Geogr. Helv., 72, 85–92, 2017
www.geogr-helv.net/72/85/2017/
doi:10.5194/gh-72-85-2017

+ GEOGRAPHICA HELVETICA + supported by sc|nat

The neglected "gift" of Ratzel for/from the Indian Ocean: thoughts on mobilities, materialities and relational spaces

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Received: 16 September 2015 – Revised: 5 January 2017 – Accepted: 20 January 2017 – Published: 16 February 2017

Abstract. When Korf (2014) recently invited (critical) geographers to come to terms with the problematic heritage of our discipline, especially with respect to spatial political thought, he first of all drew our attention to the intellectual contributions of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. While he urges us to rethink our ongoing references to these key thinkers, especially in light of the rather strict avoidance of "politically problematic" figures within our own discipline, such as Haushofer and Ratzel, this article now wishes to address geography's (dis)engagement with its politically problematic heritage from the opposite angle: focusing on Friedrich Ratzel, it asks if we might have been too radical in condemning his work as only "poison"? What if the neglect of Ratzel has actually led to a moment where his ideas feature prominently in current geographical debates without us even noticing it? By drawing on his contributions to cultural geography and, in particular, the establishment of the cultural historical method and German diffusionism, this article takes up on this question and reflects on the (imagined/actual) role of Ratzel's scholarship in contemporary geography. By pointing out striking similarities to more recent discussions about mobility, materiality and relational space, it illustrates the contemporary, though widely unnoticed, (re)appearance of Ratzel's ideas, and uses this example to emphasize the need for more critical reflection concerning the history of our discipline as well as the complex ways in which political ideologies and intellectual reasoning relate to each other.

> Geography's history, like historical writing of all kinds, presents us with various choices, both in its execution and in its interpretation. The choice between these various routes through geography's past cannot be an absolute one, and it would be wrong to see them as mutually exclusive in all circumstances. (Driver, 1992, p. 37)

> Das Wachrufen einer Anschauung ist niemals die einzige Wirkung eines Wortes, sondern wenn ich das Wort nenne, ist es wie wenn ich in einen weitem Raum voll Schläfern hineinrufe; es regt und reckt sich an allen Enden, und ich sehe vielleicht viel mehr Anschauungen sich erheben, als ich gewollt oder geglaubt habe. (Ratzel, 1904b, p. 307)

1 From Heidegger to Ratzel: questioning the neglect of our own "forefathers"

When Korf (2014) recently invited (critical) geographers to come to terms with the problematic heritage of our discipline, especially with respect to spatial political thought, he first of all drew our attention to the intellectual contributions of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. Against the background of the recent publication of Heidegger's, called *Schwarze Hefte*, a renewed engagement with the question of to what extent his work might be "poisoned", thus an inappropriate "gift" for geographic thought (Korf, 2014, p. 146), seems essential indeed (Strohmayer, 2015). But, as Korf reminds us, Schmitt and Heidegger were not the only politically problematic figures in the history of German spatial political thought (Korf, 2014, p. 145). However, while Schmitt and Heidegger still frequently serve as references in con-

temporary geographic scholarship, others, such as Haushofer and Ratzel – although generally acknowledged as founding fathers of our discipline, if often only rather shamefully – are usually strictly avoided as a possible source of knowledge and inspiration. Overall, as Michel (2014, p. 193) recently pointed out, the relationship between German geography and the discourses and politics of national socialism has been the subject of geographical debate since the 1980s (see e.g. Böhm, 2008; Diner, 1984; Heinrich, 1991; Kost, 1998; Rössler, 1990; Schultz, 1980), with the result that the scholars involved have widely become considered "liabilities of and to geographical thought" (Korf, 2014, p. 145).

Now, with the question being posed if we should not also apply our rather strict avoidance of "politically problematic" geographical scholarship to key thinkers outside the discipline, such as Heidegger and Schmitt, it seems equally timely to frame the question from the opposite angle: why not use the ongoing inspiration scholars draw from Heidegger and Schmitt to question and rethink our neglect of figures such as Ratzel in contemporary spatial thought? What if we have been too radical in condemning his work only as poison? Or, to more clearly point at the possible implications of such avoidance: what if the neglect of Ratzel has actually led to a moment where his ideas feature prominently in current geographical debates without us even noticing it? Is the whole oeuvre of Ratzel or Heidegger necessarily poisoned by their authors' relations to colonial or national socialist ideologies? And, if so, what does it say about us developing quite similar ideas and theoretical arguments today?

In the following, I will take up these questions and reflect on the (imagined/actual) role of Ratzel's scholarship in contemporary geography. By drawing on his contributions to cultural geography and, in particular, the establishment of the cultural historical method and German diffusionism, I wish to illustrate its contemporary, though widely unnoticed, (re)appearance by pointing out striking similarities to more recent discussions about mobility, materiality and relational space. Against the background of these observations it seems crucial that, instead of asking if we should at all refer to politically problematic figures in our scholarship, we need to critically rethink our relationship to the history of our own discipline more profoundly. What might we miss due to our avoidance of such liabilities and does this not make us equally naïve as those who uncritically refer to them? Overall, what still seems to be pending is to get to grips with and further explore the complex ways in which political ideologies and intellectual reasoning relate to each other.

2 (Re)reading Ratzel?

Mentioning Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) in a geography seminar, at least in a German-speaking context, usually evokes rather skeptical, if not hostile, reactions among the students. Though widely recognized as a crucial figure in the foundation of human geography (*Anthropogeographie*), his place in the geography syllabus is generally limited to one of the early sessions in an introductory class. There, he is usually introduced and quickly dismissed as a politically problematic figure, who developed the concept of *Lebensraum* (Ratzel, 1897a, c) and, thus, opened the way for the Nazi geopolitics of the Third Reich with all its horrible consequences. In this respect, Ratzel cannot even be considered a controversial figure – there does not seem to be any controversy.

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of authors started to rediscover Ratzel (Müller, 1992), and while some continued to emphasize his problematic contribution to the discipline (e.g. Heske, 1986; Bassin, 1987a, b; Fahlbusch et al., 1989), others focused on apparent contradictions, possible misunderstandings, one-sided interpretations and remaining ignorance (see e.g. Leser, 1963; Sauer, 1971; Sanguin, 1990; Matagne, 1992; Müller, 1986, 1992). International conferences in Trieste (1997) and Leipzig (2004), organized to commemorate the centenary of Ratzel's *Political Geography* (1897c) as well as his death († 1904), further fuelled this renewed discussion of Ratzel' work, the context of its production, as well as its contemporary reception (Wardenga and Natter, 2004; Antonsich et al., 2001). At least among those interested in the history of geographic thought, these interventions have sparked a critical, more ambivalent and certainly controversial engagement with Ratzel's contribution to geography.

The concept of *Lebensraum* still remains one of the main subjects of contemporary dealings with Ratzel. Though it is generally acknowledged that it was actually Karl Haushofer (and Rudolf Kjellén) who perverted (Peet, 1986, p. 282) Ratzel's idea of *Lebensraum* into a political programme that was then taken up by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (1933), some still hold Ratzel responsible for providing a crucial source of inspiration (Jacobsen, 1979). According to Schultz (1998, p. 127) "the shift to the paradigm of race as the decisive power in history is already inherent in his theory". As Kost pointed out in his article on *Anti-Semitism in German Geography* (1998), it is terms such as "uprooting", "powers without countries" and "unorganic unsteadiness" that are "suited to strengthen prejudices against national and religious minorities" (Kost, 1998, p. 286). On the other hand, others have emphasized Ratzel's frequent warnings against "unbelievably powerful prejudices against a whole people" (Kost, 1998, p. 286) and his calls for "the toleration of neighbouring peoples and national minorities" (Faber, 1982, p. 395; Bassin, 1987a, p. 119). As Natter (2005, p. 184) shows, Ratzel claims that "it is an entirely erroneous opinion to believe that a people is stronger in every regard, the more uniform it is" (Ratzel, 1906) and, referring to his experiences in the United States, explains, "I have seen so many apparent differences between peoples come to be erased, that I can't believe in the unending perpetuation of these differences" (Ratzel, 1905, quoted in Natter, 2005).

A second argument concerns Ratzel's relation to imperialism, colonialism and nationalism. On the one hand, his political geography has been interpreted as a "handbook for imperialism" (Sion, 1904, p. 171, Wittfogel, 1929) – an image still prevalent today (see e.g. Schultz, 2002; Lossau, 2012). Many point to his membership of the All-German Association (*Alldeutscher Verband*) with its agenda to strive for an "aggressive great German power role with extensive colonies" (Kost, 1989, p. 378) as an unambiguous sign of his support of the German colonial movement. Particularly in relation to his work on Germany (Ratzel, 1898), patriotic exclamations have contributed to his negative evaluation (see e.g. Oßenbrügge, 1983; Fahlbusch et al., 1989). But, again, other authors have also stressed the need to understand his pride of being German in the political context of the time and to consider the profound experience of a finally united Germany (Sanguin, 1990, p. 590). As Farinelli argues, "it is impossible to understand Ratzel's political geography without placing the figure of its author in the perspective of the critical bourgeois [in contrast to noble and aristocratic] geography of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century" (Farinelli, 2000, p. 943).

A third topic in critical discussions of Ratzel's geography is the extent to which he must be considered an *environmental determinist* (Müller, 1986; Mercier, 1995), a term used only pejoratively in our discipline today. As Sauer pointed out, "on occasion he indulged in eloquent acknowledgement of environment as limiting or stimulating human condition and has been thus remembered by geographers as an environmental determinist" (Sauer, 1971, p. 245). Whereas the French geographer Vidal de la Blache was considered a possibilist, Ratzel was characterized as a determinist – according to Mercier (1995) a misrepresentation that, at least in France, was largely due to the negative representation of Ratzel by Febvre (1922). As Natter (2005) has argued, this one-sided categorization of Ratzel's work as environmental determinism is a result of the fact that the extremely large oeuvre "has largely been displaced into a corpus that inadequately reflects on the dynamic, possibilist dimensions of his thought" (Natter, 2005, p. 171). In the Anglophone context, this view of Ratzel was mainly created and sustained by Semple, who had revised and expanded Ratzel's anthropogeography in her book "Influences of Geographic Environment" (Semple, 1911), thereby contributing – in the view of some – "to a mistaken conflation of Ratzel's work with her ideas" (Muscarà, 2001, p. 80; see also Keighren, 2010, p. 3). Trying to contrast the common association of Ratzel with environmental determinism, some authors have therefore tried to point out passages in which he emphasizes the limits of environmental influence (Bassin, 1987a, p. 121; see also Walter, 1955).[1]

It is not the aim of this contribution to decide whether Ratzel was or was not a racist, colonialist and environmental determinist[2]. What I do wish to point out here, however, is the fact that, first of all, a re-examination of his major works and their critiques has revealed selective readings, misunderstandings, bad translations and misinterpretations (see e.g. Leser, 1963; Bassin, 1987a; Sauer, 1971; Sanguin, 1990; Muscarà, 2001; Schultz, 2004; Natter, 2005) – overall, creating a more complex and ambivalent picture of Ratzel than usually portrayed in class. Moreover, a second argument in support of the call for (re)reading Ratzel becomes apparent here. The long trajectory of critical engagement with Ratzel's work more or less exclusively rests on his political geography (Ratzel, 1897c), as well as his reflections about the link between nation state and physical space (Ratzel, 1882), while his other works remain almost completely neglected. But are they less relevant only because they cannot easily be linked to debates about racism, imperialism and environmental determinism? Or have they been neglected because they are supposed to be the product of Ratzel as an ethnographer or historian and thus rather irrelevant to geography?

Those who have read some of the less-known works of Ratzel emphasize their difference, not only regarding the subjects but also in character (Schultz, 2004, p. 95). Hassert (1905, p. 376) called him the "philosopher among the geographers"; for Eckert (1922, p. 254) he is the artist of his discipline. As Farinelli points out, Ratzel was inspired by the idea of a "true" or "pure" geography that had developed at the beginning of the eighteenth century, "a geography for the sake of geography", rejecting any political function (Farinelli, 2000). This approach forged him to conceive of geography as "re-cognition" (*Erkenntnis*), where "knowledge in its entirety is returned to the philosophy of nature, and science is taken back to art" (Farinelli, 2000, p. 954). And, indeed, in his ethnographic, historical and cultural geo-

[1] Moreover, recent theoretical debates inspired by Actor–network theory and science and technology studies, with their particular emphasis on the agency of things, have contributed to a rethinking of the impact of the environment on humans, thus, opening up ways for a more nuanced engagement with Ratzel's reflections and the much condemned notion of environmental determinism more generally.

[2] While others might want to determine how far Ratzel's work is actually poisoned, or what the nature of this poison might be (e.g. inherent racism, colonialism, environmental determinism, ...) or how poisonous Ratzel's work might be in comparison to the work of Heidegger and Schmitt, both of whom were much more directly involved in national socialism, what this article wants to bring to the fore, instead, are the rather radical effects of the diverse accusations concerning Ratzel's oeuvre. Despite all potential poisons having been the subject of critical discussions and re-evaluations, Ratzel's work is still largely neglected based on a rather superficial categorization as politically problematic (and students are hardly encouraged to more thoroughly engage with his ideas). Independent of the actual amount or nature of poison in Ratzel's work, this neglect has certain consequences that are usually not dealt with by those who argue for the avoidance of politically problematic figures. This contribution illustrates some of these effects with the aim of encouraging further critical reflections about their implications.

graphic publications, Ratzel seems much less concerned with politics but, more generally, with the mediation between geography and the arts and humanities, as well as with the potential contribution of geography to (world) history (Ratzel, 1886, 1887, 1891, 1897b, 1904a).

In the remainder of this contribution, I now wish to look at this less-known, other side of Ratzel that was highly influential, not only with respect to the development of cultural anthropology, but also with regard to (early) cultural geography. I will argue that it is particularly this part of Ratzel's work that is also closely related to – and could therefore inspire – ongoing attempts to reconceptualize space relationally to better grasp space's dynamic dimensions (see also Natter, 2005).

3 Culture circles: a progressive sense of space?

Throughout his career, Ratzel had a strong interest in migration and, particularly, in the movements of cultural traits and their spatial implications. Especially in his *Völkerkunde* (translated as *The History of Mankind*), published between 1885–1888, as well as in his article on history, anthropology and the historical perspective, published in *Historische Zeitschrift* in 1904, he elaborated on a historical approach to the relation between culture and space. This interest led him to become one of the central figures in the development of the cultural historical method and, with it, German Diffusionism – a particular school of thought not to be mistaken with Diffusionism in the UK or later in the US, and not to be equated with what became known as the German *Kulturkreislehre*.

During his time in Munich (1871–1886), Ratzel had been a student, and later a colleague, of Moritz Wagner, to whom he developed a close friendship. Wagner, who also supervised his habilitation, had been appointed professor of geography and ethnography at the University of Munich in 1862, as well as director of the city's ethnographic museum. Based on his extensive travels and resulting collections, he concluded that animal, plant and human populations had dispersed widely, always adapting to local conditions. In contrast to Darwin's evolutionism, which builds on the assumption that species develop and progress based on their own abilities (e.g. selection mechanisms), he promoted the understanding of cultural change as the result of movement and contact with other cultures, and developed what has become known, particularly among biologists, as "migration theory" (Wagner, 1871, 1898). Inspired by their discussions, Ratzel also moved away from Darwinism (see e.g. Ratzel, 1905) and expanded Wagner's concept of migration to the diffusion and differentiation of cultures and particular cultural traits (Girtler, 1979, p. 29). Strongly opposing the common evolutionary thinking of the time, Ratzel considered all societies to be historical in character, even small, peripheral and the then so-called primitive societies – a point he pushed much further than others at the time. Following from this, he argued that the presence of the same or at least similar cultural traits in different places does not provide proof of a general evolutionary passage of cultures, but instead signifies a historical connection between them (Ratzel, 1904a). Hence, he concluded that it was the detailed study of the contemporary geographical distribution of culture complexes that would allow for a reconstruction of world historical processes (Ratzel, 1882, p. 466).[3]

In order to find out who – or what – went from where to where, Ratzel, his companions and followers – most prominent among them Frobenius, Ankermann, Graebner and Schmidt[4] – developed a clear methodology: the cultural–historical method. Focusing mainly on material culture, they looked at what travellers and scholars sent back to museums, read travelogues and diaries or even travelled themselves to find out about the distribution of masks, drums, weapons, boats, clothes, houses and the like. To avoid random comparisons, over-interpretations and unfounded conclusions, they developed a rigid set of criteria. As summarized very well by Graebner (1911) and Schmidt (1937) in their respective textbooks on the method of anthropology, the first was the criterion of form or quality. It is said that similarities between two culture elements, which do not arise out of their nature, material or purpose, should be interpreted as resulting from diffusion, regardless – and this is important to note – of the distance that separates the two instances. Second, there was the criterion of quantity, which meant that the probability of historical relationship between two regions or cultures rises with an increasing number of additional items showing similarities. And finally, they argued for a criterion of continuity, which demanded for items to be found in between the regions in question, in order to render historical movements from one to the other even more plausible.

[3] As others have emphasized, to Ratzel it was important to overcome the dichotomy between history and geography as well as between geography and anthropology (Natter, 2005, p. 178). Understanding history as practice (Ratzel, 1904, p. 4) and, in particular, as the result of movements he saw the need to think geography and history together. This idea was part of the intense discussions with his colleague and close friend, the historian Lamprecht, who also taught in Leipzig since 1891. In this respect, Ratzel was also crucial for the establishment of a historical-geographic seminar organized by Közschke, a student of Lamprecht (Chickering, 1993, p. 292–293).

[4] Ratzel, Frobenius (a student of Ratzel), and Ankermann all presented detailed observations on distributional patterns of material culture in Africa, cross-reading and combining their insights with those of others who did similar work in Indonesia, Polynesia and Melanesia. Most famous, in this respect, is the double–lecture on distribution patterns in Oceania and Africa by Graebner and Ankermann, given in 1904 in Berlin (Graebner, 1905; Ankermann, 1905). An important result was the historical connection between Africa and Indonesia across the Indian Ocean, leading Frobenius to develop his (in)famous idea of a west African "culture circle" that related eastern Papua New-Guinea and Indonesia with large parts of Africa, including the west African coastline (Frobenius, 1897/98).

Moreover, and what is particularly interesting from a geographic perspective, Ratzel and his followers developed an elaborate notion of the kinds of spaces that emerged through mobility and diffusion. Graeber, in his book *Die Methode der Ethnologie* (1911), took up the task of providing a systematic overview of the approach developed by Ratzel. Here, culture circles were envisioned as spaces and characterized as follows:

> Culture circles are conceived without any clear boundaries, more cloudy, and fuzzy at the edges. [...] They can never be entirely homogenous; they are made of both diversity and unity. [...] They are characterized by movements, marked by relations that do not seem to follow any rules or order. [...] They do not have to cover a topographical entity, they can be islands, connected by bridges or totally dispersed, and still they overlap. [...] To discern them one needs extensive and very detailed empirical studies. (Graebner, 1911, p. 131–133, own translation)

> All spatial differences are only relative [...], there are no logical or factual reasons for judging relations between far dispersed sites differently to those near to each other. (Graebner, 1911, p. 143, own translation)

Noting the similarities to contemporary ways of characterizing and conceptualizing space and place relationally, notably the early attempts to account for the spatial implications of globalization (see Massey, 1994; Hannerz, 1996), it seems astonishing that Ratzel's diffusionist ideas had a much stronger impact on anthropology than on geography. One reason for this is surely the selective appreciation of Ratzel's work by Semple. Although Semple (1911), in her reception of Ratzel, noted his methodological practice of "close inductive reasoning from an extensive body of facts" (Semple, 1904, p. 553), she restricted her focus to the aspect of environmental determinism and thus clearly contributed to the neglect of "other" perspectives in and around Ratzel's work.

However, it is through the work of Sauer, that Ratzel's ideas, and particularly his focus on material objects and migration, found its way into American cultural geography. At Berkeley, Sauer – whose influence on the development of cultural geography in the United States can hardly be exaggerated (Mitchell, 2000, p. 20) – had been in exchange with his colleagues in anthropology, Kroeber and Lowie, both former students of Boas[5] and also drawing on Ratzel in their studies of Native Americans (Kroeber, 1947). He was especially drawn to Ratzel's historical–anthropological reflections and *The History of Mankind* (1896–1898). In his presidential address delivered before the Association of American Geographers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in December 1940, he stated the following.

> Ratzel is best known to us, and that mostly at second hand, for the first volume of his *Anthropogeographie*. There is far more in the unknown Ratzel than in the well publicized one. [...] It may well be remembered that Ratzel founded the study of the diffusion of culture traits, presented in the nearly forgotten second volume of his *Anthropogeographie.* [...] Ratzel elaborated the study of cultural diffusions which has become basic to anthropology, both as a means of inspection and as theory. This is essentially a geographic method. (Sauer, 1941)

Also later, in 1971, in an appreciative reflection on Ratzel's *Cultural Geography of the United States* (Ratzel, 1880), he praised him as "a humanist concerned with non-periodic origin and diffusion of cultures, their practical and aesthetic satisfactions" (Sauer, 1971, p. 245). And it is this interest of Ratzel that also became a central characteristic of Sauer's cultural geography. According to Sauer (1952, p. 1), geographers should be concerned with

> discovering related and different patterns of living as they are found over the world [...]. These patterns have interest and meaning as we learn how they came into being. The geographer, therefore, properly is engaged in charting the distributions over the earth of the arts and artifacts of man, to learn whence they came and how they spread, what their contexts are in culture and physical environments.

By bringing together Ratzelian thought and the idea of culture circles with American anthropological approaches of culture areas and cultural relativism, Sauer successfully developed a specific kind of cultural geography that was historical in perspective, driven by a strong interest in the study of the emergence of cultural landscapes and regions (Sauer, 1941, 1974).

However, for all those who do not consider themselves cultural geographers – or, even if they do, prefer to associate themselves with the new cultural geography – this version of cultural geography as advocated and practiced by Sauer and his students probably seems not only outdated, but also long overcome. As Mitchell points out in his critical introduction to cultural geography (Mitchell, 2000), in the process of reinventing cultural geography in the 1980s and 1990s, "Sauer's legacy has been an important touchstone of reaction" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 21). Jackson (1989, p. 19), for

[5] Franz Boas was also a German geographer before he turned into the key figure of American anthropology (see e.g. Verne, 2004) and promoted the study of culture as both a geographical and historical enterprise, thus contributing to the development of the famous concepts of culture areas and cultural relativism. Regarding his very different role in the history of the respective disciplines; see Powell (2015).

example, referred to the "almost obsessional interest in the physical or material elements of culture [...] This focus on culture-as-artifacts has led to a voluminous literature on the geographical distribution of particular culture traits from log building to graveyards, barn styles to gasoline stations".

But, while the study of cultural diffusion, as promoted by Sauer, is clearly not popular within the new cultural geography, theoretical debates on mobility and materiality as well as the mobilities of all kinds of artifacts are again centre stage. Especially their connective capacities – how the mobility of people, things and ideas shape spaces, and how these, in turn, merge, mingle and overlap in the course of diverse forms of mobilities – have become a major starting point for geographic attempts to construct and sustain more dynamic and fluid understandings of space. In this, however, we usually ignore that Ratzel already thought of mobility and movement as a natural fact of life and thus aimed at developing a more dynamic, anti-sedentarist concept of space. We would rather cite Latour (1996, p. 46) to argue that "our terrains aren't territories, [but that] they have weird borders", than refer to Ratzel or Graebner's quotes mentioned above. Moreover, when we now draw on Deleuze and Guattari, and Latour and DaLanda to inspire our apparently new and highly innovative reflections about the mobile, procedural and relational nature of spaces – all thinkers directly referring to Spinoza and Leibniz among others – hardly do we realize that it was these very same scholars that were an important influence for Ratzel (Hassert, 1905, p. 377; Chickering, 1993, p. 295), thus maybe the reason why the characterization of culture circles quoted above sounds so familiar to those who are engaging with relational constructions of space today. This shows that, by neglecting Ratzel's "other" side, we certainly miss an important precursor to contemporary debates in geography, but it also makes us realize the awkwardness of a situation in which something is enthusiastically celebrated as an innovative research frontier while, at the same time, still criticized and condemned as racist and colonialist (Gingrich, 2005, p. 92). In order to recognize such contradictions, a more thorough engagement with the history of our discipline seems crucial in which we avoid easily dismissing the old in favour of the new and instead try to get to grips with the often much more ambivalent relationship between past and present geographies.

4 Conclusion: re-evaluating Ratzel's gift

As Kost pointed out,

> the history of geographic science is one of the most neglected themes in the discipline. [...] Only recently, students of different German Institutes of Geography tried to compile and to analyse the research contributions of German geographers up to 1945. This study resulted in considerable overreaction and false assessments which is only natural, when university research does not take care of this inconvenient subject or even thrusts it aside. (1998, p. 285)

While some, indeed, seem to prefer avoiding the early history of geography, particularly its problematic figures, and do not see any benefit in the engagement with their ambivalence, others have tried to emphasize how "past cultural geographies inform our present work in complex and often unexpected ways" (Oakes and Price, 2008, p. 81).

Although the works of Ratzel and others working on the cultural historical method hardly feature explicitly in today's reflections on the study of relational spaces, I have tried to show that several links can be drawn between them. Among them are shared sources of inspiration (Spinoza and Leibniz to name but two crucial figures in contemporary spatial thought) and a similar interest in mobilities and materialities and their spatial effects. Of course, the ideas, concepts, and terminologies are not and cannot be exactly the same as today, as they were developed at a different time in an entirely different context. But it is exactly because they are not identical that they may be an inspiration for current debates that share certain understandings and are similar in their concerns. Thus, by carefully elaborating concepts of space, method and materiality, Ratzel's work may therefore be considered a challenging but important contribution to today's understandings of relational spaces.

On the other hand, all those who remain convinced that all of Ratzel's ideas are inherently related to colonialist, racist or nationalist ideologies – and therefore, are not a "gift" but indeed entail some "poison" (*Gift* in German) – encourage us to ask what it means if, even without any direct reference to his work, we are now looking at the same things in a similar way. Would this not make us and our ideas equally problematic?

As Korf (2014, p. 146) pointed out, "sometimes, poison kills; sometimes, in the right dose, it cures." Maybe an experience with – instead of a widespread avoidance of – the "poison" in our discipline may help us to strengthen our relationship to our disciplinary history. And here, we might once again turn to Sauer:

> There is available a fine and great intellectual heritage to us. This is not simply the study of our subject as it has shaped up at various periods of its history, though this is stimulation enough. Of special value, however, to the development of the student is the first-hand study of the individual great and genial figures of our past. This sort of thing, however, involves learning to know these men through the whole range of their work, not by way of some one else's critique. A good knowledge of the work of one or more of our major personalities is about as important an introduction into geography as I am able to suggest. (Sauer, 1941)

5 Data availability

This is a theoretical reflection of scholarly work published by Ratzel at the end of the 19th century. There is no data set/empirical data at the basis of this publication.

Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Ute Wardenga for encouraging me to pursue this project, as well as all those who provided constructive feedback on an earlier draft in the context of the Zurich Development Lecture 2016 and at the workshop on "New Developments in the History of Thought" in Bayreuth 2016.

Edited by: B. Korf
Reviewed by: two anonymous referees

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