Ratzel's biogeography: a more-than-human encounter

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A B S T R A C T

Understanding the social and political in relation to fabrications of earth/life has been one of geography's most enduring concerns. Friedrich Ratzel's Lebensraum essay, subtitled 'a biogeographical study', is an early exposition of how relations between the bio and the geo are politically molten. Yet his oeuvre, whilst of interest to political geographers, has been overlooked in the recent proliferation of work on the earth/life nexus in more-than-human geography. To this end, this commentary asks what it might mean to read Ratzel's essay in light of attempts to articulate and specify the cartographies of life. Three key themes are highlighted that resonate with contemporary more-than-human approaches: the spatial ontologies of animal life, animals' mobilities and cartographies of the living world. More specifically, this commentary expands upon Ratzel's notion of the oecumene and argues that it offers up critical purchase for diagramming animals' ontologies in ways sensitive to geographical concerns with nonhuman difference, lifeworlds and movement. A brief conclusion identifies avenues for future research and engagement.

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Relations between the bio (life) and the geo (earth) have been amongst geography's most enduring concerns. Their durability, Sarah Whatmore has remarked, 'bears the hallmark of geography's history which, like that of archaeology and anthropology, took shape before the now entrenched division between the social and natural sciences took hold'.1 It was precisely at such a juncture that Friedrich Ratzel's Lebensraum essay was written, a text that sets up a current that has continued in modern geography's impetus to understand the social and political with and through fabrications of earth/life.2 The discipline's productive wrestling with the spatialities, economics and governance of the living and material world, found in the persistence of such themes as landscape, ecology and animal life, stand testimony to this endeavour of examining the bio and the geo in conjunction.

This essay examines one feature of this current: posthumanism, or what have come to be called 'more-than-human' and 'hybrid' geographies, ones that complicate the ontological purity of humanism to honour messy histories and geographies forged by a retinue of other bodies, forces and technologies.3 The gravitational force of this recent work has now exerted a significant pull on human geography, particularly by questioning routinized ontological beliefs in the discipline. More-than-human geographies in the last two decades have sought to rework topologies of the living and material world, diffusing the 'feverish borders' of the social/material and cultural/natural, or, for that matter, animal/machine and flesh/information.4 An attention to spaces of embodiment, motion and relation in ways that do not silence, overlay or tidy up the recalcitrant workings of nonhuman life is an impetus shared with non-representational theory and, more recently, strands of neovitalism.5

Whilst 'life' has predominantly been the domain of biogeography – the branch of geography concerned with documenting and understanding spatial patterns of biodiversity, and of which Ratzel was an early proponent – more-than-human geography has sought to engage with questions about the social, political and economic


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ordering of life through its commitment to understanding entan-
glements between the bio and the geo. Almost two decades ago, Tom Spencer and Sarah Whatmore commented that human and biogeographers ought to talk to one another in creative ways, calling for a biogeography ‘attuned to the circumstances and anx-
ieties of today’s world’. The ‘new cartographies of life’ they were indexing were those where the bio permeate[s] the boundary that has been taken to mark off “human society” from the rest of the “natural world” … .’

Since then a number of attempts to foster creative conversations have emerged, including cultural biogeographies assaying how species distributions are as much the product of histories of colo-
nialism and settlement as they are of ecology; ‘lively bio-
geographies’ that seek to incorporate nonhuman difference, agency and vitality into the dynamics and distribution of life articulated by the biogeographical sciences, and ‘assemblage biogeographies’ that show how organisms’ dispersal and speciation are induced through their traffic in international trade. Others track geomaterealister histories of landscapes foregrounding animal lifeworlds and the burdens of postcolonial subalterns. The relational modes of earth/ life writing, or ‘bio-geo-graphies’, that emerge point to a politics articulated in conjunction with a retinue of nonhuman bodies, technocologies and human interactions interfacing with Earth’s surface. Responses from biogeographers have been sympathetic, but lukewarm, although the field has internally grappled with questions of human influence on the dynamics and distribution of life, which is wit-
nessing a revival with the demarcation of the so-called Anthropocene.

If more-than-human geography’s persistent reworking of the earth/life nexus has resulted in some of the most vibrant current geographical scholarship, what might it mean to read the forgotten work of Friedrich Ratzel, writing at a time when divisions between the bio and the geo were not firmly settled? And what might such a reading offer for accounts of life and the world which refuse to bracket off the human from rest of the nature? It is these questions that this commentary seeks to address. Firstly, the paper seeks to understand Ratzel’s exegesis of the earth/life nexus through the more immediate concerns of more-than-human and contemporary biogeography. Secondly, the paper examines what conceptual purchase, if any, might be drawn from such a reading. Ratzel is seldom considered a canonical figure in biogeography, and neither was he in dialogue with the historical materialist tradition that had emerged in the nineteenth century, and which was to have sig-
nificant bearings on later geographically writing on landscape. His renderings of the earth/life nexus and how it is politically molten are fraught with colonial overtones and a disastrous twentieth-
century reception. Yet, histories of geography matter, and the geographies we think geographies with matter even more. Reading the Lebensraum essay thus enables us to pick over the political histories of biogeography and to think carefully about how relations between earth/life emerged as a geographical concern. Accordingly, the next section locates Ratzel, and the Lebensraum essay, within the wider field of biogeography and outlines his understandings of space. Whilst there is much work on his importance within political geography, biogeographical readings of Ratzel remain rare. The following three sections then address key themes in Ratzel’s essay that resonate with contemporary more-than-human geography and its reworking of the bio and the geo. These are the spatial on-
tologies of animal life, animals’ mobilities and cartographies of the living world. I highlight key points in a brief conclusion and identify avenues for future research and engagement.

The bio and the geo: earthbound

Ratzel’s Lebensraum essay, although more widely discussed in political geography, is subtitled ‘a biogeographical study’. Concerned with how organisms are distributed over the surface and history of the earth, the term ‘biogeography’ came into use towards the end of the nineteenth century. Some attribute the German coinage of the term biogeographie to Ratzel, purportedly in a letter to Hugo Eisig in 1888, but it was used by others before that, being coined independently in German and English in 1883 and 1892 respectively. Ratzel’s key intervention was that he wanted to unify the plant and animal geographies of his time in the form of a general or an Allgemeine Biogeographie. ‘It is the duty of geography’, he wrote, ‘to go ahead and summarize and create a biogeography that shares a single common principle, to study the distribution of life on Earth’. Such an endeavour required geographical synthesis, for Ratzel saw biogeography as a geographical science. As he argued, once a zoologist asks ‘where do these animals live?’ and ‘what climatic factors and soils influence their distribution?’ the science becomes geographical.

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7 T. Spencer and S. Whatmore, Bio-geographies: putting life back into the disci-

11 On discussions of the biogeography canon, see M.C. Ebach, Origins of Biogeog-

raphy: The Role of Biological Classification in Early Plant and Animal Geography, Dordrecht, 2015. On Ratzel and historical materialism see J. Verne, The neglected ‘gift’ of Ratzel for/from the Indian Ocean: thoughts on mobilities, materialities and relational space, Geographica Helvetica 71 (2017) 895–92. Verne makes the argument that Ratzel developed his own form of cultural historicism which moved away from culture as evolutionary passage to one of historical connection. For landscape, see D.E. Cosgrove, Towards a radical cultural geography: problems of theory, Antipode 15 (1983) 1–11. The webbed genealogies of the earth/life theme and its persistence in different currents of geographical thought, although beyond the scope of this paper, are certainly a subject for future scrutiny. Two brief points illustrate this. Firstly, Ratzel’s writings influenced early twentieth-century Marxists such as Plekhanov and Kautsky who sought to factor the environment into historical material-

14 Brown and Lomolino, Biogeography.