Imperialism and the nation state in Friedrich Ratzel's political geography

by Mark Bassin

I would annex the whole world. I would, if I could. . . . The planets, . . . yes the planets, if I could. I often think of that. Cecil Rhodes in 1900 (Millin, 1952: 366).

A nation (Volk) does not remain immobile for generations on the same piece of territory: it must expand, for it is growing. Friedrich Ratzel (1901: 171–72).

I Introduction

From the middle of the 1870s, the major European powers embarked upon the most ambitious programme of colonial acquisition the world had to that point witnessed. The United States and Japan eventually joined in this intense and increasingly competitive drive, the apotheosis of which was reached with the outbreak of world war I in 1914. This 'new imperialism' aroused much initial enthusiasm and, ultimately, passionate committment – depicted masterfully in the pathological Mr Kurtz of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – but nevertheless was not seen universally as a natural stage in the evolution of European political life. This is understandable, for the new expansionist course did indeed represent a radical departure from some of the more basic political traditions of the nineteenth century. Among the most important of these was the idea of the nation state. As an ideal for social and political organization, the nation-state concept had inspired virtually the entire spectrum of European civic life since the French Revolution, and did not cease to do so even after the 1870s. Yet this ideal was fundamentally challenged by the realities of the new imperialism: the openended political and territorial expansion of the developed world across the globe and the absorbtion of foreign lands and peoples into the national-imperial state framework of the respective metropole. This was from the outset irreconcilable, both logically as well as practically, with the territorially limited and socially homogeneous unit implied by the nation state.

The tensions arising out of this *de facto* contradiction were hardly concealed at the time, and those promoting the new imperialist endeavor were faced, at least initially, with considerable obstacles. Not least of these were idealogical, for fundamental amendments were necessary to nearly a century of popular political

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traditions and aspirations. Some sort of political *Weltanschauung* had to be offered to take the place of the venerable but already, so it was felt, anachronistic nation-state ideal; something that would be at once more appropriate, more 'modern' and better suited to the realities and needs of contemporary European imperialism. In this essay[1] I will argue that the essence of Friedrich Ratzel's political geography is to be understood within this context of late nineteenth-century European imperialism and more specifically as a particular response to the tensions between nation state and empire just described.[2] Building, as was common for the time, on concepts taken from the natural sciences, he applied these by analogy to human society, and in so doing constructed a system that both explained and justified 'scientifically' the necessity for the constant political and physical expansion of the state. A champion of the 'modern' imperial view of state life, he exhorted vociferously against those who would contain Germany within the more restricted goals of simple ethnic unity and national sovereignty: in other words, the establishment of a true German nation state. The ultimate expression of this type of thinking, and the significance of Ratzel's own contribution, became clear in the development of German expansionist thinking after 1918, which witnessed the tragic culmination of German imperialism.

II National and imperial state ideals in the nineteenth century

In its classic form, the concept of the nation state was closely associated with the ideas of natural rights, national sovereignty and nationalism that had emerged in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution and the defeat of the Napoleonic occupations. The nation state was founded on the idea that every people or nation was entitled to form a united and sovereign state, the physical foundation of which would be the specific piece of territory that through centuries of inhabitation and use had become recognizably nationalized. In a sense, therefore, the nation state was the tangible product of the union of a distinctly 'national' group of people with a correspondingly distinct 'national' territorial base (Kohn, 1956: 4ff; Shafer, 1955: 104–11; Meinecke, 1962: 12; Mosse, 1974: 49–50). Importantly, the right to national statehood of this sort was seen as universal, each nationality sharing in it equally. This gave rise to a perspective on international relations which formed an implicit part of the nation-state idea itself: the vision of a fraternal community or brotherhood of nation states, each pursuing their independent national existence within the boundaries of their own discrete and, it was understood, limited national territory (Hayes, 1963: 242; Mosse, 1974: 52–53). It was, however, only in western Europe that historical and demographic circumstances made possible the realization of a reasonably satisfactory approximation of these ideals. In central and eastern Europe, the nation state remained an ideal and a vision. As such, it was an object of increasingly intense popular aspiration but, up to 1918 at least, unrealized and indeed unrealizable.

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This final point is important for our consideration of Ratzel and German imperialism. In Germany in particular, the realization of the nation-state ideal[3] was impossible from the outset. This was due, among other factors, to the circumstance that the ethnically German population was not centralized spatially, but rather had become widely and often thinly dispersed over the centuries throughout central and eastern Europe. Bismarck, it is true, created a unified and 'national' German state, but his *kleindeutsch* solution was a nation state that excluded over 10 million Germans in adjacent Austria-Hungary and yet remoter areas (Mosse, 1974: 64–65; Rothfels, 1959b: 66–68). At the same time and for the same reason, a clearly defined and generally recognized territorial base that would be uniquely German was lacking. All of these considerations insured that Germany, in striving for consolidation on the nation-state model, would in the process necessarily be constrained to go beyond it and embark on a course of expansionism, in order to assemble the various German *irridenta* into one nationally founded state (Meyer, 1955: 22).[4] The term 'expansionist' used in this sense, however, must be qualified, for it was in an important regard limited: limited in its aims, this is, to the creation of a truly all-inclusive national state. It should be kept distinct from the contemporaneous movement of German colonial expansion, the sources and aims of which were quite different.

As with the nation-state principle, Germany shared basic elements of its late nineteenth-century imperialist thinking with parallel tendencies in western Europe. Imperialism was certainly nothing new on the world scene, and specifically had in some form been characteristic of every phase of modern European history. Nonetheless, in a number of important respects the final quarter of the nineteenth century marked a watershed. In the first place, the simple dimensions of the new activity far surpassed anything that had gone before: from 1875 to 1914 some 620 000 square kilometres of new territory were formally annexed *per year* as colonial possessions. This amounted to an increase of nearly three times over the preceding 75-year period, such that by 1914 about 85 per cent of the earth's land surface consisted either of colonies (or former colonies) or colonial powers (Nowell, 1979: 894). Moreover, the geographical object of the imperial drive shifted in a fundamental way. Much of the earlier expansion had taken place in regions that were from the European point of view essentially empty, such as North America, Australia, New Zealand, and much of South Africa. In all of these areas, the annexed territories served the important function of settlement colonies for an outflow of population from the mother countries. In the period under consideration, on the other hand, the focus shifted to Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific (Fieldhouse, 1973: 2–5), and colonization involved rather the incorporation of more or less intact societies. Finally, there was a dramatic increase in the number of colonial competitors, the 'traditional' colonial powers of England, France, and Russia being joined in the 1880s and 1890s by Germany, Italy, Belgium, the United States and Japan.

By the end of the century, the drive for imperial expansion had become a frenzied quest for new annexations, a quest in which considerations of rational

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economic exploitation or political integration of the colonial territories were often pushed aside by an overbearing hunger for continued growth at all costs. It was, moreover, a process which had no logical end or goal beyond that of further expansion (Lüthy, 1961: 488; Smith, 1978: 122–23, 146; Arendt, 1966: 125). The vigour of late nineteenth-century imperialism was fuelled by the ubiquitous conviction that the healthy development of an advanced state in the modern world rested fundamentally on the acquisition of colonies. Already in 1870 Charles Dilke gave expression to the new fascination with empire in asserting that India's significance for Britain lay essentially in its insuring that 'vastness of dominion which, in this age, is needed to secure width of thought and nobility of purpose' (Dilke, 1870: 573; Langer, 1951: 71). In this way, expansion *per se* was elevated to the *conditio sine qua non* for prosperity, and indeed for continued existence. This view became nothing less than the obsession of an entire era, the truly fantastic dimensions of which can be sensed in the simple German formula *Weltmacht oder Niedergang*, or in the heartfelt yearnings of that quintessential imperialist Cecil Rhodes for a British empire stretching 'from the Cape to Cairo' (Langer, 1951: 67, 70–75; Arendt, 1966: 125; Oncken, 1948: 12).

The new popular passion for expansion did not fit well with the principles of the nation-state outlined above and indeed represented in many ways its antithesis. The notion of the *body politic* as a sovereign people occupying its own national territory was violated by the formal colonial annexation and incorporation of totally foreign lands and peoples. In a similar way, there was a definite departure from older ideas of a fraternal community of nations sharing equal rights and entitlements. Fieldhouse has commented on the new 'bellicosity' that characterized relations among the imperial powers in the final decades of the nineteenth century (1973: 5–6, 64; Koch, 1970: 57–59), and indeed, this bellicosity would seem to have been a natural concomitant of the colonial contest itself. Throughout Europe, the vision of the international arena as the scene of an ongoing struggle grew increasingly popular: a struggle in which national interests were necessarily in conflict and where one nation's gain could mean nothing other than another's loss and possible decline.[5] These and related new ideas were given an intellectual framework and justification by the philosophy of social darwinism, which enjoyed its great flowering during precisely this period.

Taking a radically materialist and holistic view of the world, the social darwinists argued that the laws governing the natural organic realm applied with equal validity to human society. These laws were, as their mentor had taught, those of evolution and unceasing growth of all organisms, together with the principle of their survival through an all-encompassing and neverending struggle for existence. For the purposes of international politics, the social darwinists identified the political state as the anthropological unit corresponding to a natural organism, from which point it was immediately possible to derive the imperative for the growth, i.e., physical expansion, indicated above. At the same time, the international arena was thereby converted into a network or, to follow the popular image, a jungle of competing state organisms, struggling against each

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other for their bare survival. Success in this struggle superseded every other concern, and became the sole criterion by which a state should judge the morality and effectiveness of its international behaviour (Hayes, 1963: 4–6, 114–16; Gasman, 1971: xxii, 33–36; Koch, 1970; Zmarzlik, 1963).

III Ratzel's system of political geography

It is within the context of the imperialist frenzy described above that Friedrich Ratzel's political geography is to be understood. It represents the attempt to develop a theory of expansionism in which the need for more or less constant physical growth of the state was explained, as it were, 'scientifically' in the manner popular for the age: by direct analogy with the plant and animal world. For despite Ratzel's ever greater reservations in regard to certain aspects of Darwin's theories (e.g. 1905: 399) and the outspoken rejection in his mature work of the more brutal contemporary social darwinist tendencies, still his logic and argumentation derived a great deal of their inspiration from these teachings.[6] Throughout his career, he vociferously advocated the essential unity of all organic life on earth, and shared the conclusion that, because of this fact, human society can be understood in terms of precisely the same laws that govern the natural world (e.g. 1869: 478–79, 482; 1901–1902: II, 554). In this spirit, his goal was to create a 'science' out of political geography parallel to that of physical geography (Ratzel, 1885: 248–49; Overbeck, 1965: 63–64), and his theory of expansionism, based on the central concept of *Lebensraum*, was initially derived from a biogeographical consideration of the non-human organic world.

Ratzel argued that every living organism required a specific amount of territory from which to draw sustenance and labelled this territory the respective *Lebensraum*, or living-space, of the particular organism. He continually emphasized the elemental significance of the *Lebensraum* concept. Indeed, the idea of life itself could not for him be separated from its attendant space-need: '[Every] new form of life needs space in order to come into existence, and yet more space to establish and pass on its characteristics' (1899–1912: I, 231; 1901: 146). Importantly, Ratzel's conception of an organism included not only individual living units such as single trees or elephants, but also applied to entire homogenous and spatially coalesced populations of these individuals, such as forests of trees or herds of animals. These Ratzel termed aggregate-organisms, and as such they had their own independent *Lebensraum* requirements. Because, however, the laws of nature dictated that through reproduction the absolute size of such homogeneous populations would ultimately increase, so too would their space-need, leving the inescapable alternative of expansion or decline.[7]

For Ratzel to apply this biogeographical scheme to human society, it was necessary only to locate in this society the organism on to which the space-need concept could be transferred. Here Ratzel followed the lead that had already been conceptually developed by the social darwinists, such as Oskar Hertwig

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(1899), Albert Schäffle (1875–78) and Albert von Krieken (1873)[8] and identified the political state as the corresponding organism or, more precisely, aggregate-organism (1897: 8). Composed of coalesced homogenous populations of human individuals, he argued, the state not only bore a morphological resemblance to forests or animal herds, but operated according to the same laws of development (1897: 11; 1899–1912: I, 2). The state organism was based on a certain defined territorial expanse – a *Lebensraum* – in which a certain level of sustenance was available. On the basis of this level a human society could consolidate and develop. This relatively stable relationship was bound to be upset, however, as the human population grew, resulting in an increased demand for sustenance, in other words a greater space-need (1896a: 98; 1923: 90). The ubiquitous response to this circumstance was a 'flowing over' of excess population beyond the formal political boundaries of the state (1899–1912: I, 121; 1923: 70, 90), a process which in discussing Chinese emigration in the 1870s he likened to fermenting honey 'flowing over the rim of the jar' (1876: 254). Under optimal conditions, the state would then itself physically expand to meet this need, acquire additional *Lebensraum* and once again consolidate on the newly enlarged state territory. If, however, the state were either unable to attempt acquisition of new lands, or if its attempts should prove unsuccessful – if, in short, it did not expand – then it would necessarily exhaust its sustenance base and thereby decline (1899–1912: I, 72).[9]

The malthusian inspiration, with its characteristic notion of overpopulation, is not difficult to detect in Ratzel's thesis. The conclusions that he and his contemporaries drew, however, were diametrically opposed to those of Malthus. For while the latter was concerned that the population of a country,should simply not be allowed to grow beyond that country's nutritional capacity (Malthus, 1966: 7–14ff; Young, 1969: 111–12; Koch, 1973: 26–27), it was canonical in the view of the social darwinists that a vigorous increase of population was one of the most important indications of a nation's health and vitality (Gasman, 1971: 98–100). This was a canon that Ratzel fully accepted. The actual problem, he argued, arose not from the imperative to expand, which was in itself entirely normal and positive. Rather, the source of the ultimate difficulties was to be found in the circumstance that, while the imperative he identified was shared equally by every state, still the earth's surface was finite and offered only a limited amount of territory for this purpose (e.g. 1901–1902: II, 590). Moreover, as states grew larger through history, this available territory became ever more limited, and in this process they were forced to compete ever more directly and aggressively with each other for territorial advantage. The ultimate expression of this was the contemporary imperialist competition, for Ratzel understood overseas colonial acquisition as the only remaining means by which the European states, by the late nineteenth century already hopelessly overpopulated in terms of their native *Lebensraume*, could further expand territorially (1898: 143–44; 1899–1912: II, 191; 1923: 106–107, 257, 308). The European continent itself he viewed as effectively occupied and thus unavailable for new settlement (1923: 270; 1906b: 376), a perspective which Hitler for one did not share, as discussed below.[10]

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IV Grossraum, the Volk, and the modern struggle for space

Ratzel adopted the social darwinist vision of relations between states to the extent that he also saw these as a *Kampf ums Dasein* or struggle for existence. This he modified in terms of his theory into a *Kampf um Raum*, or struggle for space (Steinmetzler, 1956: 42), and defined it as well as a biogeographical principle:

> Between the movement of life, which is never at rest, and the earth's territory (*Raum*), which remains constant, arises a contradiction. Out of this contradiction the struggle for space is born. [In the beginning] life was quickly able to [spread and] take over the land surface (*Boden*) of the earth as its own, but when it reached the limits of this surface it flowed back, and since this time, over the entire earth, life struggles with life unceasingly for space. The much misused, and even more misunderstood expression 'the struggle for existence' really means first of all a struggle for space. For space is the very first condition of life, in terms of which all other conditions are measured, above all sustenance (1901: 153, 165–68).

The application of this principle to contemporary European society led Ratzel to the conclusion that his own country must acquire land outside Europe if it was to survive, and he clung to this conviction with a passion that was fully at one with the *Zeitgeist* of his imperialist age. He argued that these new territories need not necessarily be limited to lands suitable for European agriculturalists, and indeed pointed to the fact that the best lands for this purpose had already been claimed (1884: 10; 1899–1912: I, 192). Rather, he insisted that *all* available territory, even uninhabitable and foreseeably unexploitable stretches of desert, had at least a potential political value, and referred to the contemporary process of colonial acquisition cynically but thoroughly approvingly as 'large-scale land speculation' (*Grossgrundspekulation*) (Ratzel, 1923: 32, 74; 1897: 80; Schulte-Althoff, 1971: 143). As he asserted in the opening pages of his *Political geography*:

> The policy that recognises the more distant goals toward which the state strives, and [for this reason] secures for the growing nation (*Volk*) the necessary land for its future, is a truer *Realpolitik* than that which bears this name because it accomplishes only that which is immediately tangible, for the sake of the present day alone (1923: 8; 108).

For Ratzel, the cultural development of a state was inseparable from its spatial growth. Consequently, states of limited territorial extent, such as tribal groupings in Africa, were associated with lower levels of development. This condition Ratzel termed *Kleinraum* (1899–1912: I, 236–38, 241; 1923: 152–53). The advance of civilization was marked everywhere by the progressive broadening of the territorial base of the state. In considering the present and the future, Ratzel declared repeatedly that the territorial base of the European states had become too narrow, and would in the future have to give way to the modern principle of *Grossraum*. Concerning precisely what was meant by the designation *gross*, or large, Ratzel remained vague, but judging from his usage it implied a state with physical dimensions greater than those normal or indeed possible on the European continent. Ratzel did not coin this term, which had already been used in the German literature on political economy some three decades earlier (von Inama-Sternegg, 1869: 9ff; Faber, 1982: 392), but within his system it acquired a new significance. His models came from the non-European world, most notably

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from the impressive example of the rapid and vibrant colonization of the United States, but included Australia, Russia, and China as well (1905: 476; 1923: 264, 270).[11] These countries, he insisted, exemplified the pattern that was to be the wave of the future: politically unified states based on continental or at least subcontinental land masses (Faber, 1982: 392).

> The European system of small but intensively used spaces is retrograde in the face of [contemporary states based on *Grossraum*] because it cannot be [the pattern] of the future: a pattern which today, as it has for millennia, strives unremittingly after ever-larger spaces. The large states, such as represented by the United States, are the modern expression of a political state in which new developments take place, and which especially benefit from the accomplishments of commerce; the other states stay behind. (Ratzel, 1923: 270; also see von Inama-Sternegg, 1869: 39).

Ratzel expressed an understandable consternation at the fact that it was indeed the 'young' non-European powers which seemed to have the spatial advantage, but most fundamentally his urging of the *Grossraum* principle was intended, as was his entire theory, to awaken Germany to the enormity of the stakes in the current struggle for colonial acquisitions.

It is entirely logical that in Ratzel's theory of the state and political expansion the idea of the people as a nation or *Volk* was accorded only a minor significance. The state for him was an organic whole that developed out of the interaction between a group of people and the territory they occupy – *ein Stück Boden und ein Stück Menschheit*, in his famous formulation (1923: 2). It is precisely this shared relationship to the land that was important in bonding the group together, and not an *a priori* ethnic or racial kinship. He made this point explicitly in defining the *Volk* as 'a politically united body made up of groups and individuals, *who need neither to be related ethnically nor linguistically*, but who through their common territory are *spatially* linked together (*verbundene*)' (1923: 3, emphasis added). Ratzel did not deny the existence of ethnicity as such, and even allowed that the circumstance of ethnic kinship had historically been one factor, among many, for fostering cohesion and unity within a state (1923: 141). He left no doubt, however, that in the Europe of his day it was unacceptable to continue to view ethnic or national affinity as the ultimate basis for the formation of the state.[12]

To the national principle outlined earlier in this essay, Ratzel emphatically contrasted his own geographical or territorial principle, and insisted that in the modern world the basis for a successful state must be the idea of *Grossraum*. Accordingly, he condemned the striving for an exclusively nationally founded state, or *Nationalitätenpolitik*, which represented a dreamy goal for many of his contemporaries in central and eastern Europe:

> Viewed against the major movement of our time to give politics an ever-firmer territorial base, today's *Nationalitätenpolitik* is a step backward away from this territorial priority (*Rückschritt ins Unterritoriale*). It considers a people based on a linguistic community to be the principle of the state, without any regard for its land. It will in the long run not be able to stand up against a geographical politics, which is concerned above all with land.

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> Political strivings [toward an exclusively national union] stand in notable contrast to the tendency toward large political spaces, and will certainly be overcome by the latter, unless they join with a political movement based on the *Grossraum* principle, such as the Pan-Slavs. It is [only] in union with [such movements] that they can hope to win. *Because, however, spatial growth is founded on a younger and more lasting political force than the idea of a national union, we see the former progress uninterruptedly beyond the latter.* Purely national politics are inspired by the struggle to free oneself from the geographical conditions of the land, but this struggle is unmistakably defeated [by these very conditions] and in the end always submits to them. (1923: 25 and 162–63 [emphasis added], 278–79).

Ratzel applied this logic with admirable consistency to the situation in his own country. In an early essay, for example, he rejected on principle the claims of the Germans in the Baltic regions to membership in a German state, arguing that this would violate the exclusively geographical or territorial logic which must be the foundation of all political unions (1878: 198). He firmly adhered to this position in his later work. In so doing, he not only opposed a popular current of the time, but indeed raised fundamental questions at the outset about an issue that was to become nothing less than a holy cause for many of his countrymen.[13]

Within the context of the tensions between nation and empire discussed earlier in this essay, the significance of Ratzel's political geography is unmistakable. He has discarded as 'retrograde' the classic nineteenth-century idea of the nation state as the ultimate form of political organization, and offered in its stead something radically different. Presented in the language of the age, using, that is, the 'scientific' precepts of a rudely materialist social darwinism, his system was a coherent formulation and justification of the concern that animated Europe's modern age of imperialism: the drive for political expansion. Its inordinate significance lay in the fact that it replaced an essentially *restricted* ideal of political organization – limited spatially to the distribution of the nationality and its national territory, and bound at least in theory by notions of international coexistence – with a vision of biologically founded expansion having no ultimate goal besides that of further growth and expansion. In an early discussion of Ratzel, Franz Neumann identified this fundamental aspect of his thinking and expressed it succinctly with the observation that 'The laws of movement . . . and space cannot be reconciled with the notion of a unified legal and political sovereignty over a specific area' (1944: 139). Older standards of relations between states were overruled by the single exigency of the struggle for space, and success in the endeavour to expand became the sole criterion for moral judgement.

In presenting and arguing for these ideas Ratzel did not limit himself to the pages of his scholarly texts. Quite to the contrary, in an age which in general was characterized by the intense involvement of academics directly in the political life of the country (cf. Kehr, 1930: 361–63ff; Marienfeld, 1957; Ascher, 1963), Ratzel was among the most involved. He was active from the first in colonial advocacy leagues, and passionately took up their cause of convincing a reluctant German government of the need to acquire overseas colonial possessions. In the late 1870s, while still a young university instructor in Munich, he founded the 'Munich association for the defense of German interests abroad', a branch of one of the

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earliest and most important colonial societies: the 'Central association for commercial geography and the promotion of German interests abroad' (Wehler, 1969: 158–59, 165; Schulte-Althoff, 1971: 88–89; Smith, 1978: 20). In 1882 he was a founding member of the *Kolonialgesellschaft* and later in the decade of its successor the *Kolonialverein* (Schulte-Althoff, 1971: 111; Smith, 1980: 66). In the early 1890s he was one of the very few geographers to participate in the establishment of the radical-conservative *Alldeutscher Verband*, or Pan-German League, and although he quickly distanced himself from the group's more outspoken chauvinism (Kruck, 1954: 18; Mosse, 1964: 220), his students Paul Langhans and Felix Hänsch went on to play important roles in the organization (Meyer, 1955: 111; Faber, 1982: 393). At the turn of the century he joined with such luminaries as Max Weber in the group of so-called 'fleet professors': prominent academics who supported the rapid development of Germany's navy in order to enhance the country's position as a world power (Marienfeld, 1957: 53, 55, 69–70; Schulte-Althoff, 1971: 161).

In addition to this active engagement in political organizations, much of Ratzel's prodigous literary output was devoted to treatments of contemporary problems of world politics. These included entire monographs advocating the need for overseas expansion (1884) and the imperative for the country to develop a competitive navy (1900). The latter work in particular won high praise in naval circles, where it was considered an excellent 'scientific foundation for the professional education of naval officers' (Hassert, 1905: 233). He was moreover one of the most active contributors in the 1890s to the conservative-nationalist journal *Die Grenzboten* (Buttmann, 1977: 124; Wanklyn, 1961: 46). Throughout all of this, Ratzel strove to explain and popularize the ideas that he had developed on a scholarly level in his political geography: the dire need for Germany to acquire land to insure its healthy growth and the life-and-death character of the current struggle for space among the imperial powers. The near-frenzied tone which these exhortations could reach is well expressed in a passage written in 1898 in regard to the naval question and Germany's position as a world power. 'There will always be peoples who rule and peoples who serve', Ratzel observed, and depicted metaphorically the existential choice facing the nation as between being either a hammer or an anvil.

> Whether they [i.e., we Germans] become one or the other depends on their recognizing in good time the demands which the world situation presents to a nation which is struggling to rise. Prussia's task in the eighteenth century – to win for itself a position as a major power in the middle of the European continental powers – was different from that of Germany in the nineteenth century: to win a place among the world powers. This task can no longer be solved in Europe alone; it is only as a world [i.e., global] power that Germany can hope to secure for its people the land which it needs for its growth. Germany must not remain apart from the transformations and redistributions taking place in all parts of the world if it does not want to run the risk . . . of being pushed into the background for generations. (1906b: 377–8).[14]

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V Lebensraum and expansionist ideology in Germany after 1918

Although Ratzel's ideas certainly had an effect in the period after world war I, subjectively he still belonged to Europe's pre-1914 era. This is apparent, for example, from his insistence that spatial growth of the state need not necessarily resemble that of other aggregate-organisms and take the form of an amorphous extrusion beyond existing boundaries into immediately adjacent areas. Rather, he believed that the expansion of advanced states could be a rational and planned affair, accomplished through the selective sending out of groups of excess population for the purposes of colonization (1899–1912: I, 147–48, 167–68). The territorial needs of these groups could be met through land acquisition overseas, in the non-European world (1899–1912: I, 167–68). As noted, Ratzel rejected the idea of territorial expansion on the European continent itself. Moreover, although he did adopt the view of relations between states as a struggle for space, which meant existence, it may well be argued that he did not necessarily feel that the ultimate outcome of this would be a general armed conflagration. Despite a not infrequently aggressive tone, in important respects his thinking unmistakably reflected some of the dominant optimism of nineteenth-century liberalism. This was an ambiguity that Ratzel shared fully with social darwinism in general, and in his writings as well can be found the vision of the progressive march of civilization toward ultimate perfection. One example of this was his optimistic conviction that the petty squabbles between the nations of Europe would be irresistibly overcome by the further development of international commerce and transportation (1898: 144–45; 1899–1912: I, 242; 1901–1902: II, 676). In this spirit, he may well have ultimately allowed for the possibility of a peaceful and mutually satisfactory solution of the existing space-need through international negotiation and moderation.

The outbreak of world war I dashed forever the hope that developments might in fact follow such a course, and Germany's situation after 1918 led rather to an intensification of the ideas we have been discussing. The overseas colonies were lost with no prospect of reacquisition, but even more damaging was the loss of territories in Europe itself that the Germans considered to be rightfully theirs. The atmosphere of the 1920s was consequently marked by a sense of mass claustrophobia and obsession with Germany's space-need, an obsession well-demonstrated by the remarkable popularity of works such as Hans Grimm's *Volk ohne Raum* (*A people without space*) (Grimm, 1927; Smith, 1983), or by the flourishing of the new science of *Geopolitik*.[15] In such an atmosphere, Ratzel's postulates about *Lebensraum* seemed to take on a new relevance and urgency (Lange, 1965: 432–33), and his *Political geography* appeared in its third and definitive edition in 1923. The value of his arguments remained the fact that they seemed to offer a scientific basis and justification for these concerns.

At the same time, concern for the strictly national consolidation of the German people was intensified in the same manner. In the form of Wilson's Fourteen Points, the issue of national rights had figured importantly in the negotiations

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following the conclusion of the war, and indeed, the political reorganization of central and eastern Europe was largely based on them. The feeling was widespread in Germany that they, alone of all European peoples, had been denied these elemental rights, and that their quest for national unity and sovereignty was nothing more than a desire for fair and equal treatment. Of course, the pattern of German settlement had not been fundamentally altered by the war, and the call for national union carried the same expansionist overtones as before.

The dichotomy between the notions of national union and biological expansionism was expressed in the idealogy of national socialism, and it is here, I would argue, that the type of perspective developed by Ratzel received its ultimate and fateful significance. The demand for a national political union based on the inclusion of all ethnically German peoples figured in the official programmes of the Nazis throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. That the principle of nationality was perverted by the Nazis into a chauvinistic racial concept should not obscure the basic continuity of these demands with the nineteenth-century concept of the nation state described above. While this was in the German case expanisonist, it represented a sort of limited expansionism, limited to the geographical distribution of the German peoples. Diametrically opposed to this was the idea of biological expansionism, the need for which was maintained at the same time and in the same programmes,[16] and developed in some detail in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Pursuing a crude logic, his reasoning seemed to parallel Ratzel's, and led to the proclamation that a vibrant, growing population must seek an expanded *Lebensraum* in order to insure racial survival (Rich, 1973: I, xii–xiv, 3–10). He gave this imperative the appropriate name of *Bodenpolitik*, or soil politics (Hitler, 1943: 151–53), which clearly underscored the contrast to the national principle, or *Nationalitätenpolitik*.

Hitler may have derived some inspiration directly from Ratzel. A copy of the latter's *Political geography*, presented by Karl Haushofer during a visit in 1924, was among his small prison-cell library as he composed his manifesto, or so Haushofer proudly claimed (Haushofer, 1940: xxvi; Maser, 1966: 82, 152). Quite unlike Ratzel, however, Hitler identified the appropriate territory for expansion on the European continent, specifically in Slavic agricultural land to the east of Germany. When Germany annexed Austria in the name of the nationality principle in 1938, it seemed that this should have satisfied the country's 'limited' expansionist aims. It was, however, no longer the nationality principle but rather the drive for biological expansion implied by the ideas of *Lebensraum* and *Bodenpolitik* that had become the inspirational basis for German foreign policy, and explained Hitler's real interest in world war II: un unlimited war of territorial conquest against the Slavic east (Bracher, 1964: 376; Fest, 1974: 214–17).

This is by no means to suggest that Ratzel's theories produced or can be held in any way as ultimately responsible for this aspect of national socialist ideology. Hitler's *Bodenpolitik* was founded on a chauvinistic racism, and he was convinced that available land for Germans must be created in Europe itself by the

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evacuation and resettlement of biologically inferior races. Ratzel, as we have seen, was an outspoken critic of this sort of racism. Of equal importance in estimating Ratzel's subsequent influence is the fact that he was not the only, and indeed, not at all the most important advocate of Germany's need to expand based on a growing population (Schulte-Althoff, 1971: 229–30). Similar arguments were advanced in the 1890s both in academic quarters (e.g. Schmoller, 1920: 3–9ff; Ascher, 1963: 291, 296) and in the more popular political press (e.g. *Deutschlands Ansprüche. . .*, 1896: 3–5), and can be traced further back into the nineteenth century in the works of Friedrich List and others (Smith, 1986; Meyer, 1955: 12–13; Stern, 1961: 68).

VI Conclusion

This essay attempted an analysis of Ratzel's political geography within the context of the imperialism of the late nineteenth century. The practice of political expansion and the incorporation of foreign societies was fundamentally at odds with the nation-state ideal that had dominated for most of the century, and out of this tension arose new theories and intellectual systems better suited to the exigencies of the new *status quo*. Ratzel's political geography figured importantly among such theories. Based on analogies between the organic world and human society, it presented a thoroughly principled rejection of the nation-state idea, and postulated instead the need for ongoing physical expansion to insure the vitality of the state. Although his was not the only attempt to formulate such a theory, Ratzel's specific contribution lay in the creation of an appealing system and terminology that supplied a seemingly 'scientific' explanation and justification for expansionism (Schulte-Althoff, 1971: 144). In a materialist age that venerated science, this was of considerable significance. To the extent that national socialist ideology maintained a continuity with the nineteenth-century imperialist tradition in general, it could adopt essentially as its own the core of Ratzel's theory of biological expansionism and *Lebensraum*.

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VII Notes

[1]The following essay is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the 25th congress of the International Geographical Union, Geneva, 1984, to a symposium on the history of geography.

[2]Since 1945, there has been something of a reluctance to discuss Ratzel's political geography, no doubt related to its dubious development after 1918 as *Geopolitik* and the highly visible (if disputed) role of the latter in the Nazi state. Symptomatic of this reluctance is the fact that the most extensive and detailed examination of Ratzel's geographical ideas to date – Steinmetzler, 1956 – pays little attention to it beyond brief references. This is true as well of the biographical monographs by Buttmann (1977) and Wanklyn (1961), both of which are otherwise quite useful. An announced project to translate the entirety of Ratzel's *Political Geography* into English (Rumley, *et al.*, 1973: 272) was apparently never realized. (See, however, Kasperson and Minghi, 1969, Chapter 2, for an excerpt. A complete French translation of Ratzel's work by P. Rusch has been announced to appear in Geneva in late 1986.) This neglect is unfortunate, for in terms of subsequent influences Ratzel's political geography is without question his most important contribution. Happily, the subject has attracted more attention in recent research. This comes only in part from the general renaissance of interest in political geography and geopolitics, for much of the best work has been contributed by historians and not geographers. See especially Klein, 1985; Parker, 1985: 11–14; Korinman, 1984; 1983; Hunter, 1983; Faber, 1982; Smith, 1980; Jacobsen, 1979: I, 241–46ff; and Gollwitzer, 1972–82: II, 58–63. For earlier treatments see Schulte-Althoff, 1971; Bakker, 1967: 29–34; Overbeck, 1965; Lange, 1965; Schöller, 1957; Oncken, 1948: 93–96ff; and Troll, 1947: 21–22. The present essay makes no claim to be exhaustive in its consideration of these and the remaining secondary sources: those wishing a more complete review of this bulky and highly uneven literature may consult works more devoted to that task, for example Hunter, 1983. My goal is rather, through a close examination of the relevant primary texts in their historical context, to present an interpretative analysis of the subject.

[3]In these brief comments on the nation-state idea, certain important distinctions in the way it was understood in different parts of Europe have not been mentioned. Notable among these is the fact that in western Europe the nation was seen as a *civic* institution, of which anyone could become a member by virtue of membership in the political structure of the state, i.e., through citizenship. In central and eastern Europe, however, the nation was seen more as an expression of ethnic and linguistic affinities and membership depended much more on facts of birth and cultural background. Moreover, the respective 'national' territorial base was on the whole much less clearly defined in the east than in the west. This distinction is suggested in the well-known contrast Friedrich Meinecke drew between *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation* (Meinecke, 1962: 10; also see Rothfels, 1959a: 91–92ff; Faber, 1982: 394). Nevertheless, in terms of the contrasts with

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imperialism discussed below, the broader generalizations concerning the nation-state concept presented here are valid.

[4]The tensions created by this situation, tragic for the course of modern German as well as European history, were apparent as early as the Frankfurt parliament of 1848 (Pascal, 1946: 121; Theimer, 1955: 365; Oncken, 1948: 7). They ran through the entire *Mitteleuropa* debate in Germany in the early twentieth century (Meyer, 1955: 8), and were finally resolved only with Germany's defeat and partition in 1945.

[5]My analysis of the essential incompatibility between imperialism and the nation state in the nineteenth century is indebted particularly to the perceptive treatment by Hannah Arendt (1966: 223–32) and R. Aron (1964: 153–7ff.). On this subject also see Neumann, 1944: 102–103; Bracher, 1964: 376; Schröder, 1974: 8–9; Dehio, 1970: 309; Wehler, 1970: 13–14; and Winslow, 1948: 5–7. It is important to bear in mind that this contradiction involves the territorial nation state and not nationalism *per se*, which is a very different phenomenon. Nationalism refers to what is essentially a state of political, social and cultural consciousness which can be expressed in a great variety of different ways. Under the rubric of so-called 'social imperialism', for example, nationalism has historically proven to be entirely amenable to 'aggressive expansionism'. (On 'nationalist' imperialism see Hayes, 1963: 220; Shafer, 1955: 149–50; and Oncken, 1948: 31, 63–65.)

[6]Among others, Ratzel was critical of Ernst Haeckel, one of the foremost interpreters of Darwin in Germany. Ratzel's reservations are notable, for Haeckel had been a very important influence on him as a student, and Ratzel travelled in 1869 to Jena expressly to audit his lectures. Moreover, Ratzel's earliest monograph, published in the same year, betrayed the strong influence of Haeckel's application of darwinian principles to human society, presented in his *Generelle Morphologie*. This was apparent in Ratzel's postulation of 'lower' and 'higher' races, and the approval with which he likened the dying out of native peoples upon contact with their European conquerors to 'snow melting before the sun': this, after all, was nothing more than the process of natural selection at work (Ratzel, 1869: 496, 476–77; 1872: 555–58). In his later work, Ratzel abandoned his youthful racist enthusiasm (see endnote [12]), and explicitly distanced himself from chauvinists such as Haeckel (Ratzel, 1902: 570, 578; Steinmetzler, 1956: 86–91; Faber, 1982: 391). Thus Peet's (1985: 329) assertion that Ratzel was a member of 'a group of scientists led by Haeckel' and devoted to popularizing Darwin is, without any qualification, not entirely accurate. Still, Ratzel never renounced his view of the unity of all terrestrial life that he took from Haeckel, nor the organismic view of human society.

[7]Ratzel's notion of *Lebensraum* was not entirely original. Rather, he developed it on the basis of the teachings of his friend and mentor Moritz Wagner, who had attempted to 'complete' Darwin's theories in the 1850s and 1860s by postulating a necessary spatial component to the process of evolution (Wagner, 1868: 17–19ff; Ratzel, 1896b: 468–69). The relationship between Wagner's scientific theories and his own involvement in the German colonial movement is most interesting

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(Smith, 1980), especially in light of the strong connections in the case of his young colleague. In general, the intellectual history of the idea of *Lebensraum*, which would extend back to the early nineteenth century at least, would be a most promising avenue for research. (Since this article was written, Smith's (1986) very fine study of the ideology of German imperialism has a given a good deal of attention precisely to this question.)

[8]Ratzel acknowledged his debt to these thinkers in the opening pages of his *Political geography*. His expressed goal was to deepen the scope of contemporary organismic theories by adding to them the 'geographical' factor of *Boden* or territory, an element he felt to be generally ignored or underestimated. His efforts in this regard did not go unappreciated, as indicated by the fact that the most comprehensive statement of his ideas on *Lebensraum* appeared as a (presumably invited) contribution to Schäffle's *Festschrift* (Ratzel, 1901). Still more explicit was the praise lavished on his political geography by the Graz-based political scientist, Ludwig Gumplowicz, a leading formulator of the social darwinist perspective in international affairs (Gumplowicz, 1905: 520–37). Indeed, among Ratzel's contemporaries it seemed to be political scientists such as Schäffle, Gumplowicz and, most importantly, the Swede Rudolph Kjellén who, rather than geographers, initially picked up on and developed his ideas. His political geography captured the general attention of the geographical community only after 1918, (cf. Oberhummer's 'Afterword' to Ratzel, 1923: 597, 612–14). By this time, of course, Ratzel was long dead and his ideas were reformulated and popularized by Kjellén and others.

[9]In his discussions of the state-organism concept, Ratzel often displayed a certain ambiguity, which was characteristic for much of his writing. Thus, statements may be found in his work to the effect that the state organism differed from other organisms in the natural world in that it was 'imperfect', or that it was a 'spiritual and moral' (*geistiger und sittlicher*) or a 'complex' (*zusammengesetzter*) organism, animated by a specific political idea he termed its *Seele*, or 'soul' (Ratzel, 1923: 6–9, 145; 1897: 10). Some later scholars, eager to disassociate Ratzel as fully as possible from the social darwinist temper of the times, have cited these formulations as evidence that he did not share the view of the state as a biological entity. However, qualifications of the state organism in comparison with the rest of the natural world were not uncommon in the social darwinist literature itself, and were often phrased in the same terms that Ratzel used (Coker, 1910: 41–42, 70–71). Ratzel's constant treatment of the political state in biological terms, including his repeated morphological comparisons of it to biological phenomena such as cell patterns, coral reefs, rock formations, or bee hives (Ratzel, 1923: 1–2, 85, 384–85), belies this attempted disassociation. Whatever finer distinctions he may have drawn, there is no question that in its essence the state was for him fully a biological organism, and it was indeed only on this basis that he could justify the overall conceptualization of his political geography (cf. Köhler, 1963: 393–94; Buttmann, 1977: 89–90).

[10]This is not to suggest that Ratzel did not entertain a notion of *Mitteleuropa*, for

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he did, and especially after 1900 advocated the idea strongly as a central European counterweight to the imperial colossi of Britain and Russia (Ratzel, 1904: 253–59; 1905: 472, 477; 1906b: 376; 1923: 258). However, his vision of *Mitteleuropa* remained on the relatively modest scale of a customs union: a free association of geographically contiguous states around a common protectionist economic programme. It was not, in his view, to be a remedy for overpopulation, and there was no question of resettlement of excess German population within its confines. This forms a stark contrast to the quasi-imperial schemes for German domination in central and eastern Europe which were elaborated under the Nazis and put into effect after 1939. In these, it was precisely population resettlement which was the animating spirit. (On the role of geographers in the development of the *Mitteleuropa* idea in German-speaking Europe before 1914, see Meyer's comprehensive treatment (Meyer, 1946; 1955: 110). He does not, however, emphasize Ratzel's role.)

[11]In the early 1870s, Ratzel spent nearly two years travelling in the US as a correspondent for the *Kölnische Zeitung* (Buttmann, 1977:43–50). The impressions and ideas that he gathered there, during this very early period of his intellectual development, were critical in his later work, not only for the specific notion of *Grossraum*, but for his entire system of *Anthropogeographie* (Bassin, 1984: 16–18). On the American side, Frederick Jackson Turner among others was stimulated by Ratzel's views on the importance of space in the development of the American nation (Turner, 1897: 283–84; Coleman, 1966: 39–40).

[12]I have dealt at some length with Ratzel's views on the question of race elsewhere (Bassin, 1987). He stood apart from, and indeed opposed, the popular current of the day in his outspoken affirmation of the biological unity of the human race and the essential equality of all its members. This more than anything else served to set him apart from the social darwinist mainstream. He emphasized this conviction in all of his writings on the subject, and he actually went so far as to sharply criticize two of the most important spokesmen of late nineteenth-century racial fanaticism: Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Artur de Gobineau (Ratzel, 1906a: 485–87). This point is important not only in order to do full historical justice to Ratzel's legacy. Racism and imperialism are generally assumed to have gone hand in hand in nineteenth and twentieth-century western imperialism (e.g. Arendt, 1966: 223–24; 1946: 665); in the person of Ratzel, we have one important example in which they definitively did not. (For a good example of the common misevaluation of Ratzel in this regard, see R. Peet's recent essay on environmental determinism (Peet, 1986).) Quite apart from this, as I argue in the paper cited above, the peculiar relationship of German geopolitics to the national socialist state was fundamentally affected by the geopoliticians' perspective on race, which deviated from that of the Nazis and was at least in part shaped by the legacy of Ratzel's political geography.

[13]In the same way that Ratzel's views on race set him definitively apart from the social darwinist current of his day, so his categorical rejection of an exclusively nationally founded German state served to set him apart from the Pan-German

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movement. After 1918, geopoliticians such as Haushofer were to betray him on this point (among others) by their strong advocacy of a pan-Germanic national union.

[14]In view of Ratzel's decades of unremitting organizational and literary committment to the German colonial movement, subsequent efforts to exonerate, as it were, his scholarly legacy by reading out of it precisely his call for a conscious and aggressive policy of territorial expansion (e.g. Köhler, 1963: 389–90, 394; Marzian, 1967: 149–52) are untenable. Particularly striking in this regard is Hunter's recent monograph on Ratzel's political geography, which arrives at the remarkable conclusion that Ratzel should not be classified as an imperialist 'since he did not persistently and primarily advocate that his government establish, control and maintain a superstate through which colonial areas could be acquired and exploited' (Hunter, 1983: 235–36). Clearly, Ratzel did precisely that.

[15]The specific nature of the connection between Ratzel's teachings and the doctrines of German *Geopolitik* is rather complex and deserves to be the subject of a separate study. The geopoliticians, of course, always claimed him as their spiritual grandfather, and there is more than a grain of truth in this. I have worked out some of the more important 'philosophical' continuities elsewhere (Bassin, 1987), and in general the debt of *Geopolitik* to Ratzel is recognized in many of the more important works on the subject (cf. Troll, 1947: 21–22; Schöller, 1957: 2). It is indicated even in the title the late Karl-Georg Faber chose for his excellent study of Ratzel: 'On the Pre-History of *Geopolitik* . . .'. Nevertheless, Ratzel's political geography differed in a variety of important respects from the 'science' of geopolitics that emerged in Germany after 1918 (Oncken, 1948: 96), and to designate him simply as a 'geopolitician' (e.g. Mommsen, 1974: 76) is without question anachronistic.

[16]A clear example of this duality is found in an early party document, 'The Program of the NSDAP,' from February, 1920. In listing the objectives of the newly founded party, the first point affirmed Wilsonian principles: 'The union (*Zusammenschluss*) of all Germans on the basis of [the right to] self-determination'. The third point, however, went quite beyond this and demanded 'Land and soil (colonies) for the sustenance (*Ernährung*) of our people and the resettlement of our surplus population'. ('*Das Programm der NSDAP*,' in Jacobsen and Jochmann, 1961, I, Document 24.II.1920: 1).

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