

KLINKE, IAN (2023): *Life, Earth, Colony: Friedrich Ratzel's Necropolitical Geography*. University of Michigan Press. Ann Arbor. 329 pp, 16 illus. ISBN: 978-0-472-05617-0 (paperback, \$39.95), 978-0-472-90351-1 (open access), 978-0-472-07617-8 (hardcover, \$85.00).

Ian Klinke's lucid book is more than simply a biography of Friedrich Ratzel, the much-defamed founding father of political geography: While it brings together the complicated threads of his life and thought, it is at the same time a journey back into the colonial gaze of much of European geography in the 19th century. What Klinke reconstructs is a Ratzel beyond "Lebensraum" – his best-selling concept with its much-told history of reception. Klinke's Ratzel is not simply the forefather of National Socialism disputed as it is among political geographers how much he (Ratzel) is to blame for his posthumous reception by figures such as Karl Haushofer, and possibly through him, Adolf Hitler. Klinke's Ratzel is rather a thinker deeply implicated in the colonial enterprise, not as a "Schreibtischtäter", but as one of its "Ideengeber" and political protagonist.

Was Ratzel a racist? Yes, indeed, argues Klinke, but his did not come in the usual form of racism in Imperial Germany with its antisemitic and anti-Slavic tenet. Ratzel's racism was that of "the obsessions of a typically North American frontier racism" (p. 78). Indeed, Klinke gives significant space to Ratzel, the travel writer, who had started in 1873 on a voyage of almost two years to the United States of America and subsequently Mexico and Cuba. Ratzel wrote for several newspapers and magazines, and Klinke argues that Ratzel's travel writing displayed "a noticeable emotional economy of repulsion in relation to race that was inextricably linked with his settler colonial fantasies" (p. 53). Ratzel romanticized the frontiersman who conquered unchartered territory and saw Frederic Jackson Turner's influential work "The Significance of the American Frontier" as conforming to his own theory of the state as organism. Klinke insists that "his political geography emerged organically from his travel writing" (p. 54). And even more, Klinke writes: Ratzel suggested that "German colonialism in Africa should emulate the westward expansion of the American frontier" (p. 155).

"Colonization", emphasizes Klinke, "was one of Ratzel's lifelong obsessions" (p. 110). Ratzel's role was that of "an armchair cheerleader for Germany's most well-known colonists and explorers" (p. 113). This colonialist Ratzel is a necropolitical thinker *avant la lettre*, who supported even the most brutal of German colo-

nialists, among them Carl Peters, *Reichskommissar* for the Kilimanjaro Region infamously known for this violence against civilians, or Hermann Wißmann, whose East African *Schutztruppe* had brutally suppressed the Abushiri revolt in 1888-1889. When Ratzel denounced colonial atrocities, mostly the brutal war of Cecil Rhodes's troops in the First Matabele War (1893-94), his was "hardly a statement on ethical grounds" (p. 156), i.e. a renunciation of violent conduct in the colonies *per se*, but rather a critique of the "hypocrisies" of the British empire: Britain promised freedom, but only ever brought bloodshed and violence to Africa. Ratzel was more on the side of the Boers – they had been the agricultural colonists.

Ratzel's theory of "war as a continuation of biology by other means" had a Darwinian core, insists Klinke, paraphrasing Clausewitz's famous dictum (p. 128). Klinke proposes the term "necropolitics", which he borrows from ACHILLE MBEMBE, to capture "[a] deadly underside of Ratzel's *Lebensraum* idea in which biology, race, and sovereignty were fundamentally fused" (p. 7). With his concept of "necropolitics", MBEMBE had famously radicalized Foucault's notion of "biopolitics". For Foucault, biopolitics meant the calculated management of life, which could also expose a whole population to death. While Foucault thought primarily about the violence of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, MBEMBE decolonized Foucault's approach and explained how the colony, plantation and slavery had posited spaces and subjectivities in an *in-between* of life and death, "conferring upon them the status of living-dead". MBEMBE concludes: "under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred" (MBEMBE 2003: 40). Klinke suggests to locate Ratzel's "preoccupation with the rise and fall of races, nations and states and his aestheticization of death" within the intellectual history of necropolitics.

Klinke also discusses CARL SCHMITT's reception of Ratzel, most prominently in SCHMITT's work on *Großraum*, where SCHMITT approvingly takes up Ratzel's notion of the creative (*das Schöpferische*) that both see as inherent in the wide spaces of *Großraum* (SCHMITT 1941: 76). *Großraum* is not simply a wider compared to a smaller space, but it is a qualitatively different type of imperial space, insists SCHMITT, who uses this conception of space to discard the "Jewish" conception of abstract space that he equates with the work, among others, of Hans Kelsen. There is thus a blatantly antisemitic tone in SCHMITT's argument. Beyond *Großraum*, there is a more implicit conversation ongoing between Ratzel and SCHMITT on what the latter has called "*herrenloses Land*" (SCHMITT 1950: 171): This is the doctrine of "terra nulli-



us” – not as empty space, but as a space without a proper master (*Herr*) that can be appropriated by the colonial powers in a state of exception where the colonizer assumes sovereignty through brute force. Ratzel seems to have had a similar conception of colonialism. Klinke writes: “Ratzel was not a fantasist of ‘empty space’” (p. 150) – land had to be taken away by force from indigenous populations to make space for (white) settlers.

Klinke also discusses the more familiar tropes of Ratzel’s oeuvre and his reception, such as his concept of *Lebensraum*, his organic theory of the state, his indebtedness to evolutionary biology, not only Darwin, but Moritz Wagner in particular, and, perhaps lesser known, his enthusiasm for Gustav Fechner’s panpsychism, which “prompted Ratzel to think of death as an awakening to the universe” (p. 134). Klinke is at pains to paint Ratzel as a thinker of death, of destruction and of ruins, and his interest in extinction of animal species as much as that of “self-annihilation” of “savage races”. For Ratzel, extinction was not the end, but simply the beginning of a new chapter in humanity’s evolution and history. Spatial “thinness” of indigenous communities and their “weak grip on the soil” (p. 146) made them vulnerable to decay and self-annihilation. But that demise of one people only opened the way for the birth and expansion of another, stronger, more civilized or developed people that would take its space: Survival, expansion, population growth are therefore only the other side of the coin of extinction and extermination. Klinke concludes that “there was little room in Ratzel’s intellectual universe for compassion for those who had gone extinct” (p. 150).

What to do with Ratzel, then? Can we think both *with* and *against* Ratzel as CHANTAL MOUFFE (1999: 6) famously proposed for CARL SCHMITT? Some geographers seem to think exactly this. JULIA VERNE, for example, fears that geography “has been too radical in condemning his [Ratzel’s] work as only poisonous” (VERNE 2017: 86) and suggests reading his diffusionist ideas alongside recent debates on materiality and relational space. Klinke does not seem to be happy with such attempts to read Ratzel against the grain. Especially, he warns against those who identify resemblances between Ratzel and new materialism. Klinke writes: “[Ratzel’s] diffusionist critique of the idea of indigeneity may have raised eyebrows among adherents of Aryanism, but it too was epistemologically violent” (p. 195). For Klinke, it is impossible to write out the necropolitical impulse that runs through Ratzel’s oeuvre. Ratzel may have been a monist, an animist and yet, he was also a forceful advocate of settler colonialism. Indeed, Klinke’s elaborate analysis of Ratzel’s necropolitics will make it even more difficult to rescue Ratzel for a productive canon of the discipline.

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