



A theory for the “Anglo-Saxon mind”: Ellen Churchill Semple’s reinterpretation of Friedrich Ratzel’s *Anthropogeographie*

Ian Klinke

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

Correspondence: Ian Klinke (ian.klinke@ouce.ox.ac.uk)

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Abstract. The American geographer Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932), famous for her work on environmental influence, is often framed as a mere disciple of the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). Drawing on a reading of Semple’s published and unpublished works as well as correspondence and diaries, this paper sheds new light on the two anthropogeographers’ intellectual relationship, which was in fact one with benefits to both sides. Semple found in Ratzel’s geography a detached and scientific language with which to reinterpret American history. He drew on her as an informant on issues of racial segregation in the United States. Although Semple remained loyal to his broader intellectual project after his death, she had begun, soon after they met, to develop her own brand of anthropogeography, freed from the ambivalences of his work. Her sharpened reformulation, which he had endorsed, would ultimately make anthropogeography an easier target for its critics.

1 Introduction

In the mid-1870s, the later geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) spent a formative period of his life in North America as a travel writer for the German newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung*. Whilst visiting the former states of the Confederacy, then still reeling from the wounds of the Civil War, he absorbed the revisionism of white Southerners and concluded that the South’s economic recovery was hampered by the inability of black Americans to participate in democratic government (Ratzel, 1876[1988]:146). Enchanted by the spirit of the American frontier, he fashioned the United States into a role model for German colonisation. The American continent’s wide spaces and abundant natural resources, he claimed, had brought out creative energies in European settlers, resulting in the formation of a new nation. In this “New World”, he wrote admiringly, “modern civilisation grows right out of nature like seeds in virgin soil” (62). Unfortunately, however, with North America now saturated with settlers, his native Germany was forced to look elsewhere for space. Ratzel initially toyed with the idea of territorial acquisition in Argentina, but soon turned his

eye to Africa, becoming one of Germany’s leading advocates of the continent’s colonisation.

Ratzel remained a frequent commentator on American politics and society until his death in 1904. His writings found an audience not only in German intellectual and military circles, but also amongst North American scholars, including the German-born founder of modern anthropology and trained geographer Franz Boas, the sociologist, historian and civil rights activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the geographer and policy advisor, Isaiah Bowman (Klinke, 2022). But it was the Kentucky geographer and historian Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932) who set out most explicitly in the 1890s to develop an anglophone human geography on the basis of Ratzel’s ideas. Semple was a highly successful author who became known for her work on the environmental conditions of American history. She was also a popular educator and erstwhile policy advisor who shaped American public discourse in important ways. By the 1910s, she had become known as the American heir to Ratzel’s brand of anthropogeography.

Much of the debate on Semple’s legacy has been preoccupied with the question of her environmentalism, or en-

vironmental determinism. Whilst the existing canon places her firmly in the determinist camp (Cresswell, 2013:50; Livingston, 1992:281), others have argued that she developed a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between environment and society in her late oeuvre (Adams, 2011; Braden, 1992). The two most authoritative accounts on the topic trace the transatlantic reception of her 1911 book (Keighren, 2010) and the evolution of her ideas in the context of a gendered academy (Adams, 2011). Semple's Eurocentrism and racism have certainly been noted (Ashutosh, 2018:20; Cresswell, 2013:50; Hutchings and Owens, 2021:350; Kobayashi, 2014:1104; Peet, 1985:323), although at times her environmental preoccupations are seen to have “led her away from the more racist aspects” of Ratzel's geography (Dittmer, 2014:16). Semple participated enthusiastically in discourses on the inevitability of American expansion. She was an avid supporter of the Panama Canal as a project of Anglo-Saxon mastery (Frenkel, 1992:145) and saw commercial success as a white racial trait (Adams, 2011:5). Semple (1911:vii) did try to discard race as an explanation for cultural difference but was far from consistent on this matter.

Clearly, Semple saw herself as a proponent of Ratzel's geography – but this should not imply that she simply regurgitated the Leipzig geographer's ideas (Keighren, 2010:174; Hutchings and Owens, 2021:351). And whilst existing studies have rightly pointed to the nuanced nature of Semple's commentary on Ratzel's work, notably in the preface to her 1911 *Influences of geographic environment*, they have not systematically compared her work to his. In taking this question forward, I offer a high-resolution image of Ellen Semple's reinterpretation of Ratzel, focusing on crucial conceptual and political questions. This requires attention to the ways in which she tailored Ratzel to “the Anglo-Saxon mind” and to what she wrote about American politics and society, including in private correspondence with Ratzel. I focus not just on Semple's most well-known works, but also on her translations of Ratzel's writings which date from the 1890s, a time during which she was establishing her intellectual framework. As we will see, these translations reveal that an independent intellectual project had already begun to form in her mind. Her hesitation, moreover, to publish in more popular genres, suggests a further break with Ratzel's legacy. Whilst the Leipzig geographer had been all too keen to become a public intellectual in Imperial Germany, Semple sought comfort in the seemingly detached language of academic geography. It was here that she found a frame with which to approach recent historical events as mere epiphenomena of geographic influence.

2 Ellen Churchill Semple

Born in Louisville, Kentucky during the American Civil War, Ellen Semple was the daughter of an old Bluegrass family



Figure 1. Ellen Churchill Semple, 1895, Ellen Churchill Semple papers, University of Kentucky.

which had settled in the region in 1835 and which could trace its roots to seventeenth century English colonists (James et al., 1983:30). Even after her father's death in 1875, the family's prosperous hardware business ensured a privileged education (Colby, 1933:229). In 1882 and aged only 19, she graduated as the valedictorian from Vassar College, the second of the seven sisters, at a time when less than 2 % of American women attended college (Adams, 2011:24). She went on to teach at a private school and travelled Europe before completing her second degree from Vassar with a dissertation entitled “Slavery: A study in sociology”, a piece of work which displayed her training in political economy (Semple, 1891).

Semple would later recall that she had felt the need for a grounding in geography whilst writing her thesis (Semple, 1912). By 1890, she had encountered the writings of Friedrich Ratzel and decided to study with him in 1891/1892 and again in 1895.¹ It was her exposure to the Leipzig ge-

¹The exact circumstances of how Semple was introduced to Ratzel's work, then only available in German, are unclear. Duren

ographer which began to shape a distinctive brand of anthropogeography in her mind. In the years that followed, Semple taught at different North American universities, including most notably the University of Chicago from 1906 to 1924 and Clark University from 1921 until shortly before her death. Always keen to promote anthropogeography as both a university and school subject, she was a respected lecturer, known to narrate “with true dramatic effect and with flashes of wit” (Atwood, 1932:657). Her approach was thus one of using geography not just to explain but to enliven history.

By the introduction of the human element, geography is lifted out of the dull round of formal studies and the earth becomes the setting of a great world drama. By the introduction of the geographic element, history becomes vitalized; through it now pulses the lifeblood of the people. All the forces and treasures and beauties of nature enter into the chronicle. Its pages seem to smell of the upturned soil; they are golden with fields of ripened grain and white with fields of cotton; they echo the sound of the pioneer’s axe blazing a trail over a mountain pass, the ripple of the voyageur’s canoe exploring some far northern stream, the splash of the steamboat on a river highway, the roar of waterfall and the whirl of mill-wheel, the lowing of cattle on thirsty plain, and the hum of life in the big seaport; they reflect the persistent and potent forces back of political bodies and legislative enactments in the geographic conditions of the people. (Semple, 1904b:366–367)

Semple’s breakthrough came in 1901 with an article about the Anglo-Saxons inhabiting the Kentucky Mountains (Semple, 1901). For Semple, these were early English colonists inhabiting a time capsule, for an extended period of isolation had frozen their social practices. Although the Anglo-Saxons had elsewhere established the most socio-economically advanced societies, those who had settled in the barren and almost impassable region of the Appalachians had not partaken in this development. This proved decisively, she claimed, the influence of geographical separation on social development. Researched on horseback, the piece also revealed a talent for vivid description and an eye for the politics of everyday life. Semple’s first book, the 1903 *American history and its geographic conditions*, elaborated this theme on a larger canvas, offering an attempt to read the entire history of the United States by reference to environmental influences (Semple, 1903). In 1911, she published the more theoretical *Influences of geographic environment on the basis of Ratzel’s*

J. H. Ward, a former student of Ratzel’s, claimed to have been the instigator in 1887 (Baugh, n.d.:3). Semple’s own account states that she encountered Ratzel’s writings only in 1891, upon which she travelled “immediately to Leipzig to study under him” (Semple, 1912; see also Adams, 2011:56; Keighren, 2010:14).

system of anthropo-geography which drew its evidence from across the globe (Semple, 1911). Thereafter, she travelled to South and East Asia, researching in some detail Japanese agriculture and colonialism. Semple’s “axe-and-canoe” approach to geography increasingly caught the eye of other geographers, including the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society John Keltie and the Oxford geographer Andrew Herbertson.

On the eve of the First World War, she was invited to lecture at the University of Oxford and was awarded the Cullum Geographical Medal from the American Geographical Society (Edwards, 1933). Semple was summoned in 1917 by the aforementioned Isaiah Bowman, who too had soaked up Ratzel’s ideas as a student, to advise the Inquiry. The latter was a research group established by President Woodrow Wilson upon Washington’s entry into the war to set out the conditions for a peace agreement. Semple was tasked with producing reports on boundary settlements in Turkey, the Middle East and on the Austro-Italian border (Adams, 2011). Despite her work for the Inquiry, Semple was not permitted to attend the Paris Peace Conference on the grounds of her gender (Bushong, 1984:89). Her third and final book offered a geography of the Mediterranean region (Semple, 1931a). Semple died in 1932, but her writings would have a lasting influence on a generation of American geographers, from Bowman to Ellsworth Huntington and Derwent Whittlesey (Ashworth, 2013).

3 Interactions

Ellen Semple had first forged an intellectual link with Friedrich Ratzel at Leipzig during the academic year of 1891/2. Although she could do no more than audit his lectures as matriculation was not permitted to women, the 28-year-old reported a lively time in Germany to her mother. She attended evening receptions and concerts and exchanged her ideas with fellow students (Bushong, 1987).² Semple continued to correspond with Ratzel, writing sometimes in German and sometimes in English, and returned to Leipzig in 1895 (see Fig. 1). The pair do not seem to have met subsequently but continued to correspond until at least 1903, a year before Ratzel’s death.

There is no doubt that Ratzel continued to treat Semple as his former student. When reviewing her work in 1902, he bemoaned the lack of a scientific fundament (Ratzel, 1902a). Elsewhere, he applauded her clarity and talent for description and cited one of her studies as “brilliant” (Ratzel, 1897[1903]:827; Ratzel, 1905). Although their relationship

²Whilst Ratzel may have been the most important academic to have taken an interest in Semple, he was not the only one. Others included the statistician August von Miaskowski (1838–1899) and the economist Wilhelm Georg Friedrich Roscher (1817–1894). She was also taught by the statistician Ernst Hasse (1846–1908), leader of the pan-German League.

remained structured by professional hierarchies, the two anthropogeographers seem to have shared a certain closeness. In 1902, Semple reported proudly to her former professor that she had completed a draft of her first book, stressing how exhausting the task had been. "I have enjoyed the work thoroughly", she wrote, "but it has owned me, body and soul, and I find myself looking forward to the chance to lead a simple human life again, with all its small interests". "I think", she added, feeling perhaps the need to emphasise the extraordinary nature of her accomplishment, "a woman is always primarily under the necessity of being simply human" (Semple, 1902).

Ratzel wrote in his diary in 1895 that he found "Miss Semple" entertaining and attractive (Ratzel, 1895a).³ He was pleased to receive a beautiful keyring from her and sent her his writings in response (Ratzel, 1896b). But there was clearly more to be gained from his affiliation to Semple than the attention of a striking former student. Semple would later recall an "incident of the classroom at Leipzig" to her student Ruth Baugh which must have taken place during her first visit to Germany. When Ratzel had remarked that he was in dire need of US Federal census reports, Semple had used a family connection to ensure that "a veritable carload of census reports was delivered to the surprised, but gratified Ratzel" (Baugh, n.d.:6).

When drafting the second edition of his *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika* (The United States of America), he drew on Semple to update his understanding of US society, which he had first acquired during the Reconstruction era and which was now outdated. She sent him books on the manufacturing sector and informed him on the most notable American nature writers (Semple, 1893c, d). She also reported in some detail on the "racial question". In response to his interest in the legal status of the formerly enslaved people, for instance, Semple keenly gathered legal advice from insurance companies to illustrate the myriad of ways in which black Americans could be rejected for life insurance despite being equal before the law (London Assurance Corporation, United States Branch, 1893; Semple, 1893a, b).

Semple related to him how racial politics was being discussed in her wider circle, citing an unnamed professor from Louisville who had explained to her that "especially the Teutonic race, of which our people mainly consists, reveals in clear opposition to all Gallic and Latin peoples a deeply founded aversion towards the mixing with low races" (Semple, 1893a). Black men who married white women were occasionally tarred and feathered, she added. She spoke of a "terrible illness" which had befallen "the race of the negroes and the Indians" and which a friend of hers believed

was rooted in "indecent" (Semple, 1893b).⁴ Semple recommended to Ratzel writers whose political verdict she trusted (Semple, 1893a). This included "the very important statesman" Henry Woodfin Grady, a white supremacist newspaper editor and orator from Georgia (Roberts Forde, 2019). Grady was a figure of the "New South", a term he had coined to denote enthusiasm for the Southern plantation economy's transformation into an industrial economy.

Ratzel had by the 1890s adopted a segregationist position and concluded that it had been an error to have given black Americans the vote (Ratzel, 1880[1893]:180, 284). The idea that German and Anglo-Saxon settlers had been less inclined towards "racial mixing" because they preferred agricultural over trapping and mining colonisation became in the late 1890s an important argumentative strand in his *Politische Geographie* (Ratzel, 1897:340). Semple thus helped to harden Ratzel's view of North American colonisation and the supposed failures of Reconstruction. He thanked her in the foreword to the second edition of *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika* for supplying him with "rare literature" and for "helping me with the dark points of the negro question".⁵ The letters, of course, appear to shine light too on her own political compass and specifically her allegiance to the "New South", which she was not explicit about in her scholarly writing.

By the mid-1890s, Semple had become increasingly committed to promoting Ratzel's work in the Anglosphere. In 1894, she wrote to him to propose a translation of *Anthropogeographie* (Ratzel, 1894). In March 1895, she suggested an English language "summary" (*Abriß*) of *Anthropogeographie* and *Politische Geographie*, about which Ratzel noted "mixed feelings" in his diary (Ratzel, 1895c). The pair seem to have settled on a series of translations. In the summer of 1895, Semple was back in Leipzig and had the chance to discuss initial drafts with him on a number of occasions, an experience he found "very informative" (Ratzel, 1895b, d).⁶ The first of her four translations appeared in 1896 as "The territorial growth of states" which sketched his political geography in broad brushes (Ratzel, 1896a). Three abridged translations of chapters 13–15 of the 1897 first edition of *Politische Geographie* followed over the next years (Ratzel,

³Ratzel writes: "Miss Semple visits us in my absence, and she later comes to lunch. Very changed, actually prettier, entertaining" (Ratzel, 1895a).

⁴Semple adopted the practice of using elite informants to make points about racial hierarchy in her own writing too, as her 1913 discussion of Japanese colonialism in Korea demonstrates (Semple, 1913:267–268).

⁵"Über dunkle Punkte der Negerfrage halfen mir Miss Ellen C. Semple in Louisville und Dr. G. W. Gage, derzeit in Leipzig, Erkundigungen einziehen und unterstützten mich durch Zusendung seltener Literatur" (Ratzel, 1880[1893]:vii).

⁶Translated by A. J. Butler, Ratzel's *Völkerkunde* appeared almost simultaneous to Semple's translations as *The History of Mankind* (Ratzel, 1885[1896], 1886[1897], 1888[1898]). A further panoramic essay followed in 1902 (Ratzel, 1902b).

1897b, 1898a, b).⁷ Although she did not stray far from the German original, she often sharpened the latter by shortening sentences and providing translations which were not always entirely faithful to Ratzel’s terminology, a point to which we shall return below.⁸

Even after Semple had completed her 1903 book, she was still animated by the vision of an anglophone anthropogeography. Although she had originally intended to produce a translation of Ratzel’s *Anthropogeographie*, she ultimately settled on a reinterpretation of his two-volume book. The Leipzig geographer wrote to Semple in April 1903 from a holiday on Lake Garda to give his blessing to the idea.

Dear Miss Semple! I see not a single reason why I should not agree to your plan. We stand on the same ground, as I share your view that “Anthropogeographie” cannot be translated word by word; it has to be adapted to the Anglo-Keltic and specifically the Anglo-American spirit (*Geist*). I know of nobody who is more cut out for the job than you are. (Ratzel, 1903)

But Ratzel had not entirely given up control of his intellectual project. He insisted on his share of the royalties and hoped to retain some editorial input too. Semple’s response, if she sent one, has not been preserved. Ratzel died 16 months later and did not see the completion of her project.

By the turn of the century, Ratzel’s arguments had become central to Semple’s work. Whilst, for instance, she idealised the simple and lawless lives of the mountain people of Kentucky in her 1901 piece as “the purest Anglo-Saxon stock in the United States” (Semple, 1901:592), she concluded that they were a “retarded civilization, and show the degenerate symptoms of an arrested development” which had been driven by “the influence of physical environment” (593, 623). This clearly was an application of geographical separation theory (*Separationstheorie*), which informed most of Ratzel’s work and which had first been conceived by Ratzel’s mentor Moritz Wagner as an addendum to Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (Wagner, 1968). For Semple as for Ratzel, “the struggle for existence” was equivalent to a “struggle for space” (Semple, 1903: 244). Semple’s *American history and its geographic conditions* drew directly on Ratzel’s anthropogeography and his regional geography of the United States, the writing of which Semple had assisted,

and which she had applauded in a review for its views on “race intermixture” (Semple, 1894:140).

Semple remained loyal to Ratzel until his death in 1904. As she wrote in a eulogy, his service to anthropogeography had been in the order of Adam Smith’s contribution to political economy (Semple, 1904a:553). When Semple did finally publish *Influences of Geographic Environment* in 1911, she called Ratzel “the great master who was my teacher and friend during his life, and after his death my inspiration” (Semple, 1911:viii). And yet, she also wrote that his claims were often unsupported by empirical evidence and lacking in rigour. His understanding of the state as organism, first taken from Herbert Spencer, had to be rejected. Ratzel’s book was not only difficult reading, “even for Germans”, but suffered from overgeneralisation: “Sometimes he reveals the mind of a seer or poet, throwing out conclusions which are highly suggestive, on the face of them convincing, but which on examination prove untenable, or at best must be set down as unproven or needing qualification” (v–vi). Semple thus felt the need to mould Ratzel “into the concrete form of expression demanded by the Anglo-Saxon mind” – a tweak of the formulation which Ratzel had supplied in his 1903 letter (vi).

Even though *Influences of Geographic Environment* received a mixed reception in academic circles, the book did gather a sizeable readership in the years following its publication and became a standard textbook for geography courses throughout the Anglosphere (Keighren, 2010). There had initially been interest amongst historians in Semple’s approach, but she ultimately failed to convince them of her particular theses (Koelsch, 2014). Critique emerged elsewhere too. Semple’s reports to Wilson’s Inquiry were attacked for disregarding the principle of self-determination and for prioritising the colonial interests of Britain. There was little in Semple’s territorial solutions, the historian Dana Munro lamented, which protected Jews in Palestine or Armenians under Muslim rule (Munro, 1918; see also Adams, 2011; 245). Semple, in other words, may have been conscripted to a Wilsonian paradigm, but her own perspective had in fact remained wedded to an older tradition of great power politics, interpreted through the lens of geographic influence.⁹ By the 1920s, she had nonetheless adopted a less causal understanding of the nature/society relation which highlighted not the iron grip of the environment but the ability of humanity to overcome such constraints. Ratzel, she now argued, had falsely endowed space with agentic qualities and failed to see that it was in fact only humans who gave space its significance. She concluded in 1924 that whilst there was “virtue in the argument of ‘organic boundaries’ and the philosophy of *Lebensraum*”, they were “open to abuse” (Semple,

⁷Whilst “Studies of political areas: The political territory in relation to earth and continent” is a translation of chapter 13 of *Politische Geographie* (Ratzel, 1897b), “Studies of political areas II” reproduces chapter 14 (Ratzel, 1898a) and “Studies of political areas III: The small political area” chapter 15 (Ratzel, 1898b).

⁸Semple may have been working with earlier drafts of Ratzel’s texts. But it seems unlikely that she was translating significantly shorter texts, given that she often condensed a string of illustrations in the original into a single sentence. It is also noteworthy that she often left out the last sentence of a paragraph.

⁹Although Semple’s reports to the Inquiry did not engage in geographical theorisation, this did not prevent her from including references to various works published by academic geographers, including her own. Perhaps for obvious reasons, she did not make reference to Ratzel.

1924:666).¹⁰ And yet, she reiterated her belief that Ratzel's political geography had “turned an unorganised assemblage of statistical facts [into] a scientific inquiry into the relations existing between land and state, or between geography and national policy” (ibid).

Martin (2015:411) argues that the small number of surviving letters between Ratzel and Semple suggests that their exchanges may not have been as extensive and their relationship not as close as sometimes claimed. This would contradict Semple's own insistence in correspondence with Keltie that their relationship had been one of “parity” and that Ratzel had “repaid [her] efforts with most generous interest” (Semple, 1912). “After my return to America, he constantly sent me letters urging me to write. In 1897 I began sending him my articles, which he would criticize, while always cracking the whip at me to do more, more”, she wrote to John Keltie in 1912 (Semple 1912). Undoubtedly, Semple would have had an interest in amplifying her link to such an internationally recognised geographer, particularly given the many obstacles which her career faced from gendered exclusion. But Ratzel's diaries and the content of the surviving letters reveal that these letters were once part of a longer string of correspondence. Semple may have continued to address him as “Dear Professor”, but she signed off as “your friend Ellen C. Semple” (Semple, 1902). Ratzel responded with the informal “Liebe Miss Semple”, passed on regards from his family and proposed that they all spend time together in Italy, further evidence of the fact that the two had moved beyond a purely professional relationship (Ratzel, 1903). Indeed, during hyperinflation in 1920s Germany, Semple would send food and clothing to Ratzel's widow Marie and his daughters Hedwig and Lila (Baugh, n.d.:6). Although Semple eagerly played the role of Ratzel's “native informant” on issues of American politics, she was more than that. In March 1902 and thus almost a decade after her initial research assistance, Ratzel noted in his diary that Semple had sent him “letters and newspaper clippings” (Ratzel, 1902c). He was at this time working on the second edition of *Politische Geographie* and an article on North America. Two months later, he revisited Semple's documents, suggesting that they had, as in 1893, significance to his research process (Ratzel, 1902d). Semple reaped benefits too. Her work was included in a 1904 *Festschrift* for Ratzel's 60th birthday, revealing that her scholarship was recognised by Ratzel's wider circle and thus, by extension, by German geographers more widely (Semple, 1904d). When she died in 1932, *Geographische Zeitschrift* published an obituary for her (Gauss, 1932).

All of this implies that Ratzel and Semple's relationship was one with benefits on both sides. And whilst Ratzel featured less centrally in Semple's mature oeuvre, she never broke decisively with him and continued to cite his *Anthro-*

pogeographie in her last book *The geography of the Mediterranean region*, particularly on matters of migratory movement (Semple, 1931a:133, 657, 687, 706–707, 713). When in 1931 she donated her books to the University of Kentucky, she was keen to ensure that Ratzel's works would be correctly catalogued (Semple, 1931b). She had made plans to begin a new lecture series on political geography and write a book on the same subject but died before she could embark on these projects (Semple, 1931c). None of this, however, should imply that she was a mere *disciple*. As the following section shows, Semple had begun to formulate a more radical brand of a (soon to be hyphenated) anthropogeography as early as the mid-1890s.

4 Translation and adaptation

In order to get a better grasp of Semple's intellectual and political preoccupations immediately before she was exposed to Ratzel, I want to begin by examining her 1891 dissertation “Slavery: A study in sociology”. I then turn to the four translations of Ratzel's writings which she produced in the latter half of the 1890s. A comparison of these texts to the German originals reveals that she was already grappling with some of the tensions in Ratzel's theoretical edifice and that she struggled not only with his organismic theory of the state but also with his notion of *Geist* (spirit or mind). It was precisely this frustration with Ratzel which may have prompted her to abandon her plan of translating *Anthropogeographie* and develop instead a much neater, more argumentative and independent line of reasoning.

Semple's 1891 dissertation set out to examine the institution of chattel slavery throughout history and across different world regions, paying attention to legal regimes and social practices. Although she was interested in slavery and serfdom in medieval Europe as well as debt bondage in China, her main focus was on a comparison between ancient slavery in the Mediterranean and modern slavery in North America. In antiquity, the education of slaves had been a matter of importance, she noted, but it had been a punishable offence in the mid-18th century colony of South Carolina. Whilst emancipation had been possible in Rome and Greece, it had been severely restricted in the plantations of North America. Rather than approaching this difference on a moral plain, it was explained away by racial difference and economic history. As Adams (2011:41) shows, Semple framed slavery both as a universal human institution and a necessary stage of human history. Drawing on political economy and evolutionary biology, particularly the writings of Herbert Spencer, she argued that “savages” required a hierarchal economic organisation which taught them the value of labour and thus ultimately had a civilising influence (Semple, 1891:52). Slavery had a number of benefits: it led to capital accumulation and fostered trade – but it was incompatible with industrialisa-

¹⁰Semple had of course read Ratzel's 1901 *Lebensraum* essay and cited it in *Influences of geographic environment*, but did not employ the term itself (Semple, 1911:170).

tion and thus doomed to disappear wherever the latter had emerged (99).

Aside from Spencer, whose work featured heavily in the thesis, Semple also drew on Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel, the latter in English translation (Semple, 1891:146–148). She did not yet engage with Ratzel at this stage, nor with any other geographers. Her intellectual debt to an anglophone tradition of classical liberalism is apparent and shines through too in later writings. And although Semple did not set out to defend slavery, she found in a teleological and racialised sociology an approach which allowed her to present the violent history of her own region as a historical necessity: free enterprise and trade had made the institution obsolete. Ratzel’s geography would soon permit her to see slavery and the Civil War at an even higher level of abstraction, as the inevitable outcome of geographic forces. But in order to accomplish this, she first had to remove references to human agency from Ratzel’s geography.

Semple first completed a translation of the 1896 essay *Die Gesetze des räumlichen Wachstums der Staaten: Ein Beitrag zur wissenschaftlichen politischen Geographie*. A literal translation of the title would have been “The laws of spatial growth of states: A contribution to a scientific political geography” – but Semple tellingly shortened it to “The territorial growth of states” (Ratzel, 1896a). Although she was working closely with the original text and undoubtedly intent on conserving its meaning, she sought to bring clarity into Ratzel’s often convoluted formulations by slicing up his lengthy sentences and omitting passages which made reference to German scholars, many of whom would have been unknown to her readers. She also took out some of Ratzel’s empirical material, especially when the latter constituted no more than further evidence for a point which Ratzel has already richly illustrated. Semple’s introductory paragraph to the essay, however, was an important exception to her loyalty to the original. Whilst she retained, on this occasion, Ratzel’s understanding of the state as a living organism, she not only refused to set his political geography up as an alternative to the perspective of international law (*Völkerrecht*) but also omitted a sentence which discussed “spiritual relations” (*geistige Beziehungen*) between people as one of a number of vectors which define territory (Ratzel, 1896c:97). And whilst Semple was happy to translate *geistige Anstrengungen* as “mental efforts” (Ratzel, 1896a:351), she left out a sentence in which Ratzel spoke of a “spirit which realises a greater conception of space” (*eine größere Raumvorstellung verwirklichenden Geistes*) (Ratzel, 1896c:101).

Semple’s translations of three chapters from Ratzel’s *Politische Geographie* followed a similar approach in terms of their fidelity to the original (Ratzel, 1897b, 1898a, b). Just as with the earlier essay, these texts were neither annotated, the odd reference aside, nor did they include a translator’s preface. We can thus only speculate as to why she chose to translate some of the later, rather than the book’s opening chapters which developed Ratzel’s organicist metaphor. Chapters 13–

15 of *Politische Geographie* did include theoretical themes, chiefly about the global distribution of political space and the political effects of spatial distribution (Ratzel often seemed blissfully unaware of the circularity of some of his arguments), but were otherwise heavy on illustration. It is noticeable that when Ratzel’s organicist and evolutionary language did feature in these chapters, such as when he insisted on the “genetic connection between state and earth’s surface”, such language was curiously absent from Semple’s translation (Ratzel, 1897:320). Her well-known rejection of Ratzel’s organicism is thus likely to have been nurtured as early as the mid-1890s. That said, these translations clearly feature ideas and themes that can be found in Semple’s later work, such as Ratzel’s assertion that “the mastery over space brings man every moment face to face with the things of nature” and a discussion of the superior colonisation of North America by the “German races” over their “Latin” counterparts (Ratzel, 1898b:454, 457).

The issue of how to deal with *Geist* reappeared again in Semple’s version of chapter 14, where she decided to translate *Geist* as “intellect”. “When generals gain the greatest results by unexpected marches”, her text reads, “we see in such an achievement not merely a physical exploit, but a purely intellectual element of superior spacial conception” (Ratzel, 1898b:450–451). And whilst “intellect” is a possible translation of *Geist*, the more obvious choice would have been “spirit” or “mind”. Unlike “intellect”, the German for which would be *Intellekt* or *Verstand*, *Geist* does not presume an ability to reason. Ratzel stated in the same chapter that he was speaking of “space which had been converted into the spirit [*Geist*] of man”, inducing either “crippling or inspiring” consequences (Ratzel, 1897:335). In Semple, this appears in the phrase “lending [a people] wings or making it crawl” (Ratzel, 1898b:350). Semple seems to be agreeing with Ratzel’s reduction of space to a binary logic, which is either limiting or creative within a *Geist*. Ultimately, however, she is struggling with an ambiguity in Ratzel: does the environment form spatial consciousness, or does something, a *Geist*, intervene? Ratzel’s insistence that military and political leaders who were informed by a practical type of political geography could shape their nation’s fortunes must have struck Semple as being in tension with the general thrust of his argument about the earthbound nature of the state. *Geist* was thus in Ratzel a notion which opened his book up to a possibilist reading. Semple must have concluded that it was best to dispose of it.

Semple, it appears, was well aware that Ratzel used *Geist* in different and mutually exclusive ways. She seems initially to have been ambivalent as to how to proceed with the term. But by the time she spoke of the need to adapt anthropogeography to the “Anglo-Saxon mind”, she had long recognised that it was precisely a term like *Geist* which had to be removed. The problem was certainly not one of language proficiency. Semple’s letters to Ratzel reveal her German to have been advanced enough to grapple with the finer

nuances of his writings. Unsurprisingly then, whenever she used “spirit”, “intellect”, “mental life” and “mental constitution” in her later work, she treated these consistently as epiphenomena of spatial struggle or environmental influence (e.g. Semple, 1903:62, 96; 1911:22–23, 199). Such determinist logics could of course be found in Ratzel's writings too, but often with crucial caveats and counterarguments. Ratzel had increasingly turned to vitalism and pan-psychism in the final years of his life (Klinke, 2022). Semple, however, seems to have remained committed to an earlier and more “mechanist” Ratzel. Perhaps because he still recognised this earlier version of himself, he did not mind her sharpened reinterpretation. As we have seen, he gave his blessing to her attempts to carve out a position for herself which was allied to but ultimately independent from his.

5 Enslaved by the soil

The trajectory of Semple's own anthropogeography as well as her political positions crystallised most clearly in the 1903 *American history and its geographic conditions*, in which she set out to examine the evolution of the American frontier. Writing a decade after the environmental historian Fredrick Jackson Turner's influential treatise on the topic (Turner, 1893[1921]; see also Bassin, 1993:480), she began her account with the observation that the westward movement of the frontier was but a continuation of the colonisation of North America by the “Atlantic states” of Europe. Mountain ranges, rivers and climatic conditions had shaped this movement, variously holding back or dispersing populations, enabling particular types of agriculture, commerce and industry. Finally, the advance to the Pacific had opened up the opportunity for the United States to become the twentieth century's dominant commercial power.

Semple had no doubt about who should receive the credit for this mastery of space – the Anglo-Saxons. The vast spaces of North America, its abundance of raw materials had found their master in this “youngest, freshest, most progressive civilization of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Semple, 1903:400). Unlike other European colonists, she explained, the English had not amalgamated with other groups. “The line between them and the savage was therefore strictly drawn: half-breeds were rare” (81). “A less vigorous people”, she remarked, “would hardly have responded to the educative influences of this peculiar environment” (Semple, 1903:226). “Here heredity and environment”, she concluded, had “combined to do their utmost, and the result ha[d] not been small” (434). Semple did not take this racial valorisation of the “Anglo-Saxons” from Ratzel. The Leipzig geographer too admired English colonisation but his allegiance was firmly with Germany and German emigrants. Ultimately, his anthropogeography offered to Semple a detached way of approaching the political conflict into which she had been born and whose aftermath would dominate much of her life. With the help of Ratzel, she

sought to argue that the *casus belli* in 1861 had not been the conflict over slavery but rather a “sectional feeling originating in differences of climate and soil” (Semple, 1903:283). This divide had been accentuated by North America's geography; all great routes of communication, such as rivers and railroads, ran east to west. And whilst she did not deny the existence of struggles over the productivity and morality of the slave economy, she saw these as second-order problems to the geographical forces at play.

On this, Semple held a position morally allied with but analytically distinct from Turner, who saw the struggle over slavery as secondary to westward expansion (Turner, 1893[1921]:3), and Ratzel, who viewed it as subordinate to the conflict over territorial unity (Ratzel, 1897[1903]:94). Unlike the Leipzig geographer, Semple neither tried to excuse white supremacist violence (1876[1988]:148), nor did she seem interested in debating the racial theorists of her time (1904[1906]). But her disinterest in racial science neither prevented her from airing highly racialised views of black and indigenous Americans, nor did it preclude her from showing some understanding for the Confederate cause. She noted with noticeable admiration that after Kentucky had been secured by the Union, “the flower of its manhood [had] marched across the border into Tennessee to join the standard of the South” (Semple, 1903:288). Despite her sympathies for the South, she concluded that the lessons from political geography were unambiguous: “the disruption of the Union would have been a retrograde step” because it threatened the preservation of a “large political territory” (308). Here, her views were entirely compatible with Ratzel's.

When Semple published *Influences of geographic environment on the basis of Ratzel's system of anthropo-geography* in 1911, she set out to unearth “classes of geographic influences”, something which Ratzel had not systematically attempted. She stated in a letter to Keltie that she wanted her book “to be more than a mere restatement of Ratzel's Principles” (Semple, 1907; see also Keighren, 2010:41). It included, after all, her own inductive research on coastal peoples. She was planning to include Ratzel's name in the subtitle not merely out of a sense of indebtedness but “to protect me against the charge of plagiarism” (Semple, 1907).

Semple chose to structure the book in a way that would have been familiar to readers of Ratzel. Whilst theoretical points were developed in the early chapters, later sections served the purpose of illustration and were organised around geographical features (mountains, rivers, islands and so on). A conclusion was absent. Like Ratzel, she had a tendency to suffocate her audience with an abundance of illustrations of nature's grip on historical processes but avoided discussing the most obvious counterexamples (Koelsch, 2014:53). Ratzelian motifs and formulations appeared throughout. She emphasised the importance of geographical location in understanding the evolution of a particular people and stressed the role which large areas played in guaranteeing national permanence. Like Ratzel, she de-

scribed the ways in which geography channelled migration and flagged up the importance of isolation for cultural differentiation. She shared his view that territorial growth of advanced nations naturally disposed indigenous peoples towards extinction and that the tropical climate tended to relax “moral fibre” (Semple, 1911:626). Ultimately, humanity was earthbound, its history subjected to geographical factors and climatic influences.

And yet, we can agree with her own assessment that *Influences of geographic environment* was not simply a restatement of Ratzel’s *Anthropogeographie*. The book followed neither the structure of the first edition of Ratzel’s book (1882 vol. 1/1891 vol. 2), nor that of the second – and included discussion of political geography, to which Ratzel had devoted a separate book. Semple did not bother with Ratzel’s lengthy discussion of anthropogeography’s place in relation to other fields, his methodological reflections, nor his potted history of environmental thinking from Antiquity to Carl Ritter. Ratzel too had written, though not without caveats, that nature entered into human “bone and tissue” (Semple, 1911:1; Ratzel, 1882:61), but had shied away from the kind of statements which Semple made about the relationship between geography and the human body. “On the mountains [the earth] has given him leg muscles of iron to climb the slope; along the coast she has left these weak and flabby, but given him instead vigorous development of chest and arm to handle his paddle” (Semple, 1911:1).¹¹ Semple was cruder too than Ratzel when she claimed that “[h]istory tends to repeat itself largely owing to this steady, unchanging geographic element”.

Unlike Ratzel, Semple often seemed disinterested in cultural landscapes, how the earth had been shaped in different historic periods by humans, how and why swamps were drained, forests cleared, and how such cultural landscapes were best classified. Whereas Ratzel had entertained the idea that individual political or military leaders could shape the fortunes of their nations, Semple was sceptical on this matter. Although not ruling out that a “great man” could “institute a far-seeing policy, to whose wisdom only gradually is the people awakened”, she cautioned that the acts of such a leader were “rarely arbitrary or artificial” for “he is a product of the same forces that made his people” (Semple, 1911:42). Whereas Ratzel took an interest in the actions of individual leaders or particular political parties, Semple almost entirely avoided such discussions. As Ashworth (2013:140) points out, this amounted to a radicalisation of Ratzel’s *Anthro-*

pogeographie which had tended to conceal its determinist streak behind excessive complexity and dense prose.

On the question of race, the pair held similar but not entirely congruous positions. Both geographers claimed that racial difference needed to be understood in environmental rather than biological ways and both were firm believers in the hierarchy of races. Although Semple was a proponent of monogenesis, she did not mind citing nineteenth century polygenists like Louis Agassiz and Josiah Clark Nott in her writing (Semple, 1911:125). Ratzel too rejected polygenesis but spoke favourably of Agassiz after having spent time with him in 1873 on his journey to North America (Klinke, 2022). Both agreed that slavery had not been the *casus belli* in 1861. Whereas Ratzel saw the war as a struggle for territorial unity, Semple viewed it as the outcome of geographic forces. As we have seen, she disagreed precisely with the way in which Ratzel had given agency to space itself. Despite these nuances, the two geographers reinforced each other’s views of the colonisation of America and race in the 1890s. They may have thought of racial character as mutable, but this hardly prevented them from using anthropogeography to legitimate some of the most reactionary political agendas of their time. Ultimately, her claim that humanity was eternally enslaved by the soil implied a levelling of relations of oppression between the planter class and the chattel, a move consistent with her positioning within discourses of the New South.

6 Concluding remarks

Despite its obvious debt to Friedrich Ratzel’s *Anthropogeographie*, Ellen Semple’s anthropogeography cannot simply be folded back into his approach. Her regional interests only partially overlapped with his, her writing style was smoother and her claims bolder. She remained committed to a liberal anglophone tradition of political economy which predated her interest in Ratzel’s anthropogeography. Semple’s writings, moreover, introduced a semantic shift, depriving Ratzel’s geography not only of its occasional interest in human agency, but also of some of its most esoteric concepts, including that of *Geist*. Unlike Ratzel, she shied away from transmitting her ideas to a mass audience, preferring geographical societies and other educational associations (Bushong, 1984:91). Her work for Wilson’s Inquiry brought her closer to political decision-making than Ratzel had ever been. The Leipzig geographer had only ever advised the King of Saxony.

Semple’s affiliation with Ratzel was only one of a number of reasons for her academic success. She was not only supported in the second half of her life by a network of mostly male North American and British geographers, but also, at an earlier stage, by an elite all-female environment at Vassar and the Woman’s Club of Louisville (Adams, 2011:13). The fact that Semple framed herself quite explicitly as a fol-

¹¹Note that although Semple does not deny the inheritance of acquired characteristics, she is not necessarily making a Lamarckian argument here. Whilst Semple does not mention Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, she cites Charles Darwin throughout the book, mobilising both the notions of variability and natural selection. Moritz Wagner, Ratzel’s guide to speciation and much else, is only mentioned in passing – but has a presence too in relation to the question of isolation (Semple, 1911:115, 169).

lower of a preeminent male thinker needs to be evaluated in the light of what it might have meant for her to succeed as a woman in a male-dominated institutional setting. None of Ratzel's other posthumous popularisers, men such as Rudolf Kjellén (1964–1922) and Karl Haushofer (1869–1946), seem to have feared the charge of plagiarism. But this question has also to be viewed in the more general context of nineteenth century patronage. Ratzel too had his master, patron and mentor, Moritz Wagner. It was Wagner who had first encouraged Ratzel to fuse an older Ritterian tradition of geography with insights from evolutionary biology. A grateful Ratzel thanked this “fatherly friend” by showering him in praise and dedicating his works to him (Ratzel, 1882:xv–xviii). If at all, Semple's comments in the preface to *Influences of geographic environment* reveal an intellectual independence from her mentor which Ratzel had failed to achieve. Although there has been speculation that Ratzel may have come to question some of Wagner's ideas after the latter's suicide in 1887 (Steinmetzler, 1956:95), he never criticised his master in writing.

Even in the mid-1890s, when Semple was translating Ratzel, her thinking had not become overdetermined by the Leipzig geographer. As her 1896 lecture “Civilization is at bottom an economic fact” to the Third Biennial General Federation of Women's Clubs in Louisville shows, she was still guided by an anglophone tradition of political economy (Semple, 1896). Ratzel only made a passing appearance. But when she reused the same phrase about civilisation as “at bottom an economic fact” to open a chapter on the American Civil War in her 1903 book, she added this time that “[b]eneath the economic lie the geographical conditions, and these in the last analysis are factors in the formation of ethical standards” (Semple, 1903:280). This shows that geography offered to Semple a “deeper” understanding of history in general and of the American Civil War in particular than did political economy. Ultimately ethics, including the ethics of slavery, was formed by geography.

Translation, clarification and adaptation of Ratzel's work may have been amongst her key objectives, as Keighren (2010:24) rightly highlights. But all three of these entailed a not-so-subtle critique. By stripping Ratzel's anthropogeography of its indecision and mysticism, she in fact created something more argumentative and thus ultimately easier to dismiss. It was precisely the elasticity of Ratzel's ideas, particularly his *Lebensraum* concept, which proved most readily adaptable for ideological purposes in Weimar and Nazi Germany. Incidentally, Semple never found any use for “living space” in her own work and preferred to keep separate notions of “habitat” and “territory” which *Lebensraum* precisely sought to blur. And yet, her participation in the Inquiry highlights that Ratzelians found themselves on both sides of “Versailles”, in the territorial revisionism of the Nazi sympathiser Karl Haushofer and in the blueprint for a new American world order to which Semple and Bowman contributed. When confronted with the formative influ-

ence of *Geopolitik* on Nazi expansionism, Haushofer wrote an apologia in November 1945 which sought to justify his own thinking by placing it within a politically “untainted” Anglo-American tradition. He named Semple as one of its most crucial proponents (Haushofer, 1945[1979]:642).

Semple's input on the “racial question” was pivotal to the hardening of Ratzel's views in the 1890s. He had begun to adopt a white supremacist reading of the Civil War and Reconstruction well before he had met Semple (Ratzel, 1880:99–104). But as he never returned to North America after his visit in the mid-1870s, he had to draw on informants like Semple to update his understanding of US society. With her help, he expanded the section on black America for the book's second edition, now noting that the continued presence of the formerly enslaved made “racial aristocracy unavoidable” (Ratzel, 1880[1893]:283). At the end of his life, he treated the status of African Americans in the United States as a crystal ball into the future of global race relations. “Let us see”, he wrote in 1904, what lessons might be learned from that “greatest of racial questions” (Ratzel, 1904[1906]:483). On a global level too, he concluded, “salvation [] lies only in the gradation and division of tasks, which should be combined with spatial segregation in order to counteract the risk of the higher race mixing” (483).

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