

**“HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEOGRAPHY III: THE HAUNTED, THE
REVILED, AND THE PLURAL”**

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History and philosophy of geography III: the haunted, the reviled, and the plural

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Abstract

This report takes a new English-language translation of Friedrich Ratzel's infamous essay *Der Lebensraum* (1901) as a prompt to consider the ethical questions that are raised by revisiting geography's dangerous ideas and discredited practitioners.

Attending to a series of recent interventions that offer new readings of Ratzel and his essay, I consider how historiographical practice and moral obligation intersect in the process of making sense of, and coming to terms with, disciplinary pasts that haunt the present. The report concludes by considering the future of the series of which it form part and argues that the task of narrating progress in the history and philosophy of geography should be assumed by a more diverse range of authors than has heretofore been the case.

Keywords

ethics, Friedrich Ratzel, histories of geography, *lebensraum*, National Socialism,
Nazism, translation

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I Introduction: revisiting the haunted past

Perhaps more so than for any of the other subdisciplines whose progress is reported in this journal, work in the history and philosophy of geography tends to achieve coherence, and demonstrate identifiable trends, by happenstance rather than by design. Whilst many subdisciplines gain intellectual congruity through the scholarly infrastructure provided by dedicated journals and conferences, and the shared dialogues they provoke, the history and philosophy of geography is a rather more diffuse field—simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. One of the pleasurable challenges of appraising twelve-months' work in this area—work often years in the making—is recognising where the empirical and conceptual labour of individual scholars has cohered (beyond the accident of an arbitrary publication date) so as to suggest a collective attention to common themes and related issues.

The last year has, in this respect, seen clusters of work attentive, variously, to women's role in the professional practice of geography (see Ginsburger, 2017; Jöns, Monk and Keighren, 2017; Keighren, 2017; Monk 2017); to the development of critical geography in twentieth-century Brazil, particularly through the defining work of Milton Santos (see Ferretti, 2018; Ferretti and Pedrosa, 2018; Melgaço, 2017; Melgaço and Prouse, 2017); to the contributions of Clarence Glacken to the field of environmental history (Rajan 2017, forthcoming); and to the ongoing significance of biography as a

means of revealing, narrating, and challenging disciplinary histories (see Baigent and Novaes, 2018; Barnes, forthcoming; Cotoi, forthcoming; Craggs and Neate, forthcoming; Downs, 2017; Ferretti, 2019; Lois, 2018; Portuondo, 2018; Tammiksaar et al., 2018).

The retrospective orientation of work in the history of geography is often, however, to compel a return to particular objects of enquiry—to the reintegration and rereading of particular disciplinary moments, events, or figures. The task of the history of geography is often, then, to take the familiar—or the apparently familiar—and to cast it into a new light in the hope that it might reveal something novel and suggest productive lines for future enquiry. Occasionally, that retrospectivity is driven not simply by a desire to reappraise but by a nagging sense of disciplinary culpability—whether regret about the historical marginalisation of women and subaltern groups, for example, or guilt over the sometimes reprehensible ends to which geographical ideas have been put, or to which geographers have committed their labour (Ashutosh, 2018). Geography's disciplinary guilt over its associations with, and contributions to, the fatal politics of National Socialism in the second quarter of the twentieth century—a shame shared by anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, folklorists, and mathematicians, amongst many other scholarly communities (Dow and Lixfeld, 1994; Fazioli, 2012; Petropoulos, 2000; Segal, 2003; Schafft, 2004)—is a focus to which historians of geography have returned repeatedly in recent years (Michel, 2018). Alongside the close

attention paid to the complicity of individual geographers in the development and realisation of the Nazi project, the role of geographical ideas in providing a legitimising spatial logic to the Third Reich has, as my previous report described (Keighren, 2018), become a particularly significant object of attention. Nazism haunts the discipline in two ways: first, through its distorted assimilation of the language and reasoning of geography as a means of intellectual validation and, second, through its co-option of geographers in the pursuit of its criminal ends. Whilst historiographical attention to this period of the discipline's history cannot deliver absolution, what it can achieve, perhaps, is a fuller understanding of how geographical ideas are mobilised and how they can become imbued with particular forms of political power and currency.

Arguably the most potent of the geographical ideas employed in the service of Nazi ideology was that of *lebensraum*, particularly as it had been conceptualised by Friedrich Ratzel in his titular 1901 essay, *Der Lebensraum* (Lange, 1965; Ratzel, 1901). The subsequent notoriety of the term stands in contrast, however, with the comparative unfamiliarity (particularly among Anglophone scholars) of the essay in which it was propagated—a text that formed part of a somewhat niche *festschrift* for the German sociologist Albert Schäffle.¹ While other parts of Ratzel's oeuvre—particularly his *Anthropogeographie* (1882–91) and *Politische Geographie* (1897)—have been subject to recurrent scholarly attention, somewhat less consideration has been devoted to the content of his *lebensraum* essay specifically. This is not to suggest that *lebensraum*

itself is, in any sense, a neglected concept; a great deal of ink has been spilled in efforts to detail how it was employed to further the ends of the Third Reich and, ultimately, to provide a warped rationale for genocide (Danielsson, 2009; Giaccaria and Minca, 2016; Halas, 2014).

For historians of the discipline, a moral problem seems to presents itself in the question of how, most appropriately, to approach a text whose author is a “disgraced figure in the geographical canon” (Klinke and Bassin, 2018: 53) and whose intellectual legacy is, even in the most forgiving interpretation, toxic. Is it possible, in that respect, to examine the text in its own terms, and to say something new about it, without decoupling the essay from its “posthumous career” as “a scientific legitimisation of imperialist expansionism” (Klinke and Bassin, 2018: 53; Halas, 2014: 15)? Can we, then, reconsider *Der Lebensraum* without also rehabilitating it?

II Revisiting Ratzel: on the ethics of rereading *Der Lebensraum*

[E]veryone knows the word, no one knows the work. (Murphy, 2018: 86).

The historiographical and moral challenges associated with revisiting Ratzel’s *lebensraum* essay have been given a particular focus in a recent special section of the *Journal of Historical Geography*, “*Lebensraum* and its discontents”. Here, a series of

five interventions from geographers, historians, and political scientists respond to a new English-language translation of Ratzel's essay and, in so doing, seek both to contextualise the development of Ratzel's thought, and to advertise the relevance of his essay to "ongoing debates in geography and beyond" (Klinke and Bassin, 2018: 58) around issues of biopolitics, colonialism, geopolitics, and nature-society relations. In their introduction to the special section, Klinke and Bassin (2018: 54) argue for the value of reframing our understanding of Ratzel's essay—to see it, and him, as foregrounding modern biopolitics and as embodying "a 'more-than-human geography' that tries to bridge the divide between science and philosophy" (see, also, Barua, 2018 and Chintera-Stutte, 2018). While repositioning Ratzel as a more-than-human geographer is clearly terminologically anachronistic, it is arguably not an entirely presentist imposition; Ratzel's work, much like that of Alexander von Humboldt, was infused with, and predicated upon, monism—a belief in the fundamental unity of life and earth (Rupke, 2012).

Ratzel's perspective on the profoundly connected nature of the bio and the geo can be traced, in part, to the twin focus of his university studies during the 1860s: zoology and geology. This phase of Ratzel's education closely followed the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and its translation into German the following year. At the University of Jena, Ratzel studied under one of Darwin's principal champions in Germany, the biologist Ernst Haeckel (Gliboff, 2008; Richards,

2008). Haeckel—ten years Ratzel’s senior, and a major proponent of monism—was undoubtedly a formative influence on Ratzel: a gateway to Darwin’s theory and a significant stimulus in shaping Ratzel’s perspective on the unity of life and earth (Weir, 2014). Haeckel was also, however, a figure from whom Ratzel later sought to distance himself as he articulated his own distinct biographical philosophy (Bassin, 1987). For Kline and Bassin, the development of Ratzel’s philosophy is explained not simply by the debates and individuals that shaped and coloured his experience as a student, but by his first-hand participation in the Franco-Prussian War from 1870, a conflict in which he was invalided (Kline and Bassin, 2018). Although the war cost Ratzel his hearing in one ear, it instilled in him a profound sense of German nationalism and reinforced his belief that “war was a natural condition of world history” (Kline and Bassin, 2018: 55). It is tempting to see Ratzel’s position here as some form of coping mechanism—a way of trying to rationalise the personal damage the war had done to him as somehow both inevitable and natural, the inescapable consequence of the nation state’s perpetual, inextinguishable struggle for space. By this point in his life, Ratzel was increasingly convinced that human societies were, at a fundamental level, no different from any other organism on earth; they were, all as one, locked in a struggle for a finite resource—space (*raum*).

In providing a biogeographical explanation for the political geographical realities of the state—in framing the state *as* a biological organism—Ratzel articulated a

position that justified (and, indeed, demanded) colonialism and imperialist expansion on the part of Germany as both a natural and necessary condition of its continued existence. As Kline and Bassin make clear, Ratzel saw Europe “as a politically saturated space” and therefore “advocated colonialism in Africa as the only way in which the German nation could find new living space” (Kline and Bassin, 2018: 55). Ratzel’s advocacy of these ideas—and the fact that they were “radicalised to detrimental effect after his death”—mean that it is difficult to see him as anything other than an archetypal “nineteenth-century radical conservative” (Kline and Bassin, 2018: 55). Yet, Ratzel was also capable of producing “very thoughtful and nuanced work”, and was a strong advocate of dialogue between the sciences and the humanities (Kline and Bassin, 2018: 55). Here, again, the question is one of how to reconcile the value of examining Ratzel’s oeuvre in its diverse complexity, for all that can reveal about the contours of nineteenth-century German biogeographical thought, with the certain knowledge that much of that oeuvre is unpalatable in its own terms and was later the catalyst to much more dangerous and damaging ways of thinking. This tension is not, of course, unique to the work of Ratzel—the history of the discipline is thick with ideas that have been either discredited, if not declared beyond the pale. There is, however, such a toxicity associated with Ratzel as a consequence of the posthumous utilisation of his work on *lebensraum* that this tension is especially acute.

The uncertainty over how best to deal with Ratzel's textual legacy (quite apart from his intellectual bequest) is neatly exposed by Tul'si Bhambry in her introduction to her translation of *Der Lebensraum*. Here, Bhambry addresses both the practical and ethical problems associated with the linguistic mediation of Ratzel's words. Bhambry is a very *visible* translator—her role, and her own positionality, are clearly brought to the fore; her introduction serves not only to contextualise the translation but to offer a reflection on the implications of translation as an act of revivification and cultural exchange (Van Wyke, 2013). From a practical point of view, Ratzel's prose itself presents a problem—it varies from the purple and pompous to the plain and prosaic and is “riddled with typographical errors, repetitive or awkward wording, missed words and punctuation”, among many other idiosyncrasies (Bhambry, 2018: 59). Bhambry's choice has been to allow the peculiarity and particularity of the text to stand largely uncorrected—“to let the essay sounds as strange in English as it does in German” (Bhambry, 2018: 59). Might we chose to read this decision as a small act of resistance—a choice not to confer additional legitimacy on Ratzel's text through emendation of its errors in style and typography? As a woman of mixed Polish-Indian heritage, Bhambry offers an important and situated sense of the complexity of navigating a text whose “language resonates with racist ideologies” (Bhambry, 2018: 60). “As a half-Slavic person of colour”, she notes, “[r]ewriting this text in my own words sometimes felt like I was going against core parts of my being” (Bhambry, 2018:

60). For Bhambry, this troubling task is seen to acquire its moral and intellectual justification, however, in creating the conditions for “much-needed discussion on the origins and continued attraction of ideas based on racial purity as well as spatial inclusion and exclusion” (Bhambry, 2018: 60). Here, Bhambry reminds us how we might face our troubling disciplinary past, and find a way of deriving value from that encounter, without necessarily legitimating that past. Revisiting Ratzel becomes, in this sense, not an ethical problem so much as a moral imperative—a reminder that we, as a discipline, must face our demons.

Just as monsters fade in the light of day, so too does *Der Lebensraum* appear on direct reading less obviously monstrous (at least superficially) than we might at first presume. For those, like me, who have read *about* Ratzel’s essay but have never read it, the first surprise is quite how little of the work is devoted to discussing humans directly; it is, for the most part, attentive to non-human life on earth. For Chiantera-Stutte (2018: 94), Ratzel’s choice here “can be read as an expression of the marginal meaning of human life in the universe”—an acknowledgement that, from a biogeographical point of view, there is nothing fundamentally that distinguishes the human and the non-human; each is a biological entity stuck in its own inevitable struggle for space. The more significant consequence of Ratzel’s relative focus on the non-human in *Der Lebensraum* is, however, to present his observations as natural—being at once facts derived from nature and revealing of innate and immutable natural laws. Humans, Ratzel’s argument

puts it, are governed by these laws no more or less so than any other biological organism. The net effect of Ratzel's choice with respect to his empirical focus is to cast the struggle for space as an effectively a-moral process and one that constitutes a basic condition of, and for, life. As Ratzel (2018: 63) summarised it, "the mastering of space is...a manifestation of life and the hallmark of life". For the most part, *Der Lebensraum* is troubling to a modern reader not for what it says about humans explicitly—although there is much that is unpalatable in this respect, particularly in relation to colonisation and the hierarchy of culture—but for what it implies (and appears to justify) about human behaviour through the biological examples it enumerates and offers as unspoken analogies. We cannot, in that sense, read Ratzel's words without recalling how they would come to be used—*Der Lebensraum* is a work that has been indelibly stained by its posthumous applications.

The contributors to the special section on Ratzel's essay wrestle with this problem in various ways. For Jureit (2018), Murphy (2018), and Klinke (2018), contextualisation in various forms is shown as a means by which to do useful intellectual work with Ratzel's text, whilst remaining attentive to its ultimately catastrophic ramifications. Jureit (2018: 85), for example, sees *Der Lebensraum* as "a response to upheavals within both the discipline of geography and world politics" and part of a wider ambition on Ratzel's part to provide coherence and distinctiveness to geography as an intellectual endeavour and independent academic discipline. Murphy

(2018), by contrast, attends to the reception of use of Ratzel's essay beyond disciplinary geography in interwar Germany. As Murphy (2018: 87) shows, Ratzel's work—as a consequence of its “congenial adaptability”—attracted the attention of a “surprisingly diverse range of ambitious interwar thinkers” beyond both geography specifically and the academy more generally. In tracing the circulation of *lebensraum* in its various non-academic contexts, Murphy points to the ways geographical ideas gain currency (and are made malleable) when they become public property. Murphy's essay also makes clear that the wide circulation and application of *lebensraum* in popular discourse in Weimar and Nazi-era Germany was a direct consequence of Ratzel's profound uncertainty as to the precise mechanisms by which space exerted its assumed power over biological organisms. For Murphy (2018: 88), Ratzel's “references to hidden forces and effects yet unknown” created the conditions in which his ideas could be adapted to fit a variety of purposes and contexts—their very imprecision was what facilitated their adoption. Klinke (2018: 97), meanwhile, reads *Der Lebensraum* in the much more intimate and personal context of Ratzel's lifelong fascination with death, positioning him as a “thanatological thinker”. In Ratzel's biography, Klinke sees an obsession with death—from his irresistible desire, whilst a young apprentice pharmacist, to drink a draught of laurel water in an apparent suicide attempt, to his repulsed fascination with the wounded and broken bodies he saw whilst hospitalised during the Franco-Prussian War—that translated into an intellectual fixation over

questions of extinction and extermination. For Klinke, the spectre of death that haunts *lebensraum* now haunted Ratzel throughout his life.

What these different readings of *Der Lebensraum* illustrate is how, through repeated cycles of interpretation, the history of geography—both its fair moments and its foul—is perpetually in a state of becoming; fixity gives way to fluidity, certainty to ambivalence, and simplicity to nuance as we tell and retell our disciplinary narratives. The plurality of perspectives and layering of meaning that this process reveals is not, in any sense, an admission of failure—of the inability to make definitive statements about cause and consequence in the discipline’s history—but points to the fact that we make our collective past from a shared and ever-shifting present, that what concerns the discipline today informs how we think about, and make sense of, what the discipline did in the past. Occasionally, as in the case of Ratzel, we confront a historical act or way of thinking that sits profoundly at odds with the way we think now. Addressing such ruptures is not, by default, to legitimise them. Rather, it represents an opportunity to understand how particular geographical philosophies come into being, how they acquire authority and value, and how they circulate and are received. By turning our retrospective attention to such moments, we begin, in however small a way, to make amends. It is critical, however, that we should never expect absolution; our disciplinary sins ought not to be forgiven, merely acknowledged and understood.

III Conclusion: plural futures?

The retrospective attention that drives much of the scholarship attended to in this report has a neat parallel in a recent “meta review” of the series of which this report is part (Conway 2018). Here, Conway (2018) has examined the history and philosophy of geography reports—published, with some limited exceptions, annually since 1984—in order to test a hypothesis: “that the historical side would predominate, with the philosophical...largely disconnected from the other half of the equation”. From his interrogation of the series’ “couple of hundred rather dense pages”, Conway (2018) has concluded two things: first, that the authorship of the series displays, to put it charitably, significant “biographical homogeneity” (its nine authors have all been white, Anglophone men); second, that the focus of the reports has, predominately although not exclusively, fallen on the history of geography, not its philosophy. In part, the relative bias in the focus of these reports is explained by the fact that rather more work is published on the history of geography than on its philosophy, whether current or historical. These reports also, however, bear the imprint of their authors, each of whom must necessarily make particular (and often very subjective) decisions about what work falls under their remit and their ability to evaluate knowledgeably.

As this series marks its thirty-fifth anniversary in 2019, we might, as a discipline, wish to reflect on how these reports (together with all those published in the

journal) function to write a more-or-less connected history of the intellectual present, and how their authorship informs how that history is defined and documented. The demographic uniformity of this series' authorship is, in that respect, a problem; for all that historians of the discipline have become increasingly attentive to the importance of plurality in narrating geography's histories, it is notable that these reports have, heretofore, been written from a very narrow range of situated (and male) perspectives. It has not escaped my notice that fully one third of the reports' authors—myself included—hail from a single Scottish city, Edinburgh. Such a lack of authorial diversity is, I would like to suggest, both unhealthy and unhelpful; for all that any individual author might endeavour to read beyond their immediate intellectual and cultural context, capturing the rich diversity of scholarship in the history and philosophy of geography requires a correspondingly rich and diverse authorship. In order to ensure that the variety and vitality of work in this area is adequately represented in these reports, we must look to encourage other authorial voices, particularly those of women and those from non-Anglophone traditions (Radcliffe, 2017). Just as we have a moral obligation to narrate plurality in geography's past, so we must encourage that plurality in the telling of our disciplinary present.

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Notes

¹ The Copac union catalogue, for example, lists only three copies of *Festgaben für Albert Schäffle* (1901) in UK national and university libraries.