erde in vierundzwanzig gemeinverständlichen Vorträgen über Allgemeine Erdkunde*, Stuttgart, 1881, 383, all translations are the author's.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2018.05.007>

0305-7488/Crown Copyright © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

at odds with Nazi biopolitics.⁵ And yet, Ratzel's preoccupation with extinction and his later aestheticisation of death (thanatophilia) in many ways prefigured the twentieth century's most thanatopolitical regimes.

Extinction and extermination

Perhaps the most crucial way in which Ratzel's concern with the finitude of life appeared in his academic work is in the concept of extinction, which he developed both in his biogeography and his human geography. As with many of his other concepts, Ratzel was keen to disassociate these ideas from those of other evolutionary theorists (including Darwin himself) by giving them a fundamentally spatial twist. Ratzel's spatial logic of extinction crystallised perhaps most unambiguously in his *Lebensraum* essay, where he argued that '[c]learly, the limitation of living space on earth demands that an old species vacate the space that a new one needs to develop'. 'In this sense', he continued, 'new creation and progress presuppose retreat and demise. It is the same as with the death and birth of individuals'.⁶ Thus, the very idea of survival, so crucial to Darwin's followers, always already assumed the possibility of not surviving. Nations, much like species of primroses or caterpillars, were bound to disappear if they failed to assimilate to their environment.

Ratzel thus distinguished conceptually between flexible and inflexible organisms but not categorically between the extinction of humans and non-humans. We get a sense of this lack of a distinction in the discussion of another of his key concerns, the relations between the earth and the spatial boundary:

In all realms of life, life's grip on the soil becomes weaker in the border regions. Speedy reduction and early extinction are the fate of plants, animals and peoples that live near the borders of the oecumene. ... The invasion of the French in Canada and Nova Scotia, and the English in Virginia, initiated the retreat of the North-American Indians at the easternmost edge of their area of distribution, progressing slowly across the entire continent, like an organ or carrier of all influences that were ruinous to that little people (*Völkchen*). The retreat of the bison, the elk, the Canadian moose and other animals happened in a similar manner.⁷

There is an interesting slippage in Ratzel's essay between the logic of extinction and that of extermination. At one point he speaks of the 'dying out or extermination of large animals on islands'.⁸ Unlike the term *Aussterben* (extinction), *Vernichtung* (extermination, annihilation or total destruction) crucially assumes agency. Whereas extinction takes a passive construction, extermination is an active process. Ratzel described the colonisation of the Americas by European settlers as a 'struggle for extermination' (*Vernichtungskampf*). The losers, he held, were the indigenous Americans who had 'but a weak grip on the soil'.⁹ There is little room in Ratzel's intellectual universe for pity for those who become extinct, for as one species or tribe disappears its soil is 'immediately occupied by another, as if that other had already been waiting for an

expansion of its living space'.¹⁰ He thus assumed that time (both geological and historical) operated as a cycle, rather than as progress or decline.

Whilst Ratzel was willing to accept that agriculture, forestry and hunting had led to the extinction of certain animal species and individual human races, he did not contemplate the extinction of humanity. After all, he argued in the *Lebensraum* essay that the living spaces of the dinosaurs were simply shrunk by more adaptable mammal species.¹¹ Extinction and extermination, for him, were not so much an end product as a new beginning:

A complete *extermination* of all life across a wide area cannot, however, be accepted even in the case of the Ice Age. While no more than a few decades ago no one doubted that fire, water or ice had intermittently destroyed all life across vast regions, after which new life emerged out of the dead soil, today we reject this catastrophe even in the one case where something like this might seem possible.¹²

It is in his 1885 three-volume *Völkerkunde* (translated into English in 1896 as *History of Mankind*) that we get a clear sense of the understanding of time which underlies his concepts of extinction and extermination. Here he argued that 'all that we call progress of civilisation, may better be compared with the upward shoot of a plant than with the unconfined flight of a bird; we remain ever bound to the earth and the twig can only grow on the stem'. 'Human nature', Ratzel continued, can 'raise its head aloft in pure ether, but its feet must ever rest on the ground, and the dust must return to the dust'.¹³ It is in this work that the dead take centre stage, as Ratzel wrote at great length about burial rituals amongst what he referred to as 'natural' or 'uncivilised races'. He was obsessed by sinister themes such as human sacrifice, head-hunting, infanticide and cannibalism, and described these gruesome practices – for many of which the empirical evidence is sparse – with the thoroughness of a pathologist conducting an autopsy. The following describes death rites in Fiji and New Guinea:

Burial within the hut is customary in Fiji. Amongst the Motus of Port Moresby the only sign of mourning is the incessant beating of drums for three days. When this is over, the grave is dug in front of the house, the dead body laid in a mat, and a little hut is built over the grave. After some time, the grave is opened, the corpse taken out and smeared on the elbows and knees with red ochre, while the widow smears herself with the decaying flesh. Then the dead man is put by again, and the little sepulchral house is gradually pulled to pieces, so that no trace of the grave is left.¹⁴

Ratzel explains similar rituals on the Gilbert Islands, where the widow slept under the same mat with the corpse of her husband 'until the head falls off the body', after which the skull was cleansed and the widow carried it with her for the rest of her life. Yet a few pages later he casually discusses the way in which infanticide in Australia was committed by 'thrusting a stick through the ears and into the skull' of the infant.¹⁵

Ratzel's observations of these grisly scenes are continuously presented in a puzzlingly descriptive manner, often without drawing any wider conclusions. And yet, the endless visual depiction of burial sites, coffins, human skulls and mummies in his book

⁵ M. Bassin, *Race contra space: the conflict between German geopolitik and National Socialism*, *Political Geography* 6 (1987) 115–134; D.T. Murphy, *Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918–1933*, London, 1997, 8.

⁶ F. Ratzel, *Lebensraum: A biogeographical study*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018) 16.

⁷ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 17–18.

⁸ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 14.

⁹ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 15.

¹⁰ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 16.

¹¹ Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 17.

¹² Ratzel, *Lebensraum*, 4.

¹³ F. Ratzel, *The History of Mankind*, London, 1896 [original 1885], Volume 1, 3.

¹⁴ Ratzel, *The History of Mankind*, Volume 1, 328.

¹⁵ Ratzel, *The History of Mankind*, Volume 1, 329 and 365.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/9953193>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/9953193>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)