

**“HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEOGRAPHY II: THE EXCLUDED,  
THE EVIL, AND THE ANARCHIC”**

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## **History and philosophy of geography II: the excluded, the evil, and the anarchic**

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### **Abstract**

Prompted by recent scholarship on geographers' role in advancing the divergent political ends of anarchism and Nazism, this report considers how disciplinary histories make space for the admirable as well as the abominable episodes of our shared past. In addressing some of the ideological ends to which geography has been put, the paper reflects on the historiographical challenge of dealing appropriately with the discipline's stain of Nazi collusion and explore the potential that geography's anarchist traditions have to inspire activist and critical scholarship today. In thinking more generally about practices of exclusion and marginalisation in geography, the report argues for the value, and the necessity, of diversity and inclusivity in writing on the history of the discipline.

### **Keywords**

anarchism, anarchist geography, feminist historiography, geopolitics, histories of geography, National Socialism, Nazism, radical geography

## **I Introduction**

The summer of 1911 saw the United Kingdom buckle under a prolonged heatwave—one unmatched in intensity and duration until 1976 (Nobbs, 2015). As the Meteorological Office (1911) reported with characteristic understatement in its August bulletin, “a great excess of insolation was noticeable practically everywhere”. The unrelenting heat at turns lulled and aggravated the population, sparking industrial unrest, widening the schism between rich and poor, unsettling class divisions (Nicolson, 2006). The raised temperatures and frayed nerves that defined that summer were no less evident in the discipline of geography.

On 31 August 1911, Charles Close, recently appointed Director General of the Ordnance Survey and President of the geography section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, delivered what was seen by many of his contemporaries as an incendiary attack on the discipline of geography at the Association’s annual meeting in Portsmouth (Keighren, 2010; Withers, 2010). Close’s thesis—based upon an analysis of papers published in the Royal Geographical Society’s *Geographical Journal* between 1904 and 1910—was that geography lacked the theoretical and methodological coherence necessary to demonstrate its status as an independent discipline (Close, 1911). For Close, the fact that the majority of papers published in the journal were devoted to accounts of exploration was evidence of geography’s intrinsically

idiographic and descriptive approach; what was required, he argued, was “original, definitive, and, if possible, quantitative research” (1911: 409).

For many British geographers, Close’s address was a provocation—one that demanded a swift and fulsome rebuttal from the Royal Geographical Society. Although the implications of Close’s paper were subject to urgent discussion in a flurry of private correspondence as the sweltering summer of 1911 gave way to the welcome cool of autumn, no statement in defence of geography was forthcoming, at least not in public; caution on the part of the Society, and lack of agreement on the part of the Fellows as to the most effective repudiation, saw the conversation gradually fizzle out. Where there was agreement, however, was in relation to the perceived deficiencies of Close’s methodology—of his taking the content of the *Geographical Journal* as an unproblematic proxy for the discipline’s character and approach more widely.

For Close (1911: 404), the rationale for his “simple method of investigation” was self-evidently logical:

If an inhabitant of another planet wished to know what we understand by astronomy we could confidently refer him to the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society. If he were curious about the condition of geology, we should give him the volumes of the Geological Society. And, if he were so rash as to ask what are the objects of the modern mathematician, we should hand him the papers published by the London Mathematical

Society. The *Geographical Journal* occupies no lower a position with reference to Geography than do the other journals mentioned with reference to the sciences with which they deal.

As much as the *Geographical Journal* represented the institutional authority of the Royal Geographical Society, and functioned as an important arbiter of geographical knowledge, it was—in the view of Close’s critics—insufficient evidence alone on which to pass judgement on the state and prospect of the discipline; the journal reflected part, but by no means all, of British geography.

The criticism provoked by Close’s content analysis had an unexpected echo 105 years later in an act of impromptu and creative protest staged at the 2016 Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers). The locus of that protest was a trestle table in the foyer of the Society (see Figure 1) on which was arranged a stack of complimentary copies of *Scottish Geography: A Historiography* (Pacione, 2014). Based in large measure upon an analysis of the papers published between 1885 and 2012 in the Royal Scottish Geographical Society’s *Scottish Geographical Magazine* (later the *Scottish Geographical Journal*), *Scottish Geography: A Historiography* was seen by critical delegates to have inadequately represented the contribution of women to Scottish geography as a consequence of its particular methodological approach.

[insert Figure 1.]

Figure 1. An impromptu Post-it note protest highlighting the relative invisibility of women geographers in *Scottish Geography: A Historiography*.

In an act of historiographical revision spanning several days, delegates quietly wreathed the stack of books with Post-it notes on which they listed many of the women otherwise missing from the text. This act of writing women back into (literally on to) histories of the discipline reveals not only a weariness with historiographical approaches that fail adequately to capture or acknowledge geography's diversity, but shows that such histories really matter; they matter to individual geographers' sense of belonging and recognition within the discipline and its institutions, they matter to our collective sense of purpose and direction. More generally, the events of 1911 and 2016 draw attention to the fact that the assumptions we make about what counts as geography, often implicit and taken for granted, tend to be exclusionary of those individuals, approaches, and forms of knowledge for various reasons deemed 'other' (see, for example, Tyner, 2016). The important challenge that historians of geography must address is how critical and creative approaches to historiography—in drawing on diverse source materials and in thinking broadly about geography's varied constituencies—can challenge exclusionary practices and, in so doing, offer richer and more nuanced accounts of the discipline and discourse of geography.

The past quarter century has seen, in relation to the history and philosophy of geography, a "tremendous flowering of research undertaken from feminist perspectives"

(Evans, 2016: 30). While much work remains to be done to fully document women's diverse contributions to geographical thought and practice, the value and necessity of a feminist historiography of geography is now happily (largely) uncontested. Far less consensus exists amongst historians of the discipline in regard to how (and, indeed, whether) we should make space in our accounts for geography's iniquitous practices and its 'wicked' practitioners. The question of how we deal with what we might call evil geographers and evil geographies has been the subject of fascinating recent scholarship that has examined the troubling relationship between geographical thought and Nazi ideology. In exposing the "willing contribution of many academic geographers" (Giaccaria and Minca, 2016: 14) to the geopolitical project of the Third Reich, such work is significant for the questions it raises about inclusion and exclusion in disciplinary historiography and about how we made adequate space for—and give adequate account to—geography's maleficence.

## **II On geography's evil stain**

The German geographers who developed *Geopolitik* at the behest of their imperialistic masters manifested a certain rapacious ferocity, but, like bulls, they had rings in their noses. (Wright, 1963: 1)

The degree to which geographers were complicit in the development and propagation of Nazi ideology is an issue that has troubled historians of the discipline; on the one hand this reflects a legitimate conviction that certain geographical ideas were “misappropriated by National Socialism” (Paddock, 2016: 2) and, on the other, it demonstrates the relative success of “a number of cleansing and legitimating strategies that freed geography from direct involvement with National Socialism” (Michel, 2016: 135). Geography’s role in Nazism has been variously misdescribed and obfuscated, but its detailed articulation is undoubtedly central to the way we “come to terms with the problematic heritage of our discipline” (Verne, 2017: 85). In this context, *Hitler’s Geographies: The Spatialities of the Third Reich*—a collection of new scholarship and reprinted earlier papers (e.g., Bassin, 2016; Charlesworth, 2016)—represents a valuable contribution to (and corrective of) our collective understanding of the “specific relationship between spatial theory, Nazi ideology, and its geopolitical and genocidal practices” (Giaccaria and Minca, 2016: 2).

In their introduction to *Hitler’s Geographies*, Giaccaria and Minca (2016: 14) note that “the Nazi high ranks were literally obsessed with spatial jargon”; particular ways of understanding the relationship between the people, the state, and the land (derived, at least in part, from Friedrich Ratzel’s writings on *lebensraum*) became fundamental to the rhetoric, legitimation, and expression of National Socialism. In this respect, the spatial imaginary of Nazism drew upon, and appropriated, a late nineteenth-



century conception of the state that saw it as both the highest expression of a culture and as an organism locked in a biological struggle for survival. While it is almost certainly the case that Ratzel would have objected to the Nazi's interpretation and implementation of his organic conception of the state; it is, however, also clear that through variously distorted lines of intellectual descent, his work *did* lay a foundation upon which Nazi ideology built.

In a compelling examination of history and geography textbooks published in Germany during the first third of the twentieth century, Troy Paddock (2016: 5) has demonstrated the way Ratzel's work—more so than that of other scholars who had written along comparable lines—was used to bolster an already emerging narrative of Germany as “an ideal nation-state”, one whose unity and ultimate expression was to be cemented through territorial expansion. Ratzel was not, as Paddock notes (2016:11), “a Nazi or proto-Nazi”—after all, he died in 1904 while Hitler was still a teenage schoolboy—nor, arguably, can he be absolved of responsibility for the way his ideas were deployed in the service of Nazism. Even in its most charitable interpretation, Ratzel's intellectual legacy, shaped variously by “selective readings, misunderstandings, bad translation and misinterpretations”, is, then, an ambiguous one (Verne, 2017: 87). In a recent examination of the apparent conceptual parallels between Ratzel's work and contemporary scholarship on “mobility, materiality and relational space”, Julia Verne (2017: 85) ask whether “we might have been too radical in condemning his work as

only ‘poison’”. Verne’s (2017: 87) claim, and her provocation to critical historians of the discipline, is that “Ratzel’s work is still largely neglected based on a rather superficial categorization as politically problematic”.

Ratzel’s work was, of course, not unique among nineteenth-century German geographical scholarship in providing a rhetorical basis to the later articulation of Nazi spatial ideology. Jürgen Zimmerer (2016) shows, for example, how the work of Ferdinand von Richthofen in legitimising German imperialism in East Africa, filtered down through the twentieth-century contributions of geographer such as Carl Troll, and found ultimate expression in the expansionist vision of the Third Reich—albeit one, by this point, focused on the inland empire of Eastern Europe rather than East Africa (see Burleigh, 1988). Geographers like Troll, more obviously than Ratzel and Richthofen, might be considered directly complicit in the spatial imaginary of Nazism; their work having “furthered fantasies of German expansionism and colonization by providing them with a scientific rationale and a popular accessibility” (Zimmerer, 2016: 86). In some respects, though, how we choose to understand Troll—his geographical contribution to Nazi ideology and his status as either a willing participant or ambivalent bystander—typifies the historiographical challenge presented by geography’s evil stain.

Something of the difficulty of defining Troll’s contribution and complicity is revealed in a fascinating paper by Boris Michel (2016) on the self-denazification of German geography after 1945. For Michel (2016: 136), Troll’s relationship with

National Socialism was “ambivalent”; he was never a party member, though he “worked closely with the regime and the military” in securing and furthering his career. In certain respects, Troll is shown to have become more significant from a historiographical point of view *after* the war, particularly so when he published (in the inaugural volume of *Erdkunde*, which he founded in 1947) a reflection on German geography between 1933 and 1945—a “critique and justification”, as he framed it (Michel, 2016: 137; Troll, 1947). The principal effect of Troll’s paper was to “cleanse geography and geographers from a direct involvement with the Nazis, and instead portray geography as a victim of National Socialism and the war” (Michel, 2016: 136; see, also, Weisbrod, 2003). In publishing this account—which subsequently appeared in English in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (Troll, 1949)—Troll was acting, for Zimmerer (2016: 88), as “the principal witness for the salvation of their [German geographers’] honor”.

Troll’s account is important because it became hegemonic; it set the tone, at least until the 1980s, for understandings of the role (or not) of German geography and geographers in the intellectual legitimization of Nazism—it was, as Michel (2016: 137) suggests, “foremost an apologia for geography to redeem the discipline’s former good reputation” and to secure its position in the rebuilding of the post-war nation.

Geography’s evil, in this sense, was something to be shown to lie in the past and to have been visited upon the discipline rather than perpetrated by it.

For any ambiguity that might exist over Troll's contribution to the Nazi project, it has long been understood that some geographers—Walter Christaller and Karl Haushofer, for example—were more obviously complicit in it, driven variously by shared ideological ends or the naked opportunism of career advancement (Barnes and Abrahamsson, 2015; Olwig, forthcoming). Such a characterisation, of course, lacks nuance and explanatory power; it is for this reason that recent contributions by Trevor Barnes (2016a) on Christaller, and Holger Herwig (2016) on Haushofer, are valuable.

Karl Haushofer has long been characterised as Hitler's intellectual inspiration, having provided him (during Hitler's incarceration in Landsberg Prison following the failed Munich coup) with an education in *Geopolitik*, gifting him the spatial vocabulary and rhetoric with which *Mein Kampf* (1925) was peppered (Range, 2016). There is, however, considerable debate about the true nature and extent of Haushofer's influence on Hitler, not least because the archival record is so spotty and Haushofer's own assessment of his effect (given in response to Allied interrogation in 1945) was equivocal. Whatever the real degree of Haushofer's influence and complicity, Allied propaganda—most particularly the short films *The Nazi Strike* (1942) and *Plan for Destruction* (1943)—had indelibly cast Haushofer as the nadir of the geopolitical mind, the “scholarly plotter of German world domination” as *Life* (1939: 65) magazine had earlier put it (see, also, O'Tuathail, 1996; Murphy, 2014).

The “tangled complicity” (Barnes and Abrahamsson, 2015: 70) that was Haushofer’s life and connection with Nazism—one made more confused by the fact his wife had Jewish ancestry and his son, Albrecht, was a conspirator in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler in 1944—exemplify the difficulties inherent in attributing evil intention to particular words and actions. Historians of geography should not, however, demure from the task (and the responsibility) of identifying the malevolent ends to which particular forms of spatial thought were put—something Trevor Barnes (2016a) does conscientiously in his examination of the role of Walter Christaller, and his central place theory, in Nazi spatial planning (see, also, Rösslør, 1989). Our disciplinary test, as Boris Michel (2016: 141) has put it, is to challenge the “expulsion of complicity” and question the “self-victimization” that has often characterised historiographical accounts of geography during, and in the service of, the Third Reich. It is our sad but necessary duty to make space in our disciplinary accounts for the morally bankrupt ends to which geographical ideas have been put (see, for example, Lavery, 2016).

### **III On geography’s anarchic promise**

My first encounter with a wild geographer was in the warmth of my mother’s drawing room (as she called it) on Sunday, March 3, 1901. It should have been on the tundra or steppes of the Russian Empire, for he was

Prince Peter Alexeivich Kropotkin, the anarchist. All I remember is a benevolent old gentleman with a bread. (Wright, 1963: 2)

While some phases of geography's disciplinary history, and some stripes of its philosophy, engender in us shame and demand our atonement, others have the capacity to inspire our admiration and to signal to future possibilities. This much, at least, is the claim of a flurry of recent scholarship—primarily associated with Federico Ferretti (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d) and Simon Springer (2016)—that has sought to more fully document anarchist traditions in geography and to show how the work of anarchist geographers, like Peter Kropotkin and Elie and Élisée Reclus, might inform and enliven current geographical debate. For Springer (2016: 2, 3), anarchism—unlike the many more “unsavoury ideas in geography's disciplinary past”—offers us a pathway towards “a radical, rhizomaic politics of possibility and freedom”. Framed thus, anarchism is part of a foundational narrative of geography as a radical and progressive discipline. For critical and activist geographers who find much in the history of geography an anathema, the idea that there was a period in which cosmopolitan geographical thought advanced an “antiauthoritarian vision and critical concern for social justice” (Springer, 2016: 26) will hold a particular appeal. From a historiographical point of view, one of the more interesting potential consequences of this work lies in its contribution to the canonisation of Kropotkin and Elie and Élisée

Reclus, and their texts. In a discipline both hesitant and conflicted in its practices of textual canonisation, the potential of this recent anarchist (re)turn to mobilise a sustained engagement with the work of Kropotkin and the Reclus brothers is an exciting one (see Keighren, Abrahamsson, and della Dora, 2012; Powell, 2015).

The economic and political circumstances that saw much nineteenth-century geographical scholarship fall into the service of European imperialism were precisely those that encouraged the emergence of a contrasting anarchist discourse, one “opposed to racism, colonialism and Eurocentrism” (Ferretti, 2017a: 111). As much as their mainstream counterparts, anarchist geographers developed their philosophy from a combination of “empirical experience and theoretical experience” (Vandério Cirqueira, 2017: 23). Anarchism was not an abstract ideal, but one that anarchists sought to prove through a combination of in-the-field observation and scholarly “truths revealed by disciplines like history, archaeology, anthropology, criminology, geography and environmental science” (Mac Laughlin, 2016: 94). In general terms, anarchist geographers saw in non-European societies, particularly those perceived to be in a ‘primitive’ state of development, evidence of a natural order—based upon principles of mutual aid, cooperation, and self-sufficiency—that should to serve as a model for future non-hierarchical societies in Europe (Ferretti, 2017; Mac Laughlin, 2016; Marshal, 1992). In certain respects there was nothing particularly new in this observation (Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among other Enlightenment philosophers, had

earlier expressed similar sentiments), but it found new relevance in the radical political context of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly so following the revolutions of 1848 (Katz, 1992).

Anarchist geography was as much an exercise in publishing as it was in politics; this much is evident in Federico Ferretti's (2016c, 2017c, 2017d) various examinations of the authorship, translation, circulation, and reading of the works of Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus. The significance of these studies lies in what they reveal about the (international) contexts in which anarchist writings took shape and in which they were received. Ferretti (2017d) reveals, for example, how Kropotkin's books—texts, like *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899) and *The Conquest of Bread* (1906), that are variously considered “seminal” and “foundational” in the anarchist movement (Mac Laughlin, 2016: 62, 75)—had an earlier history as publications for British periodicals. Publishing in outlets like *The Nineteenth Century* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* provided Kropotkin (by this point living in exile) with a valuable income stream, but also allowed him to “participate in key political and geographical debates” and offered him “a method of spreading anarchist ideas to a wider audience” (Ferretti, 2017d: 18). Kropotkin was supported in this publishing endeavour from the late 1870s by John Scott Keltie, who functioned as an editor-cum-agent. In this capacity, Keltie was instrumental in securing Kropotkin commissions and assisting him in navigating the occasionally competing commercial, political, and economic demands of the British periodical press.



Notwithstanding these challenges, the periodical publishing “secured a durable public success for Kropotkin’s works” and was thus fundamental in the diffusion of anarchist geography (Ferretti, 2017d). For Ferretti (2017: 26), the significance of this phase of Kropotkin’s publishing career lies in its challenge to the “commonly-held view that anarchist geographers were marginalised”. Although their political philosophy challenged the status quo and ran counter to the political mainstream, anarchist geographers were nevertheless part of a rational and informed public debate—they were outsiders speaking from the centre.

#### **IV Conclusion**

Geography’s heterogeneity (and its vitality) is reflected in the literature on its history; work that, in the last year, has ranged from cultures of geographical periodical publishing in Enlightenment-era Germany (Bond, 2017) to provincial geographical societies in twentieth-century Britain (Butlin, 2017), from the role of Jedidiah Morse in the development of geography in the early American republic (Rohli and Johnson, 2016) to the later clash of disciplinary visions revealed in correspondence between William Bunge and Richard Hartshorne (Barnes, 2016b), from the history of the discipline in interwar Yugoslavia (Duančić, 2016) to the institutionalisation of geography in South African universities (Barnard, 2016; Visser, Donaldson and Seethal,

2016). So, too, does this literature reflect geography's status as an international discipline within which theoretical concepts circulate and are subject to specific, local appropriations: Zhihong Chen (2016) and José Borzacchiello da Silva (2016) have, for instance, shown how the work of Paul Vidal de La Blache travelled to, and shaped the emergence of modern disciplinary geography in, China and Brazil (see, also, Clout, 2016; Jöns, Meusburger and Heffernan, 2017).

For all its moments of apparent coherence and consensus, geography's history is one defined by plurality of theory and practice, of purpose and method, of fallacy and certainty, of virtue and malevolence. Attempting to account for and give narrative shape to that diversity is both the challenge and the reward of scholarship on the history and philosophy of geography; the discipline rarely feels more vital than when contemplating its past. Our task, simply put, is to keep adding our Post-it notes—to continue to remind ourselves of the good *and* the bad in who we are and in what we do, to see in our past both cause for regret and cause for hope.

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