

# MACKINDER REDUX

Response by:

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Composed at the end of the First World War, Halford Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* poured the cold-water of geographical determinism over the liberal idealism of Woodrow Wilson's proposed new world order. Mackinder suggested that while a disarmed world of global law and national self-determination remained a noble ideal, geographical realities made it dangerous folly to expect it any time soon. Instead, Mackinder warned that a world brimful of super-powers and their colonies would see various attempts at global hegemony, and that, should any one power bring under its sway the resource basket of oil, wheat, and coal to be found in West Russia, the Ukraine, and the Caspian Basin, it stood fair to dominate a unipolar world. Against this possibility, treaties and law were paper tigers, only a countervailing and superior military force could offer any real protection.

This same dialectic of ideals and reality animates Robert Kaplan's argument about the Revenge of Geography. Kaplan proposes that liberal humanists and neo-Conservatives are too ambitious, seeking to remake the world in line with their democratic aspirations, but in doing so, they over-reach themselves and become mired in disasters like Vietnam or Iraq once the stubborn geographical realities of ethnic and regional

distinctiveness assert themselves, leaving the United States in Iraq, for example, as 'a land-based, in-your-face meddler [...] caught up in sectarian conflict' (Kaplan 2009a). Atavistic conflicts flourish as the weak institutions of states are shattered by globalization while the struggle for existence is sharpened by population growth amid dwindling resources. Writing of the Balkans, Kaplan finds recurrent conflict around primordial ethnic identities, as in Macedonia where, in the years preceding the First World War, 'ethnic hatreds released by the decline of the Ottoman Empire had first exploded, forming the radials of twentieth-century European and Middle Eastern conflict, Macedonia was like the chaos at the beginning of time' (Kaplan 1994: 51), and, again with the end of communism in Yugoslavia, Kaplan heard 'phantom voices that I knew were about to explode once again' (Kaplan 1994: 5). As did Mackinder, Kaplan believes that he lives in dangerous times, 'when politics are increasingly shaped by the physical environment. A brief moment marked by the Industrial Revolution, which gave humankind a chance to defend itself somewhat from nature, may be closing' (Kaplan 1996: 4). As did Mackinder, Kaplan sees contemporary crises as replaying the intense territorial conflicts of an earlier closed-space world (Kearns 1984).

For Kaplan, geography divides the world into three sets of peoples: land powers, sea powers, and the regional ethnicities ('granular ethnic and tribal elements' (Kaplan 2009b) scattered around them. Following Mackinder, Kaplan suggests that land-power is essential aggressive and dangerous, after all did not communism flourish around the edges of the great Russian land power and was not fascism a continental European phenomenon, whereas, 'liberalism nurtured its deepest roots in the United States and Great Britain, essentially island nations and sea powers both,' for 'the sea, beyond the cosmopolitan influences it bestows by virtue of access to distant harbors, provides the inviolate border security that democracy needs to take root' (Kaplan 2009c). This places a particular burden upon the United States as, for example, 'the only great power with no territorial designs on Asia [...], allowing it [...] to rise above realpolitik and act solely for the good of the region' (Kaplan 2009d). Fragile states within the reach of aggressive and repressive land powers can be saved for liberal democracy although, 'not [...] but [...] project[ing] economic and military power

regionally' (Kaplan states must be brought to the mercy of fascism believes that, in this is not only ineffectual shorn of any element

## The Materiality

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r invokes a geographical elations that promises to icy postures, placing them ary response to a stable set rns 2006). This is not now, day, the only geographical nd I want to outline four e progressive, Geopolitics hat force is not the only hat and irreducible ba Mackinder's opposition eral idealism. The nfla nt in 'realist' international rissal of multilateral insti reimer 1994). It is evident ference for realpolitik over policy. Yet ideas too have ects. The Cold War was le to understand it without al differences between the e meaning and legacy of forss 2000; Westad 2005). prosecute crimes against or tyrants and may reduce hich vicious leaders grant prosecution (Robertson n bodied a global covenant n by delegitimizing colona

made by many among (Kearns 2009). Norman ne most powerful nations n many that had virtually economic interdependence terial interest in averting titutions and trust that flict. James Bryce (1921)

proposed that a combination of a sufficient number of nations might develop the moral force to develop fora of conciliation and arbitration that would prevent at least many otherwise likely wars. John Hobson argued for a League of Nations with the right and ability to 'apply an economic boycott, or in the last resort an international force' (Hobson 1915: 6). Peter Kropótkin and Élisée Reclus argued that cooperation was the social force out of which humankind developed its highest capacities at all scales, from kin to the global ecumene (Kearns 2009).

These alternatives to conflict developed international expression. They did not eliminate military action but then neither did military action eliminate the aspiration for cooperation and renewed attempts to devise better institutions and practices. International relations are a mix of force and association, of conflict and collaboration, and foreign policy should attend to ways of building and preserving peace. Insisting that only one side of this equation is real confounds attempts to reinforce the other.

## Geopolitical Economy

Kaplan and Mackinder explain the geography of conflict in terms of fundamental spatial realities that are relatively unchanging. Kaplan finds that in the regions where empires clash, political institutions are shattered losing ethnic and sectarian hatreds. These are the very regions that Nicholas Spykman (1942) identified as the rimlands of Mackinder's Heartland. However, the continuity of conflict in these places is due more to the instability produced by earlier conflicts than by stable geographical realities. For example, the British fought wars in Iraq during 1914-18, 1920-21, 1922-4, 1943, and 1945, and in Afghanistan during 1839-42, 1878-80, and 1919, and of course are in both places yet. Current patterns of disadvantage flow from this past rather arising afresh in the present by impress of the environment. The relatively stable elements result from our having a hydrocarbon economy and under these conditions the Great Powers have a continuing interest in the Caspian Basin and Iraq. In other words, the continuity of instability is produced by recurrent external interest rather than by geographically determined local conditions.

The economic interests involved in imperialism were identified by Mackinder's contemporaries, such as

John Hobson (1901), and it is still true that jingoistic adventures are talked up by resource-hungry corporations. Another of Mackinder's contemporaries, Élisée Reclus (1905, 1908) and Peter Kropótkin () argued that the free trade pressures from rich countries, led to the commodification of land in poor countries and the promotion there of an export-based, cash-crop rural economy to the serious detriment of indigenous food security. In this way, economic and thus political instability were intensified in ways that David Harvey (2003) today describes as accumulation by dispossession. These realities of geo-political economy do not feature in the environmental determinism of Kaplan and Mackinder. Yet these realities matter because under the guise of freedom or justice a whole series of economic relations were put in place by the USA and the USSR during the Cold War. Even now, freedom is invoked to justify the creation of free markets and the elimination of the very sorts of economic protection that almost every industrialized country has relied upon when establishing companies that can compete with international enterprises (Bradshaw and Huang 1991; Lee 2008).

#### Primordial Ethnicities

A third difficulty with the geographical arguments of Mackinder and Kaplan is that they ground stable identities in regional ecologies. Kaplan proposes that when the artificial institutions of state and empire shatter, primordial ethnicities re-assert themselves. This is what Lene Hansen (2006: 13) calls a 'Balkan discourse,' the suggestion that in certain places antagonistic identities persist and people with these identities will ever be at each other's throats, whenever not restrained by the artificial institutions of state or empire. There are two problems with varieties of the 'Balkan discourse.' In the first place, ethno-national identities far from being a constant yearning have to be taught, diffused, and insisted upon. The Serbian ethnicity that Kaplan attends to in *Balkan Ghosts* was staged and promoted over many years by Slobodan Milošević in order to create a Greater Serbian identity around which he could seize control of the destiny of the former Yugoslavia (Magas 1993). He wanted control of the state because the transition from socialism created marvelous opportunities for those in power to profit from the sale of state assets (Holmstrom and Smith 2000). The second problem with 'Balkan discourses' is that by placing the blame for

ethnic antagonism in history, they divert attention from the scale and consequences of sectarian crimes in the present. Furthermore, they fail to attend to the role of justice in mitigating sectarian tensions and providing a basis for building due recognition and a parity of esteem between formerly hostile groups (Thompson 2002).

Again, similar arguments were made by several of Mackinder's contemporaries. Peter Kropótkin's (1969[1896]) discussion of the evolution of the state made clear the class-based dynamics of state formation and the invention by absolutist monarchs and, later, nationalist bourgeoisies of both ethnicity and tradition. Against the view that humanity is essentially competitive and violent, many anarchists chose to stress instead the essential goodness of humanity and the naturalistic basis for an ethics of cooperation and mutual aid (Kropótkin 1947[1922]). This tradition is important because there is an accumulated expertise in conflict resolution (Cortright 2006; Kurlansky 2006) that is dismissed in Balkan discourse, producing a dispiriting and despairing view of Geopolitics.

#### National exceptionalism

The final issue I wish to raise concerns the idea of national exceptionalism. Kaplan and Mackinder both insist that, although over much of the world the projection of force beyond national borders is aggressive and invasive, there is an exception. Both identify sea-power as essentially pacific and both view their own state as properly a sea-power. The aggression of US foreign policy cannot so easily be treated as a sideshow. In the last twenty years the United States has used military force against twenty-four countries (Grossman 2009). The current conflict in Iraq has produced some 100,000 civilian casualties (Iraq Body Count 2009). In addition, the United States has engaged in covert activities in many more places, training and funding a variety of death squads (Grandin 2006) and now maintaining an archipelago of sites of torture (Heiner 2007). Furthermore, it arms so many other countries that a large share of both civil and international conflict may properly be considered proxy wars (Loveman 2002).

Again, the national exceptionalism claimed by so-called sea-powers was challenged by Mackinder's contemporaries. I have already noted Angell's criticisms of Alfred Mahan (Navari 1989) but perhaps the most

trenchant critique of the hypocrisy of British claims to elevated motives in its use of force came from John Hobson. Hobson's study of the *Psychology of Jingoism* dissected much of the rhetoric sanitizing imperialism and in his famous study on *Imperialism*, he was refreshingly direct:

*Paramount power, effective autonomy, emissary of civilisation, rectification of frontier, and a whole sliding scale of terms from 'hinterland' and 'sphere of influence' to 'effective occupation' and 'annexation' will serve as ready illustrations of a phraseology derived for purposes of concealment and encroachment. The Imperialist who sees modern history through these masks never grasps the 'brute' facts, but always sees them at several removes, refracted, interpreted, and glozed by convenient renderings (Hobson 1988[1902]: 21).*

Mackinder claims that geographical realities underpin international relations. In this manner, the issue of state agency and responsibility is hidden by environmental necessity. States, we are assured, have little choice but to play forcefully the hand that nature has dealt them. This has three main consequences: it obscures the economic basis of much foreign policy, it denies the possibility of peaceful co-existence, and it excuses the violence of colonialism and imperialism. Some of Mackinder's contemporaries understood this and if we are to revive geographical perspectives on international relations, then, we should return also to these anarchist and socialist alternatives.

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