

# Friedrich Ratzel

Friedrich Ratzel is viewed as one of the founders of German geopolitics, which he provided with a theoretical corpus. He was influenced both by the scientific thought of his time and by the pan-germanism of Wilhelmine Germany, and he was one of the first to theorise the relationships between the power of a State, its peoples and its territorial expanse.

Ratzel was born in Karlsruhe in the Grand Duchy of Baden, and he was still young at the time of the process of unification of Germany (1860-1870). As an adolescent, he was apprenticed to a pharmacist, and in 1862 sat examinations to become a pharmacy assistant. He then set out in this profession, but at the same time undertook to study Greek and Latin. In 1866 he gave up his post in pharmacy and enlisted in the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology where he attended course in palaeontology and geology. This was Ratzel's first real encounter with biology and evolutionism, and it had a profound effect on his work. He next enlisted in Heidelberg university, attending courses in palaeontology and zoology, and he graduated with a thesis on oligochaetes. In 1869 Ratzel published his first book, *Sein und Werden der organischen Welt* (nature and development of the organic world), where it is already possible to discern considerable enthusiasm for the ideas of Darwin and Haeckel, although his thought in this first work had not fully matured and was still far removed from the field of geography. In this period, on the occasion of field work on the Mediterranean, the young Ratzel began to write articles on Mediterranean lands and peoples for the journal *Königliche Zeitung*. In 1870, at the start of the Franco-Prussian war, Ratzel enlisted in the 5th infantry regiment of Baden. A few months later, he was seriously wounded in the ear (losing his hearing on one side) in the course of combat. In 1871-1872, in Munich, Ratzel became very close to Moritz Wagner (1813-1887), a Darwinist zoologist who had a lasting influence on him, in particular via his organicist view of States and nations. Also in the setting of his work for the *Königliche Zeitung*, Ratzel went on a long journey in the Americas, passing through the United States, Mexico and Cuba. The United States made a considerable impression on him, and he devoted a number of articles to the subject. At the age of 32, Ratzel became an assistant professor in 1876 (and professor in 1880) at a time when geography was becoming institutionalised as a university discipline in Germany. Until then it would be incorrect to talk of geography as a fully-fledged discipline in Germany, despite the fact that there had been teaching in secondary schools and universities for some time; for instance the philosopher Emmanuel Kant lectured in geography in Königsberg from 1756 to 1798, and as early as 1807 *Karl Ritter* was appointed geography teacher in a school in Frankfurt, before being appointed in the same city as professor of geography in the newly created department a few years later. It is undoubtedly Ratzel's appointment as professor of geography that enabled him to produce his most dense and cogent work. From the 1870s, his work focused mainly on the United States, but his written production developed considerably from 1880.

The first volume of his *Anthropogeographie* dates from 1882 and the second from 1891. In this work, Ratzel explores the influence of environmental conditions on the evolution of societies, going on in the second volume to attempt to derive "laws", in line, in this respect, with certain positivist principles. It can be said that this work marks the beginnings of human geography, even if a little later the use of the phrase "human geography" by the Vidal de la Blache school was mainly intended to signal their distancing from Ratzel's "anthropogeography". It should be said, however, that Vidal de la Blache altered his views on this issue, since in the article he published in 1898 in the *Annales de la géographie*, "Political geography on the subject of the writings of Mr. Friedrich Ratzel", he re-stated that human geography and anthropogeography were synonymous. Five years later, when the French geographer published "Human geography and its relationship with the geography of life" in the *Revue de synthèse historique*, he had clearly changed his mind.

Between the first and second volumes of the *Anthropogeographie*, that is to say between 1885 and 1888, Ratzel published another very important work, *Völkerkunde*, divided into three volumes, the first being devoted to the primitive peoples of Africa, the second to the primitive peoples of Oceania, the Americas and Asia, and the third to the civilised peoples of the ancient and new world. In 1897 a third major work, *Politische Geographie*, heralded a turning-point in Ratzel's work: in more systematised form, it applies biological notions to the study of the political behaviour of peoples, thus opening up a field of reflection which was to develop fully in his work on living spaces and the expansion of States. This work is in many ways his most significant, and it was probably the work that had the greatest influence on the geography of his time.

Three fundamental concepts organise Ratzel's thought in his *Politische Geographie*: space or extent (Raum), *«borders»* (Grenzen) and position (Lage) which are the parameters of what Ratzel calls the political organisation of land. Indeed, he develops a theory of the growth of States conceived as biological organisms whose life depends on the occupancy of the land or soil by a people: these organisms can expand, contract, live, be born, grow and die. They therefore need to deploy across a space commensurate with their

evolution, which may in some cases justify the extending of borders. Borders are seen as an important element for the development of a State, because the outlines of States as defined by their national borders may or may not correspond to natural boundaries. The position or location of a State is thus an important factor for the study of its development. Most often, a central position is more advantageous than a peripheral position. The presence of another large State at the borders of a small State leads almost inevitably to its annexation. The concept of position articulates around two notions (Ratzel distinguishes a broad sense and a strict sense). In the broad sense, position is understood as a "constant link with the soil", a "belonging to a certain portion of the earth's surface" (Politische Geographie, §129), from which it is possible to deduce a natural position (geographical location in latitude and longitude) and a political position (the political identity of a given portion of land with a given natural position). In the strict sense, position is understood as the "political neighbourhood" (§151), that is to say it includes all the relationships of influence and power between States that can be derived from their respective geographical positions.

Thus ideas relating to the evolutionary development of States seen as living organisms and to the anchorage of individuals in the soil pervade Ratzel's work, despite the fact that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between mere metaphor and outright biological reductionism. Numerous academics see here a direct influence of the ideas of Darwin, Haeckel, Spencer and above all Moritz Wagner, in particular the Wagnerian concept of Lebensgebiet, which refers to the dependency of a species on a given territory, and probably underpins the controversial Lebensraum (living space) developed by Ratzel in 1902. It is however to be underlined that Ratzel's theories are at the meeting point of a whole range of influences. It is indeed possible in Ratzel's theory of the State, understood as the ultimate model for the organisation of societies, to distinguish the influence of Hegel's political philosophy, at least as it was perceived at the end of the 19th century.

Nevertheless, in all the work conducted in the mature years of Ratzel's career, the main influence is that of positivism and evolutionism, characteristic of his time. In his late work however there is a degree of return to romanticism, which is particularly prominent in his texts on beauty, aesthetics, or God.

Ratzel's influence varied considerably according to period and country. For a long time he was the subject of considerable controversy on account of the use made by the Nazis of certain concepts and central notions. The political concept of Lebensraum, developed by Ratzel to characterise the indissociable link (political and psychological) in the occupation of an area of land by a people, mainly aimed to back up his defence of the process of German unification, and colonial expansion in line with that practised by the other large European powers. Certain later authors, in particular Karl Haushofer, reinterpreted this concept in a racist and imperialistic perspective, in particular directed towards Eastern Europe, thus opening the way for the excesses of its takeover by the Nazis.

Numerous geographers have developed their ideas from the writings of Ratzel, and Vidal de la Blache was not the only one who maintained constant exchanges with him, even if the evolution in his thought led him to distance himself from Ratzel. Ratzel also influenced English-speaking geographers such as the American Ellen Churchill Semple, who took on the translation of Ratzel's works, and who provided a very radical interpretation of his determinism.

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