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One Sea, One Humanity

Modeling the Man-Sea Relationship in Friedrich Ratzel's Anthropogeographical Project

by
Carlotta Santini

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Modeling the Man-Sea Relationship in Friedrich Ratzel's Anthropogeographical Project

Carlotta Santini *

The prevailing concept of geography, understood as the study and description of the Earth, can be viewed as a form of removal: less than two-thirds of the globe, that is, the seas or the liquid elements of the Earth, are removed or at the very least are not explicitly designated. This article will focus on issues concerning the classification, systematization, and conceptualization of geographic knowledge that took place in nineteenth-century Germany. I will try to demonstrate how this alleged "removal" operates in modern geography and how it links with a contrasting movement that aims to reintegrate the liquid element of the Earth into the field of geography, on the basis of the man/world relation. I will focus in particular on Friedrich Ratzel's (1844-1904) pioneering studies in anthropogeography and political geography.

1. Geography of a Removal

The very term 'geography' can be considered a misnomer. Ever since the time of Eratosthenes of Cyrene (276-184 BC), it has been used to connote a science that describes and represents (*γράφειν*) the Earth (*γῆ*). It is precisely the etymology of the word 'geography', deriving from the ancient Greek term for the world (Gea, Gaia, Earth), which gives rise to this misinterpretation. Our geographical concepts and their etymologies reveal a conception of the world as eminently made up of earth[1]: whether understood as a two-dimensional disk or sphere, emphasis is always placed on the 'land' element. The Latin expression

* Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Technische Universität Berlin (*carlottasantini @ hotmail.it*).

[1] Modern languages still figure this limiting conception of our planet: *Terra* in Italian, the French *Terre*, the Spanish *Tierra*, *die Erde* in German, and *Earth* in English.

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orbis terrarum was used to designate the range of the Roman Empire and, later, the Christian Church (*Ecclesia universa toto orbe diffusa*). Yet such a formula requires a caveat: since the orb includes everything, it is important to specify which part of the planet's surface is really relevant. It is, of course, the land—the dry land, the continents—that is of most interest to man, and geographers are no exception. Contemporary geographers, however, have recently rejected the *orbis terrarum* model, preferring the rarely used medieval term *orbis terraqueus*, to mean consisting of land and water. The prevailing concept of geography, understood as the study and description of the Earth, can be viewed, then, as a form of removal: less than two-thirds of the globe, that is, the seas or the liquid elements of the Earth, are removed or at the very least are not explicitly designated.

The question of the role of the sea in ancient and modern geography is a broad and well-studied one and I do not intend to offer a comprehensive overview of it here. Rather, this article will focus on issues concerning the classification, systematization, and conceptualization of geographic knowledge that took place in nineteenth-century Germany. I will try to demonstrate how this alleged 'removal' operates in modern geography and how it links with a contrasting movement that aims to reintegrate the liquid element of the Earth into the field of geography, on the basis of the man/world relation. I will focus in particular on Friedrich Ratzel's (1844-1904) pioneering studies in anthropogeography and political geography. Nineteenth-century Germany systematized and conceptualized its geographical knowledge, which had increased dramatically as a result of the explorations of previous centuries and European colonialism. The sea, as the route that made possible such exploration and colonial expansion, would seem to be required to play a central or at least an increasingly autonomous role within geographic treaties. The fathers of modern German geography offered the first hint of a shifting sensibility towards the sea. For Carl Ritter (1779-1859), the first Chair of Geography at the then recently founded Berlin University, as well as for his academic successor, Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), the liquid element of the Earth still occupied a marginal role compared to the continents. Oceanography was not yet an autonomous discipline (Krotum, 1980), but sections devoted to the physical geography of the sea were already consecrated to the study of the coasts and, to a lesser extent, to the first physical and mechanical studies of the currents. In the treatises of Ritter and von Richthofen,

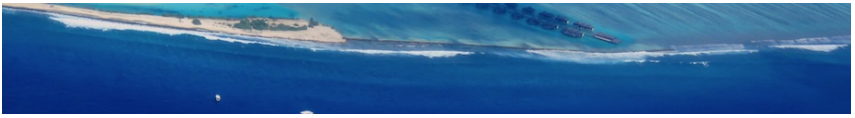
the sea plays a purely functional role, meaning that related research is limited to those aspects that best serve man: the sea's relation to the climate, the study of currents, and the art of navigation.

This ripple of interest in the globe's aquatic surface contradicts a real disparity in the attribution of value to the marine element compared to the landmass, a disparity that reveals, in some extreme cases, a real ontological devaluation. An exemplary case is that of the famous American (German born) geographer, Arnold Guyot (1807-1884):

> And yet the Ocean much surpasses the continents in extent; it occupies more than two thirds of the surface of the globe. But this is a sign of inferiority; for mass and number, as we see in all the Kingdom of nature, never belong to the superior being. (Guyot, 1849, p. 129)

Guyot's belief that the oceanic element is "essentially" inferior to the land has its roots in pseudo-evolutionary discourse. Guyot considers the sea as the place of embryonic life, while the land has welcomed the most evolved creatures. There is, above all, the (already biblical) conviction that nature is subordinate to man and, being less capable of accommodating his life and work, should be regarded as an imperfect entity. German geographer and scientist Ernst Kapp (1808-1896), who was Ritter's disciple before emigrating to America, is unequivocal on the matter: "It is not repeated often enough that nature only reaches its true essence through its relationship with man. The creation of nature is only accomplished through man, and it exists only for man"[1].

[1] "Nicht oft genug kann wiederholt werden, dass die Natur erst in ihrem Verhältnis zum Menschen zu ihrer Wahrheit kommt. Die Schöpfung der Natur ist erst in Menschen vollendet, nur für ihn ist sie da" (Kapp, 1868, p. 90; my translation). This conception of nature as subordinated to man does not avoid Kapp to conceive a theory of the development of human culture and civilization based on the influence of the environmental elements, in particular of the liquid element. Kapp defines indeed three cultural typologies, to be recognized in the historical development: the oriental one, which implies the development of great civilization in proximity of great rivers (*pothamisch*); the classical civilization, developed in strong exchange and relationship with the sea traffics (*thalassisch*); the Germanic civilization, to which would have presumably to be promised the dominion on the Oceans.



2. The Sea and the Boundaries of the Oecumene: an inclusive or exclusive relationship?

This contrast between the sea and the earth, and the related one between man, who lives on the land, and the sea, which does not allow human life to flourish, was first questioned by Friedrich Ratzel. An ethnologist and geographer, Ratzel succeeded Ferdinand von Richthofen as the Chair of Geography at the University of Leipzig, which von Richthofen had himself left in order to take up Carl Ritter's former position in Berlin. Ratzel, considered as the founder of modern political geography, developed an "anthropogeographic" conception of the world, which allowed him to integrate the anthropic component into the very concept of geography. Ratzel no longer conceived the discipline of geography as merely "functional to man", but as directly linked to the subject and his interaction with the space around him. Geography can thus be considered both a scientific and a humanistic discipline because it describes the existence of man on Earth, from a physical and geographical as well as a cultural and historical point of view[1]. Ratzel, who was well-versed in the Classics[2], based

[1] From this point of view, Ratzel's anthropogeographic project finds a forerunners in the philosopher Hegel, who instead of considering Geography as one of the natural sciences, conceived it as a fundamental part of History. Friedrich Ratzel's debts towards Hegel's conception of Geography have been acknowledged by several scholars, especially in relation to the development of the political geography and the conception of the state.

[2] Ratzel makes an explicit use of the Greek geographic sources. He quotes Homer, as well as Strabo, Herodotus, Plinius, Polybius and Tacitus, sources to which he attributes the same importance than the modern and philosophical ones, such as Schelling or Hegel or Hume, Condillac or Michelet, Ritter or von Richthofen. There is a double interest towards this kind of ancient sources in Ratzel's approach. First, they are considered as authentic historical sources, which are helpful to guide the geographer in his researches about the geo-political configurations in the past. The second use of this sources is a methodological one. Through their study Ratzel is able to reconstruct the history of the conceptions of the Earth and of the geographical concepts. Ratzel considers ancient geographical conceptions as authentic cosmological conceptions, as *Weltanschauungen*.

the foundation of his geographic system on the ancient Greek concept of the oecumene, meaning the world understood as the abode of man (Santini, 2016). If, since medieval times, the concept of the oecumene had been linked to the *orbis terrarum* model mentioned above, Ratzel expanded its boundaries: it now encompassed not only those parts of the planet actually inhabited by man but also those locations upon which his exploits were focused or indeed could potentially be focused in the future. The sea was therefore the first important addition to Ratzel's new anthropic geography, but its integration within the boundaries of the oecumene, as I will demonstrate in this article, gave rise to some difficulties of a primarily conceptual nature.

The very etymology of the concept of the oecumene, from *οἰκέω*, to inhabit, would seem to exclude a priori the integration of the sea within its semantic field. The sea, in fact, is traditionally recognized as an element that does not allow for human life to flourish: it is sterile (*ἀτρύγετος*, Hom., *Od.* V, 158) and unstable (*ἄτρῡτος*, Esch., *Eum.* 203) and can paradoxically engender death through either drowning or thirst (too much or too little water). In chapter 5 of the first volume of his *Anthropogeographie*, Ratzel carries out a long analysis of the different historical and geographical modalities of inhabiting and habitability (Ratzel, 1882-1891). According to the theoretical guidelines sketched out in his discussion, there is no real conceptual *caesura* between habitable places (fertile valleys, places next to water or those protected from the elements) and inhospitable places (seas, deserts or mountains). For Ratzel, the only logical difference is one of degree: one can note permanently and continuously inhabited places (which could thus be characterized as permanent habitations); temporarily inhabited places (such as some desert regions); regions that were once inhabited (like some islands in the Venetian Lagoon); and areas that have only recently become habitable as a result of man-made transformations (the land gained from the sea in the Netherlands). The concept of "permanent habitability" in the strict sense, of course, cannot but be a limit concept; it is the result of a contingent judgment based on the limited and unverifiable experience of a region being historically and permanently inhabited. In conclusion, according to Ratzel, if there are many uninhabited places, few uninhabitable places, and even fewer absolutely uninhabitable ones, then everywhere man has been or could go in the future is potentially part of the oecumene, even if it cannot support life on a permanent basis. According to this principle, the sea,

which is crossed every day by sailors, is as much a part of the oecumene as the continents it links together[1].

Ratzel was the first modern geographer to consistently and systematically study the marine element of geography. His study was not limited to a physical description of the sea (indeed, the descriptive element was afforded relatively less attention); rather, he provided a substantive definition of it within the geographical field, elucidating its relationship to anthropic factors. Ratzel's first significant and speculative undertaking in the field of marine geography entailed the dismantling of traditional prejudice that saw the sea as a barrier to the life and actions of man. In order to achieve this he was obliged to reconsider a fundamental category in the semantic field associated with the sea, that of the limit. For Ratzel, the concept of the limit had a dual function, an inclusive and an exclusive one. This duality was already part of the definition of the Sea in Greek Antiquity. Certainly, the sea has historically been considered as the limit of the Earth, an obstacle beyond which man cannot go; at the same time, the sea could be conceived as an edge, a border, which includes within its boundaries everything meaningful, the entire Oecumene.

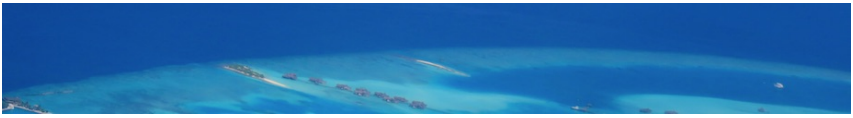
In ancient cosmology and geographical treatises by Hecataeus of Miletus (550-476 BC) and Strabo (60 BC-24 AD), Oceanus, the oldest of the gods according to Homer, surrounded the Earth like a ring and his strong current flowed eternally around the oecumene. The Pillars of Hercules, which demarcated its westernmost boundary, were traditionally considered to be the extreme limit of the oecumene, and therefore impassable. To disrupt the absolute nature of this assumption and to highlight the fundamental ambiguity inherent to the concept of the limit, Ratzel resorted to some terminology that was well known in German idealism: the Pillars of Hercules were seen to represent an ideal limit (*Grenze*) rather than a real physical one (*Schranke*). Indeed, the limit existed solely because people did not wish to deal with the risks associated with overcoming the obstacle or going beyond the boundaries of ecumenism, "di retro al Sol del mondo sanza gente" (Dante, *Inf.* XX, 117). What point was there in venturing toward uninhabited and uninhabitable regions of the outer sea, toward the loneliness and destitution (ὑπὸ ἀπορίας καὶ ἐρημίας, Strab. I, 1, 8) experi-

[1] Further elements such as air or space, made accessible through advances in science and technology (which, for Ratzel, were unforeseeable) could also be added to this list.

enced by sailors, according to Strabo, once the coast was no longer in sight and all hope of seeing another port was gone?

But this continuous ring of water surrounding the lands inhabited by man was, at the same time, a marker of inclusion and a guarantee that all contained within it would remain consistent. The idea of the outer oceanic boundary being not only a barrier but also an inclusive horizon, contour, and limit, by virtue of which everything that is "internal", the oecumene, takes on meaning and consistency, was very much part of Greek cosmology. Strabo, for example, reads Homer's mention of Oceanus in the *Odyssey* as a metaphor, if not a synonym, for the horizon. When Ulysses left the island of Ogygia:

> He never closed his eyes, but kept them fixed on the Pleiads, on late-setting Bootes, and on the Bear—which men also call the wain, and which turns round and round where it is, facing Orion, and alone never dipping into the stream of Oceanus—for Calypso had told him to keep this to his left. (Hom., *Od.*, V, 274 ff.; Homer, 1900)[1]



[1] These same lines had already been quoted in the *Iliad*, though in a context unrelated to navigation, namely during the famous description of the shield forged for Achilles by Hephaestus: "He wrought the earth, the heavens, and the sea; the moon also at her full and the untiring sun, with all the signs that glorify the face of heaven—the Pleiads, the Hyads, huge Orion, and the Bear, which men also call the Wain and which turns round ever in one place, facing Orion, and alone never dips into the stream of Oceanus" (Hom., *Il.*, XVIII, 483-489; Homer, 1925). There is a curious parallel, already noted by the curators of the Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte in Halle, Germany, between this Homeric description and an ancient celestial calendar, dating from the early Bronze Age, the famous Himmelscheibe von Nebra or Nebra sky disk (Sachsen-Anhalt). This famous bronze artifact, featuring original golden appliques that depict astral elements—a full moon or sun, a lunar crescent, the Pleiades, and other stars—was later modified by the addition of two golden arcs, thought to depict those sections of the horizon affected by the sunrise and the sunset. The final symbol to be added to the original, found on the skyline, has largely been recognized as a boat after comparisons with similar iconology found amongst the populations of northern Europe of the same age. The horizon and the sea appear in relation to one another in prehistoric central European cosmology, even though its inhabitants would only have had indirect knowledge of the sea. Cfr. Meller, 2004.

This interpretation of the oceanic limit as a "horizon" or outline, and hence as an inclusive and not essentially exclusive limit, allowed Ratzel to develop the second element of his substantial definition (*Grundidee*) of the sea: unity. Much like the concept of the limit, the idea of unity carries a double meaning: the unity of the sea as such and its consequent ability to unify men: "Just as the fluid of the earth is one, mankind is one"[1].

Here too Ratzel makes use of a very ancient concept that was present in the Greek tradition. Homer and Hesiod considered Oceanus to be the father of all rivers, from which all water flowing on Earth originated, right down to the smallest springs. The liquid element of the Earth, whether fresh or saltwater, flowing or still, open or closed, was perceived as a single element differing only in genealogical degrees (father to son). The toponymy of the regions affected by Greek colonization (Asia and Southern Italy) reveals many cases of homonymy between the rivers and the sources of the motherland and those in the colonies; these homonyms must be seen as more than mere formalities. Let us consider, for example, the narrative of the Corinthian colony of Syracuse, according to which the Alpheus River, flowing into the Peloponnese region, crosses the Mediterranean as an underwater stream, eventually emerging on the islet of Ortygia as the famous Fountain of Arethusa, where it flows next to the newly established colony. Furthermore, the continuity between the Mediterranean and the outer Ocean, as well as that between the oceans at large, though unknown and unexplored, was hypothesized, hypostatized even, by ancient geographers, who considered it an indispensable ontological assumption. In response to those who suggested that the surface level of the sea might shift or that its currents might fluctuate, Strabo replied (Strab. I, 3, 5)—in accordance with Archimedes' principle of communicating vessels—that sea levels remained the same the world over, since the ocean was unique, continuous, and connected throughout.

In Ratzel's model, the unity of the sea corresponds to the principle of unity of all lands and shores, even the most distant ones, against which the same sea continuously washes. Here Ratzel theorizes a potential unity, a unity in principle, based on the fact that the sea can be defined as a mode of communication;

[1] "Wie das Flüssige der Erde eins ist, so ist die Menschheit eine" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, 251; my translation).

it not only separates people and places, but is the junction between different shores and continents. Once again, the Classical tradition offers numerous examples of this. In Chariton of Aphrodisias' Τὰ περὶ Χαιρέαν καὶ Καλλιρόην (The adventures of Chereas and Challirhoe), the young Callirhoe of Syracuse—who, in this novel, is the daughter of the admiral Hermocrates, Syracuse leader in the naval battle against Athens—is kidnapped by pirates and enslaved on the distant coast of Miletus. Although captive in a foreign land, the heroine does not worry about how far she is from her homeland until she gets close to the sea, which washes against the shores of both Miletus and Syracuse. It is only when she is forced to leave the coast to journey to the interior of Persia, and sees the sea disappear beyond the horizon, that Callirhoe feels lost; for the first time she has the sense that she has been removed from her homeland and taken "out of her heaven", away from her horizon (Chariton of Aphrodisias, 1995, IV, 7-V, 1)[1]. Another more famous example is that of the *Anabasis* of Xenophon. This book recounts how Xenophon led the Greek army, in disarray after Cyrus' defeat, back to Greece. Upon seeing the sea from the mountains of Trebizond, crying *Thalassa! Thalassa!*, the Greeks considered themselves to have reached the safety of home after so many vicissitudes. Although they were still quite far away from Greece and, in fact, had yet more obstacles to face, for both Xenophon's Greeks and the structure of the novel itself, reaching the sea—the same one that washes against the coast of Greece—is the accomplishment of the νόστος (return) and it functions as a narrative climax.[2]

[1] Once again, a Greek novel featuring the sea as one of its central narrative elements provides us with a second significant example: *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius (perhaps one of Chariton's contemporaries). The young Clitophon, believing his beloved Leucippe to have died at sea, marries another young woman and returns to Greece. During the voyage, he refuses to consummate his marriage on the deck of the ship: "we have not traversed the limits consecrated to that poor girl until we land in another country. Did you not hear that she perished at sea? I am now sailing over Leucippe's grave, and perhaps her shade is even now hovering round the ship. They say that the souls of those who have met their end in the deep never go down to Hades, but wander in the same spot about the face of the waters" (Achilles Tatius, 1969, V, 16). Such superstition continues to nourish artistic creation even today. Just think of the legend of the Flying Hollander adapted by Richard Wagner, or the persecution of Dino Buzzati's mysterious sea monster the Colomber, or even the many ocean fantasies of cult films such as *Jaws* (1975), *The Killer Whale* (1977) or the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean*, in which the sea, in all its vastness, is a single element capable of evoking monsters from its deepness to the surface wherever in the world.

[2] "But as the shout kept getting louder and nearer, as the successive ranks that came up all began

3. "First obstacle, then threshold"[1]: Anthropogeographical Models for a Phenomenology of the Man/Sea Relationship

Concepts discussed earlier—permanent or relative habitability, ideal, physical, inclusive or exclusive limits, unity, connections and relations—comprise the articulated semantic field of Ratzel's understanding of the sea. Starting with these concepts, he elaborates a series of geographic models capable of describing the complex static and dynamic relationships between man and the liquid element of the Earth. Ratzel's approach to geography typically encompasses a historic or dynamic method (also known as genetic or vertical) that is associated with the traditionally descriptive or static geographical method (also known as horizontal). In order to understand how Ratzel's definition of the sea can be characterized by seemingly opposing concepts (habitability/inhabitability; inclusion/exclusion; obstacle/relationship), it is necessary to take into account the time factor, which allows him to observe the evolution of human relationships alongside physical elements. What appears at first as an obstacle can, once overcome, become an even more powerful stimulus for movement and exchange between populations. This is typically the case of the sea in Ratzel's thought, which, as we shall see, also has political connotations.

to run at full speed toward the ranks ahead that were one after another joining in the shout, and as the shout kept growing far louder as the number of men grew steadily greater, it became quite clear to Xenophon that here was something of unusual importance; so he mounted a horse, took with him Lycius and the cavalry, and pushed ahead to lend aid; and in a moment they heard the soldiers shouting, "The Sea! The Sea!" and passing the word along. Then all the troops of the rearguard likewise broke into a run, and the pack animals began racing ahead and the horses. And when all had reached the summit, then indeed they fell to embracing one another, and generals and captains as well, with tears in their eyes. And on a sudden, at the bidding of some one or other, the soldiers began to bring stones and to build a great cairn" (Xenophon, 1998, IV, 7, 23-25).

[1] "Erst Schranke, dann Schwelle" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 229; my translation).

Chapter 10 of the first volume of Ratzel's *Anthropogeographie*, devoted to the historical significance of the liquid element on Earth, can be defined as a groundbreaking attempt at modeling geographic networks based on human interaction. The first geographic areas to be analyzed are island systems (Greece and Polynesia) and peninsulas (once again Greece, Italy and Spain), conceived as regions in which the forces and movements of populations converge and concentrate to become the source of complex systems of interrelation. The presence of the sea in these regions means that the populations developed in a more dynamic and coherent way; the limit constituted by the sea all around the country favored the emergence of complex and rich cultures that were both centralized and open to exchange. In contrast to the dispersive nature of the continent and the great Asian plains, whose populations have remained largely transient, the inhabitants of the islands and peninsulas have stayed put and their origins can be traced more easily. At the same time, the open borders, exposed to external exchanges, have promoted the opening up of the island populations and peninsulas, placing them in direct communication with distant peoples[1].

Ratzel's systematic approach offers an increasingly abstract model of geographic contexts, creating formal patterns that can be implemented using the most diverse content or simply by modifying a few quantitative factors. This is the case for his analysis of coasts, lakes, rivers, and straits, each of which can be visualized by tracing a few direction lines that intersect geographic vectors. The case of the sea strait is very telling. Indeed, a strait can be understood as a limit that distinguishes and separates two areas of land and two seas but also—and this, historically speaking, is its real value—as a channel connecting two seas and an ideal bridge between two lands. The Strait of Gibraltar is perhaps the most complete example of this phenomenon: it has long been seen as a limit (Pillars of Hercules) and as a bulwark between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean, but also between Europe and Africa. In fact, as has been documented, this strait has allowed for the exchange of populations since prehistoric times[2], enabling the passage of Vandal populations into North Africa

[1] A historical example is that of Spain, which had much more historical contact and cultural affinity with Italy, from which it is separated by the sea, than with France, with whom it shares a land border.

[2] Leo Frobenius in particular insists on the Strait of Gibraltar's role as a prehistoric trade route. His archaeological investigations reveal the presence, in both the Spanish peninsula and the Atlas Mountains, of stylistically coherent decorative elements that date back to the same epoch, thus

during the barbarian invasions as well as the movement of Arab populations into Spain during medieval times.

An analysis of the geographical contexts of continental rivers provides Ratzel with a number of significant and coherent examples. Strabo (Strab. I, 4, 7) had already dismissed the ancient theories mentioned by Eratosthenes, who radicalized the concept of the unity of the liquid element and its value as a barrier, arguing that rivers should be considered as disruptions to the continents and that every region delimited by a watercourse was thus to be considered an island. According to Ratzel, it is not only geography, but also history, that teaches us that the notion of the limit as an obstacle is of very little value indeed, especially in relation to liquid elements. When two people are on the opposite banks of a great river, this does not mean that they are separated but, in contrast, that they are facing one another[1]. A great river like the Rhine did not keep the Germans from the Celts, or the Romans away; it has kept these people linked together, as neighbors and enemies, until the inevitable transcendence of the obstacle (which, again, is only temporary) has not decried their definitive unification. On the other hand, the value of a great river as an ideal limit (*Grenze*) has been reaffirmed by the political geography in more recent times (a large river is often chosen to trace a political boundary); the geography of the most important German river cities, usually built on one side of the river only, testifies to this. Last but not least, European rivers are real waterways in that they facilitate trade by making it faster and easier to transport goods[2].

A final example of geographical modeling concerns the lake network, which tends to behave as an aggregation center or a neuralgic pole around which exchanges between the populations inhabiting its shores and those outside are organized. The network is cohesive in that it facilitates direct water-based communication, making longer land-based routes (all around the lake) virtually superfluous. Typical examples of these "lake systems" can be observed in alpine

attesting to the existence of migration or exchange between the two continents.

[1] Friedrich Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 344.

[2] As Ratzel argues (1882-1891, 1, p. 273), old roads often followed the course of the river or, in the case of creeks that were dry for most of the year, were constructed directly on the same riverbed. Traces of this phenomenon can still be seen today in some areas of southern Italy, where the streets, traditionally located on or near the same riverbed (*Fiumare*), were later paved, thus becoming permanent. This has led to episodes of hydrogeological instability.

areas on the border between Italy and Switzerland, where the villagers' sense of belonging to the lake system is stronger than their political affiliations. The alpine lakes (Maggiore, Lugano, Livigno) that are split, politically speaking, between Italy and Switzerland represent neither a physical limit nor an ideal or political limit for the populations inhabiting their shores[1]. But even a quasi-closed sea, to take the historical example of the Mediterranean, cannot be deemed an obstacle vis-à-vis the relations between its shoreline inhabitants. It is rather a facilitating factor, if not a creator of exchange and communication. For the Romans, the Mediterranean was, in terms of character and familiarity, like a large lake or an inner and well-known sea, the *Mare Nostrum*; it was the true center of the cultural, linguistic, economic, and political unity of the Empire (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 264).

The coastline plays a fundamental role in Ratzel's anthropic geographical project and is applicable in a multitude of ways to the concepts mentioned earlier: boundaries, habitability, and relationships. In an attempt to theorize a population's varying approach to a given coastline, Ratzel proposes two scenarios: 1) the population in question stops before the supposed obstacle (the sea), and either backtracks or continues along the coast; 2) the population stops in front of the obstacle and becomes stationary. This second scenario allows for new anthropic relations to emerge including: *a*) exchanges between the coastal population and those of the interior; *b*) bilateral exchanges via the waterway. In this particular case, the concept of limit already developed by Ratzel is extremely relevant. The sea is initially conceived as a physical limit (*Schranke*) that is characterized, at the same time, as a protective element (against attacks from the hinterland) and an insurmountable obstacle. However, when a population becomes stationary (and here the "duration" factor becomes essential), the sea becomes a threshold (*Schwelle*), a road according to its ancient meaning (πόντος), out of which the dangers of piracy can arise[2], but also the wealth

[1] Traces of the geographic phenomenon of the alpine lakes network of northern Italy can be found in numerous literary works, beginning with Antonio Fogazzaro (1895)

[2] Thucydides mentions (Thuk. I, 5, 2) an ancient Greek custom whereby anyone who landed onshore was asked: "Are you a pirate?". As the famous historian recalls, since piracy was common practice (it was only eradicated in the Mediterranean by Gneus Pompeus (67 b. Ch.)), no one thought it strange to ask such a question and the person to whom it was directed had no problem responding. In general, the aesthetic contemplation of the sea can be considered a rather recent phenomenon.

of trade can emerge. In modeling land/sea relationships on an anthropic basis, Ratzel deduces an essential definition of the coast, undoubtedly one of his most important contributions to the conceptual lexicon of modern geography. In fact, he rejects the concept of a "coastline", which is already problematic from a descriptive point of view. A clear definition of a coastline, so important for delimiting the outlines of the continents[1], is in fact difficult to ascertain since there is no real line that separates the earth from the sea. Each new wave washes against the shore in a different way, and coastal variations (erosion, silting) can occur quickly, sometimes in just a few days, notwithstanding long-term, historical soil transformations. If we consider the dynamic (anthropic and historic) aspects of the coast, then the concept of a line is nothing more than a symbolic element of a relationship, an ideal boundary without content:

> As historical sites, the coasts have to be conceived as somehow broader, and therefore, not only in their own form, but also in relation to the land and, on the other side, the sea[2].

Therefore Ratzel replaces the concept of the coastline with the notion of space (*Raum*) or bands (*Band*), that is, areas of influence capable of containing multiple lines and vectors. From an anthropogeographical point of view, these coastal areas change, pulsating as living organisms and contracting and expanding owing to historical events and the impact of man's ongoing relationship with them. Thus fifteenth-century Venice could be represented as a pulsar, a concentrated and pulsating nucleus that influences the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, while

In antiquity, but also during the Middle and Modern Ages, people observed the sea out of fear of an enemy approaching or in anticipation of the arrival of a friendly ship. In the medieval period, for example, the Mediterranean was at the mercy of Saracen raids, meaning that no seaside or town was exposed to the sea or enjoyed the "view". All coastal cities, when their populations did not move to higher land, had high walls blocking the sea view, which only those in charge of spotting an enemy approach could see. There are still traces of such defensive structures in the towns and monasteries of the Illyrian coast, as well as in fortified Italian churches, notably the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari.

[1] As Strabo (Strab. VIII, 1,3) reports, the historian and geographer Ephorus of Cyme (400-330 BC) used the coastline as a reference (*μέτρῳ*) to orient his geographic descriptions.

[2] "Als geschichtliche Schauplätze sind die Küsten etwas breiter zu fassen und daher nicht bloß in ihrer eigenen Form, sondern auch in ihrer Beziehung einerseits zum Lande, anderseits zum Meere in betrachten" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 229-230; my translation).

the California coast, which remains to this day relatively "natural", could rightfully be defined as nothing more than a coastline.

Much like coastlines, even waterways cannot be considered as simple lines but rather as drivers or flexible vectors along which, or from which, areas of influence can be traced:

> It must not be forgotten, however, that any abstraction which, [...] in the routes of human beings only lines sees, will often be so far removed from the truth that any scientific benefit is cancelled out. For anthropogeography [...] like oceanography has little to do with points and lines, rather with spaces [...] and streams or bands. Traffic does not converge toward a geometrical point, but toward a space in which different points become the target and the endpoint[1].

The sea, too, contains roads—routes and currents—but they are invisible and mutable compared to those found inland. In a project devoted to formalizing and conceptualizing geographic phenomena and their relationship to humans, the seaways represent perhaps the clearest and most decisive example of a concrete reality (every day thousands of container ships travel along sea routes, determining the equilibrium of world trade) that is, at the same time, immaterial and susceptible to change if conditions require it (routes can be recalculated, potentiated or abandoned). The nautical maps of Polynesian peoples, which began to appear in German ethnographic museums during Ratzel's time, contain junctions and ropes that create nodes and triangles. They are exemplary visual embodiments of the relations between directions, vectors, and currents, all of which can inform a route through means of very few formal factors such as direction, travel time, and orientation (Woodward & Malcolm Lewis, 1998).

To conclude this list, let it be noted that the case of the open sea or ocean differs from the examples discussed above for quantitative reasons: the ocean is larger than a lake or river, meaning it is a major obstacle that demands a longer

[1] "Doch, darf allerdings auch nicht vergessen werden, dass eine Abstraktion, welche [...] in den Verkehrswegen [der Menschen] Linien sieht, [...] an vielen Stellen zu weit von der Wahrheit entfernt wird, um noch wissenschaftlichen Nutzen bringen zu können. Denn die Anthropogeographie hat es so wenig wie die [...] Ozeanographie mit Punkten und Linien sondern mit Räumen [...] und Strömen oder Bändern zu tun. Nicht auf einen geometrischen Punkt zieht der Verkehr, sondern auf einen Raum, in welchem verschiedenen Stellen ihm Ziel und Endpunkt werden können" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 466; my translation).

reaction time from man. In the introduction to his famous book on African cultures, *Ursprung der Kultur*, anthropologist and father of modern Africanism Leo Frobenius (1873-1938)—a great admirer and follower *in pectore* of Ratzel's work—describes the position of the African continent within the ancient oecumene as follows:

> A colossal barrier, Africa lies to the southwest of the old oecumene. In the north it is open to Mediterranean relations, in the north-east to the continental influence of Asia, and in the east to the insular Oceania. In the west, however, and this is decisive, lies the Atlantic, the Ocean without islands[1].

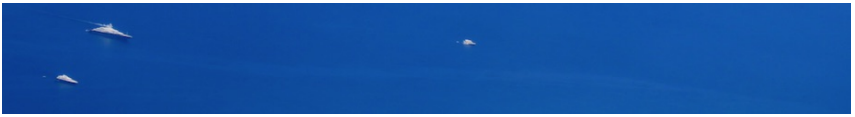
This quotation is revealing since, in order to address the historical role and cultural development of the African continent, Frobenius first defines its geographical coordinates. The whole of Africa, due to the vastness of its deserts, can be deemed a colossal physical barrier that blocks off the ancient oecumene at its southerly point. This is not the case of the Mediterranean Sea to the north, which is the route of trade and relations with the rest of Europe, nor its continental northeast passage, which opens it up to the Asian world. To the west, however, the "ocean without islands" can really be considered an insurmountable limit. For Frobenius and Ratzel before him, in contrast to the richness of the islands of Oceania or the Mediterranean archipelagos, particularly the Aegean Sea in which Greek culture flourished, the *Insellossigkeit*—the lack of islands in the Atlantic Ocean—represents a supreme physical limit to man. Of all the obstacles that man is faced with, it is the open sea that is the most formidable; it dissimulates the land for days or months on end, generating the loneliness and destitution of which Strabo spoke. But once surmounted (as was the case with the Italian and Portuguese navigators at the end of the fifteenth century), what was first an obstacle begins to provide access to trade and commerce. The greater the obstacle and the bigger the sea, the more daring the people, leading, ultimately, to greater and more successful conquests.

A final example—the case of a symbolic geographic map—would be particularly significant for our present discussion, in order to understand what kind of

[1] "Als Kolossalbarriere liegt Afrika im Südwesten der alten Oekumene. Im Norden steht es den Mittelmeer Beziehungen offen, im Nordosten dem asiatischen Kontinentaleinfluessen, im Osten den insularen Oceaniens. Im Westen aber und das ist entscheidend—liegt der atlantische, und zwar insellose Ocean" (Frobenius, 1898, p. 13; my translation).

modelization of the man/sea relationships Ratzel had in mind: the famous *Tabula Peutingeriana*[1]. The regions of the Roman Empire displayed on this almost seven meter-long map, composed of multiple scrolls, are deformed as if seen through a lens that makes them strangely oblong. Real distances are sometimes dilated and, in other cases, truncated in the extreme. If the curve of the Alps covers a tenth of the map, the Mediterranean, in contrast, seems to disappear, petering out like a ripple, much like the great European rivers which, lined up next to one another, are stifled by the land. Is this yet another example of the geographical removal I hypothesized in the introduction? Was the imperial geographer's attention limited to the *orbis terrarum*, to the vast possessions of the empire that ranged from Iberia to Indus, Britannia to North Africa? In reality, according to the latest research on this unique document, the cartographer of the Tabula seems to have shared Ratzel's anthropogeographic point of view. The omission of the sea is not due to reasons of space or value. Indeed, the map represents the urban and transport network of the Roman Empire as it branches out from Rome, its very center. In this map the waterways appear indeed as much as those on land. The only difference is that, since waterways guaranteed easier and shorter journeys, the distances covered by them were deemed shorter and, thus, were depicted accordingly. This is why the Alps, which took many days to cross, are spread out on the map. If, as researchers suggest, the map is an elaborate symbolic or topological representation of the Roman Empire's communication network, and its distances are measured according to the time it takes to travel from one place to another, then it is precisely the sea that, though almost invisible, facilitates this geographic system, functioning as the empire's primary route of communication. For the Tabula cartographer as well as for Ratzel, is also the sea the protagonist of geography, because it is the protagonist of history, the main factor of the development of the humankind on Earth.

[1] Also called *Codex Vindobonensis*, a Roman map of the oecumene, a medieval copy of which (12th-13th century) is preserved in the Hofbibliothek in Vienna. For the following discussion, see Prontera, 2003; Talbert, 2010.



4. Conclusion: A Political Perspective?

Not only do we find roads within the sea but, for Ratzel, the sea itself is a road, reflecting the name bestowed on it by Hesiod, Πόντος. Arguing against the opposition between terrestrial and marine elements in traditional geography, Ratzel reintegrates the sea within his anthropogeographical project, presenting it as a decisive factor in our understanding of man's place on Earth. As we have seen, Ratzel does not deny that the sea has, throughout history, functioned as the most formidable obstacle hindering man's exploits. But our fear of natural obstacles is, according to Ratzel, a limited deterrent: "We have demonstrated that the Earth offers no absolute obstacles to people"[1] and, in particular, "The sea does not represent an absolute barrier to the movements of man, particularly not in the long term".[2] Once one's fear of the open sea is overcome, navigation proves to be quicker and less dangerous than if sailors stuck to the (often rocky) coastline[3]. What is more, exchanges between distant continents and populations generally prove to be more lucrative than local trade movements.

One of the most innovative and interesting aspects of Ratzel's analysis of the sea is his insistence on its role in the history of peoples and the development of civilizations. If the dynamic and anthropic—in a word, the historical—element might seem at first only to inform geographic discourse, on closer inspection it is clear that in Ratzel's work the discipline of geography in fact contributes to a broader understanding of human history. His attempts at modelling the

[1] "Wir haben gesehen, dass die Erde keine absoluten Schranken des Wanderns der Völker bietet" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 467; my translation).

[2] "Das Meer keine absolute Schranke der Verbreitung des Menschen und vor allem nicht auf die Dauer ziehe" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 259; my translation).

[3] Nevertheless, before the Oceanic routes were open in the Modern time, the coasting navigation was largely diffused and preferred in the European sea systems.

geographical networks described above represent the first attempt to outline and explain the development of cultures that are produced through mankind's interaction with different natural environments. If we consider Ratzel's anthropogeographic project from this perspective, the sea is certainly a key element. Of all the natural elements, the sea provides the highest degree of stimulus for movement, trade, relations between people and, hence, for the progress and cultural development that follows. In his study of anthropic approaches to the coast, as well as in his study of how populations have responded, both in the past and in recent times, to the sea, Ratzel always tries to infer a formula for the ideal relationship between man and the sea, for the dynamic equilibrium between obstacle and stimulus, protection and openness, difficulty and advantage, which makes the sea a medium for cultural production.

> First obstacle, then threshold to enter into that orbit, which is the unique way to attain the great aim of history, the unification of man on Earth.[1]

If Ratzel's *Anthropogeographie* is devoted to an abstract and highly formalized study of the man/sea dynamic, in his *Politische Geographie* Ratzel (1897) focuses on the historical aspects concerning the development of different peoples in relation to natural elements[2]. This last text, in particular, is recently experiencing a true rediscovery in the scholarly fields of geography, political studies and sociology. On the contrary, less attention has been paid until now to the formal method of the *Anthropogeography*, and my article intends also to be a first contribution to the filling of this gap. In my opinion these two texts, which are Ratzel's masterpieces, should be considered complementary and should be read synoptically to understand his method. In both works Ratzel's point of view remains deliberately supranational and supra-historic, in order to set out formal rules that may be valid, in principle, for anyone, anywhere, anytime.

This is not the case of a brief but significant script, *Das Meer als Quelle der*

[1] "Erst Schranke, dann Schwelle, und zwar Schwelle zum Eintritt in die Bahn, auf welcher das grosse Ziel der Geschichte, die Erdumfassung der Menschheit allein erreicht werden konnte." (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 229; my translation).

[2] Such both historical and geographical approach had already been adopted by George Grote (1794-1871) and Ernst Curtius (1814-1896) for the study of the development of Athenian egemony, according to a model already present in Strabo. On the same topic wrote his famous dissertation Ernst Kapp (1830).

Völkergrösse (Ratzel, 1900), which brings together important reflections on the sea found in Ratzel's masterpieces and expands on them in relation to the development of Prussian naval power. In the incipit of this text, that bears the programmatic title *Aus der engen in die weite Welt* (From the narrow to the wide world), Ratzel makes an intellectual experiment contemplating a section of the Baltic Sea and reflects on the concept of unity of the sea:

> Behind this dark green line of the horizon there are the ocean and the whole world, which are open spaces for the bold seaman. Looking at this great and simple nature, you forget the differences between the Baltic Sea, the North Sea and the World Sea[1].

All the elements discussed until now—the concept of the limit, different approaches to coastal systems, the historical dynamics concerning the relationship between man and the sea—are now translated into practice (with fair accuracy, in fact) in order to envisage a policy of intervention regarding the trade sector and the Prussian navy.

Ratzel's short text incorporates a hitherto unseen teleological and Eurocentric spirit, which might seem unusual for the ecumenical author of the *Anthropogeographie*. He rewrites Western history from the Greeks to the present day, depicting it as a continuous movement symbiotically linked to the sea. Starting with the populations of the small but island-rich Aegean Sea, which sheltered the first movements of the ancient Greeks, European peoples then sailed upon wider seas, moving along the coast, then from island to island, before sailing from peninsula to peninsula. After the Greeks the Romans, upon suppressing the Carthaginians, took control of the Mediterranean Sea. And it was, once again, from the shelter of the Mediterranean that European powers began to conquer the ocean and the rest of the world.

Already at the time of the composition of his *Anthropogeographie*, Ratzel was convinced that the success of a people is directly proportional to the obstacles they must overcome: "World history has expanded gradually together with the size of the seas, which were opened up by shipyard. People living next to larger seas are also faced with major historical tasks"[2].

[1] "Liegen doch hinter dieser tiefgrünen Linie des Horizontes der Ozean und die ganze Welt dem kühnen Schiffer offen. Man vergisst angesichts dieser grossen einfachen Natur die Unterschiede Ostsee, Nordsee, Weltmeer" (Ratzel, 1900, p. 2; my translation).

[2] "Die Weltgeschichte ist mit der Größe der Meere welche die Schifffahrt stufenweise er-

But this image does not certainly fit continental Prussia, from which one can access the provincial Baltic Sea, the Ostsee, "die Bucht einer Bucht", the bay of a bay, as Ratzel calls it in his text (1900, p. 2), with its thousands of kilometers of winding coastline leading to the vastness of the ocean. How far is the Ocean from the narrowness of the Ostsee! Nevertheless, already Ernst Kapp pretended to recognize the specificity of the German culture in (hopefully a projection!) the dominion of the Oceans. For such a land-oriented, old barbarian stock, which inhabited the woods of the most internal continental part of the old Europe, this Oceanic projection could indeed mean nothing but the promotion of a development as a colonialist power.

Contrary to Kapp, who includes this colonialist projection within its triadic Hegelian system of cultural and ethnical development,[1] the propagandistic and political oriented contents of this pamphlet, do not structurally affect, in my opinion, Ratzel's anthropogeographic conception. No question that Ratzel work could be inscribed, as most of the scientific, ethnographic and geographic researches of that time, within a more comprehensive political and specifically colonialist perspective. The interest toward foreign countries, exotic regions and primitive cultures was actually a corollary of the effective colonial engagement of the great European nations, interested in broadening their boundaries, in exploiting new resources and in opening new markets. Scientific institutions, such as the most important Museums for ethnology all over Europe, were built to collect the objects spoiled/transferred (sometimes even bought) from the conquered/visited countries and the entire scientific activity around these institutions could flourish thanks to the political interest, which assured the economic support behind them. Furthermore, as a member of the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft, Ratzel was certainly not unaware of the kind of utilitarian implications of his scientific work.

Nevertheless, for what concerns the internal coherence of Ratzel's work, these utilitarian and pragmatic concerns hardly find their way through the conceptual and theoretic structure of the anthropogeographic system. From a merely philological point of view, *Das Meer als Quelle der Völkergrösse* is a

schloss, stufenweise gewachsen. An größeren Meeren wohnenden Völkern fallen auch größere geschichtliche Aufgaben zu" (Ratzel, 1882-1891, 1, p. 273; my translation).

[1] See footnote n. 1, p. 3.

collage of previous works. Entire passages from the *Anthropogeographie* and from the *Politische Geographie* are arbitrarily put together and artificially linked with specious argumentations. Now a day, such an editorial experiment would be considered as a form of auto-plagiarism and intellectual dishonesty. The evident occasional, if not opportunistic character of this pamphlet, which is meant as a form of *captatio benevolentiae* directed to the Prussian Kaiser, cannot but result as a caricature of Ratzel's more ambitious geographic works. The political dimension, inscribed within the greater historical dimension of Ratzel's geography, includes already all possible configuration of man/sea and man to man relations on and through the Seas: from the pirates to the international market, from the ancient to the new colonies, from the pilgrim and the traveler to the explorer and the conqueror, from the Athenian to the Venetian hegemony and so on. Was there room for the Prussian ambitions in this historical and systematic reconstruction of the man/sea dynamics? Was the colonialist perspective essentially legitimated by the development of the Prussian geography and history? This is the only thing Ratzel has not been able to prove. And perhaps, it is also because of this, if his work still maintains all its validity even today.

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