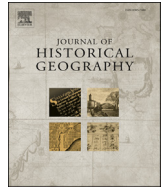




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Ratzel's stone guest: The art of politics in the work of Friedrich Ratzel

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I demonstrate that Friedrich Ratzel's *Lebensraum* essay can itself be read as a biopolitical text because it contains something more than a pure description of the Darwinian struggle for life, namely an imperative. I therefore interrogate Ratzel's ideas in the light of Michel Foucault's theory of biopower. In order to unveil the deeply biopolitical character of Ratzel's *Lebensraum* idea, I point first to Ratzel's specific notion of culture, which he shares with the cultural studies approach (*Kulturwissenschaften*) developed by the Leipzig circle. Secondly, I detect the main 'stone guest' in this text – Ratzel's idea of politics and the 'art of state politics' (*Staatskunst*), by folding 'politics' into German cultural imperialism. Finally, by interrogating Ratzel's notion of science, I show his construction of geography as 'power-knowledge' in ways designed to reveal to politicians the keys for an understanding of human and political life.

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The strict connection between the improvement of geographical discoveries and the enlargement of the political dimension creates a direct relation between the history of geography and political history.¹

Friedrich Ratzel's *Lebensraum* concept is one of the few 'academic' ideas that, according to a wide literature, inspired and was used to legitimate the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, despite the Nazi's scepticism of intellectuals.² The idea of *Lebensraum* became well known only long after Ratzel's death, and its fame is due to its impact on political praxis rather than in scientific debates. In fact, Ratzel's theories did not belong to the mainstream geographical sciences at

all. They were disparaged by academic geographers during his lifetime, and it was only from the First World War onwards, particularly with the diffusion of Rudolf Kjellen's works, and of his idea of Geopolitik, that they began to attract broader interest.³ Recent literature on the *Lebensraum* idea after the Second World War has introduced new perspectives on its history, dealing both with the analysis of Ratzel's essay and its political impact, although the demarcation between these levels of investigation sometimes seems to blur. For this reason, the interpretation of Ratzel's intentions, the use of his work by Adolf Hitler, Karl Haushofer and other political agents, and, finally, the practical operationalisation of the concept, all seem to be difficult to untangle.⁴

In this contribution I will not follow Christian Abrahamsson or Claudio Minca and Trevor Barnes in demonstrating the effects of Ratzel's *Lebensraum* essay on politics and biopolitics in the twentieth century.⁵ Instead, my argument is that the essay can itself be read as a biopolitical text. I will therefore interrogate Ratzel's ideas in the light of one of the main contemporary definitions of biopolitics: Michel Foucault's theory of biopower as a 'toolkit'.⁶ I will

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¹ F. Ratzel, *Politische Geographie oder die Geographie der Staaten, des Verkehrs und des Krieges*, Munich, 1903, 226.

² See, for example, W.D. Smith, Friedrich Ratzel and the origins of *Lebensraum*, *German Studies Review* 3 (1980) 51–68; W.D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism*, New York, 1986; M. Rössler, *Wissenschaft und Lebensraum: Geographische Ostforschung im Nationalsozialismus*, Hamburg, 1990; C. Abrahamsson, On the genealogy of *Lebensraum*, *Geographia Helvetica* 68 (2013) 37–44; M. Halas, Searching for the perfect footnote: Friedrich Ratzel and the others at the roots of *Lebensraum*, *Geopolitics* 19 (2014) 1–18.

³ H.D. Schultz, 'Wachstumswille ist Naturgebot!' Der Beitrag der Schulgeographie zum Versagen der Staatsbürgerkunde in der Weimarer Republik, in: R. Dithmar (Ed.), *Schule und Unterricht in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik*, Neuwied, 1993, 21–41; H.D. Schultz, Mit oder gegen Geschichte? Die Tücken des geographischen Paradigmas beim Kampf des Faches um die Oberstufe der höheren Schule Preußens vor dem ersten Weltkrieg, in: U. Wardenga and I. Hönsch (Eds), *Kontinuität und Diskontinuität: der deutschen Geographie in Umbruchphasen*, Münster, 2005, 29–50.

⁴ Abrahamsson, On the genealogy of *Lebensraum*, and T.J. Barnes and C. Minca, Nazi spatial theory: the dark geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103 (2012) 669–687.

⁵ Barnes and Minca, Nazi spatial theory.

⁶ M. Foucault, Power and strategies, in: C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York, 1980, 134–145. See also J.W. Crampton and S. Elden (Eds), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, Aldershot, 1988.

locate the Lebensraum essay within the context of the development of the practice of biopolitical power which, according to Foucault, took place in modern politics from the nineteenth century onwards. In particular, three main 'tools' or definitions deployed by Foucault will be relevant for the following analysis: biopower as the exercise of 'a power that has taken control of life in general, with the body as one pole and the population as the other'; the consideration that 'the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy'; and, finally, the fact that 'the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power'.⁷ These three main features of biopower – the care of population, the biologization of politics and culture, and the power/knowledge nexus – will be retraced in Ratzel's essay, which will be read against the background of his whole work. Attention will be focused on the opposition between individual and population, between culture and nature, and between politics and science, all in order to reveal Ratzel's strategy of incorporating the individual into a population, culture into nature, and politics into science.

It is important at the outset to stress two specific assumptions concerning the interpretation of Ratzel's conception of Lebensraum that will be developed here. I argue that a Darwinian interpretation of human society which reads human processes as a result of the struggle for life – and which can therefore lead to naturalistic reductionism – is not biopolitical in itself. Only a discourse or practice that includes or implies something more than a description – that is, a reference to the being (*Sein*) – and offers an overt or hidden prescription (the *Sollen*), can be defined as biopolitical. From this standpoint, Ratzel's Lebensraum essay can be seen as biopolitical because it contains more than a pure description of the Darwinian struggle for life through space. Secondly, some of the biopolitical elements of the Lebensraum essay are not immediately evident and must be detected through an analysis of the essay's context and of Ratzel's other writings and lectures. Like the stone guest in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, even if these biopolitical elements are not explained and developed in the essay, they constitute the preconditions for Ratzel's idea of Lebensraum. Their imperative force emerges precisely out of this hidden quality. Because they are not scientifically discussed, they are taken for granted, indeed presupposed. These 'stone guests' make the text strategic for promoting a certain vision of politics, in which political space corresponds to the 'natural order' and political action is the expression of 'natural imperatives'.

In order to unveil the deep biopolitical character of Ratzel's Lebensraum idea, I point first to his specific notion of culture, explaining at the same time the main contradictions in the Lebensraum essay. Secondly, I detect the main 'stone guest' in this text, Ratzel's idea of politics and the 'art of statecraft' (*Staatskunst*), which I will analyse in the context of German cultural imperialism. Ratzel's political perspective can be deduced only after the reconstruction of the specific cluster of meanings that he implicitly refers to when he relates culture to nature, politics and science. In the third part, I sum up my arguments about the intrinsically biopolitical character of the Lebensraum essay.

Ratzel's contradiction: expansion or rootedness?

The Lebensraum essay, like all of Ratzel's major works, is marked by a fundamental contradiction between a static and a dynamic idea of human societies and their development. In the

⁷ See M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, New York, 1976, 253; M. Foucault *Security, Territory, Population*, London, 2007, 1 and Gordon (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge*, 52.

1901 text, for example, Ratzel maintains that 'life is movement, that always returns to a given form', and that 'Every increase in the organic mass, every growth, every reproduction signifies spatial movement; and every movement is a mastering of space'. Yet, at the same time he defines the oecumene as 'the space which [a species] occupies on the earth and on whose size and shape its viability depends in part', and affirms that 'each living thing is bound to its space and connected to its space'.⁸

This contradiction between a static and a dynamic idea of life, together with Ratzel's way of solving it, can offer some key elements that are useful for interpreting Ratzel's conception of nature and his specific idea of culture. The juxtaposition between a static and a dynamic concept of life originates from the tension between his willingness to follow the methods and philosophy of classical human geography as opposed to Ferdinand von Richthofen's naturalistic approach, and also his acknowledgement of the validity of the new Darwinist doctrine.⁹ The ambivalence between a statement of the strict relationship between a people and its soil on the one hand, and the consideration of shifting political boundaries that are defined by wars, conquests and arbitrary political decisions on the other, is not only a problem in Ratzel's theory. It was a fundamental tension lying, as Hans-Dietrich Schultz maintains, at the very genesis of geographical science.¹⁰ Classical geography, and in particular the work of Carl Ritter, solved this problem by referring to Johan Gottfried von Herder's conception, according to which each people or nation lives in their natural boundaries, one next to the other. Once the stability between peoples and soil was reached, and every people occupied its own geographical region, this balance and order had to be preserved.¹¹ In this view, every violation of the equilibrium between peoples represented a temporary violation of a natural order that, sooner or later, would be restored. In classical geography, the plea for a politics of balance mirrored the European system of state power from the eighteenth century onwards, and served to transform the equilibrium between great and small powers into a natural normative ideal.

In the decades that separated Ritter and Ratzel, however, the world had changed. The processes of colonisation had accelerated – even if Germany was left out of the imperial scramble – and mass movements such as nationalism and socialism had emerged and begun to change the nature of political representation. The success of Darwinism and Lamarckism, moreover, altered the interpretation of human history, and technological developments had begun to create the conditions for a globalized world. Ratzel's theory registers these new facts and translates the dynamics of political and social life into a complex synthetic theory based on two assumptions: the historical acceleration of the struggle for space in modern times; and the 'hierarchization' of social and political spaces via the classification of peoples

⁸ F. Ratzel, Lebensraum: a biogeographical study, *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018) 5. See also F. Ratzel, Gesetz des räumlichen Wachstums der Staaten, *Petermanns Mitteilungen* 5 (1896) 34, 97–107.

⁹ For an analysis of the conflict between Ratzel, who aimed at continuing the classical ideal of human geography, and Richthofen, as the most influential promoter of the relation between geography and natural sciences, see F. Farinelli, Friedrich Ratzel and the nature of political geography, *Political Geography* 19 (2000) 943–955.

¹⁰ H.D. Schultz, Zwischen fördernder Natur und freiem Willen: das Politische an der klassischen Deutschen Geographie, *Erdkunde* 59 (2005) 1–21.

¹¹ See for instance Ritter's model of history in *Die Erdkunde im Verhältnis zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen oder allgemeine vergleichende Geographie*, volume I, part 1, Berlin, 1822, 6, wherein natural development leads to the conformity of each people with a land and a state (*Volk, Land and Staat*).

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