



The State as a “form of life” and the space as *Leistungsraum*: the reception of Ratzel in the First and Second World Wars

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Abstract. My contribution explores the meaning of war and the role of Germany, which was seen as representing a *Mittellage*, before the First and the Second World Wars, through the eyes of two main authors who radically reinterpreted and appropriated geographical political thinking, particularly the work of Ratzel. I am referring to the Swedish political scholar Rudolf Kjellen and the “crown jurist” of the Third *Reich*, Carl Schmitt. The consideration of the triple relation between space, Ratzel and war casts light on Kjellen’s and Schmitt’s use of Ratzel as a lever in order to promote their idea of politics and political science. Ratzel’s concepts offered Kjellen and, in a different way, Schmitt, a means of justifying their way of overcoming and stretching the “limits” of their disciplines and, at the same time, of introducing a new idea of political and geographical organization, which de facto legitimized German expansion, in two crucial periods of German political life – the First and the Second World Wars. As a consequence, their Ratzel was oriented toward militant aims. Moreover, their scientific and political ideas were clearly intertwined – they explicitly rejected the idea of separating their roles as political activists and as members of a scientific community.

1 Introduction

The terrible concentric pressure from West to East obliges all Mitteleuropean nationalities to merge together to bulwark associations . . . to be ready for this, means everything, and our existence and rescue depend on this (Meinecke, 1916:728).

It is thus that the well-known historian Friedrich Meinecke summarizes the position (Lage) of Germany in 1916, namely as the *Mittellage*, the position in between. Indeed, from Leibniz (1670 [1931]:166) to Naumann (1915), from Kjellen (1921) to Schmitt (1993) and to the post-1989 literature on Germany, *Mittellage* has been understood not only as a descriptive concept but as a key metaphor to connote the space occupied by Germany. However, *Mitteleuropa* and *Mittellage* are different concepts and have different histories: while the latter refers to a geographical position, the first has a historical and symbolic meaning which overcomes the geographical connotation and changes in different historical pe-

riods. However, here they have to be thought of as a constellation of concepts which historically change over time, as Schultz (1989) and Kost (1988) have done. *Mittellage*, the “position in between”, evokes contrasting feelings of fears, anxieties and dreams of power – as does *Mitteleuropa*, which is often associated with “the position in between” (Schultz, 1989; Kost, 1988). As Schutz (1989) asserts, these two seminal geographical and political concepts have followed paths that have sometimes intertwined and sometimes significantly diverged. Germany – with Austria – is the key to any definition of *Mitteleuropa* and, in its turn, the German geopolitical identity is almost always defined through *Mittellage*, in a twofold sense, as an intermediary (*Vermittler*) between East and West and as a bulwark against Asian barbarity. War and defense are therefore concepts that have been often associated with the specific role and geographic position of Germany in Europe (Schultz, 1989; Kost, 1988).

My contribution explores the meaning of war and the role of Germany, which was seen as representing a *Mittellage*, before the First and the Second World Wars, through the eyes

of two main authors who radically reinterpreted and appropriated geographical political thinking, particularly the work of Ratzel. I am referring to the Swedish political scholar Rudolf Kjellen and the “crown jurist” of the Third Reich (Stirk, 2005), Carl Schmitt. However, the general reception of Ratzel’s work by these authors is not the subject of this paper, and neither is their debt to geopolitical thinking, which has been highly debated concerning Schmitt’s work (Legg, 2011; Minca and Rowan, 2015; Barne and Minca, 2012; Abrahamsson, 2013; Galli, 2021; Mesini, 2019). Rather, the aim of the following pages is to investigate how the political role of Germany as the center of the *Mittellage* and the meaning of war have affected the ways in which Kjellen’s and Schmitt’s thought was influenced by Ratzel. The war is seen here both as a context for intellectual and political interpretations and as the subject of the works under examination.

The relevance of the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars to the posthumous reception of Ratzel’s work cannot be overestimated; Kjellen in particular was one of the main protagonists of Ratzel’s revival (Kost, 1988). Kjellen and Schmitt did not, so to speak, think the war *through* Ratzel, but *with* Ratzel: in their attempt to understand the war, they applied neither Ratzel’s categories and concepts nor his research methods. They appropriated and transformed Ratzel’s concepts for their research aims, in order to demonstrate the validity of their arguments and highlight a new turning point in the political and juridical sciences. In other words, the arguments developed in political geography about the central meaning of space and position in order to understand politics were appropriated by Rudolf Kjellen and Carl Schmitt as the starting point for the development of their own methodology. Their references to Ratzel thus functioned as a kind of pretext, a means of justifying their arguments, but were not key to their approach.

In particular, Ratzel’s concepts offered Kjellen and, in a different way, Schmitt, a means of justifying their way of overcoming and stretching the “limits” of their disciplines and, at the same time, of introducing a new idea of political and geographical organization, which de facto legitimized German expansion, in two crucial periods of German political life – the First and the Second World Wars. Kjellen and Schmitt were not mere theoretical thinkers but intellectual actors involved in war. They did not think of war only abstractly for the human race and history: they considered war in relation to the space and role of Germany in Europe – as a *Großmacht* and as *Großraum*. As a consequence, *their* Ratzel was oriented toward militant aims. Moreover, their scientific and political ideas were clearly intertwined – they explicitly rejected the idea of separating their roles as political activists and as members of a scientific community. The consideration of the triple relation between space, Ratzel and war casts light on Kjellen’s and Schmitt’s use of Ratzel as a lever in order to promote their idea of politics and political science.

2 Kjellen: destiny and war

The influence and success of Ratzel’s work during the First World War cannot be considered without taking account of Kjellen’s reception of it: the Swedish scholar developed and reinterpreted Ratzel’s ideas in order to legitimate his new perspective on political sciences and his main research subject, namely the nature of *Reich* and State. I will make three main points concerning Kjellen’s reception of Ratzel: firstly, Ratzel’s geographic approach – and in general geopolitics – was the starting point for his attempt to define a particular idea of State and autarky, and therefore to justify the foundation for a new political science. Secondly, war played a major role in his interpretation of political global relations and the main social and political dynamics. Finally, his idea of war and of space was clearly prescriptive, in that it was deployed as a discursive tool in order to promote German imperialism. In this sense, Ratzel’s idea of the fight for space (*Kampf um Raum*) became a pretext – a source of legitimation – to Kjellen’s work, a basis for the construction of a new science aiming to justify German political expansion.

War played an essential role not only in Kjellen’s work, but also in his personal and intellectual life: not only was he a strong supporter of Germany during the First World War, but the war also contributed significantly to his academic success. His work *Grossmächte der Gegenwart*, published in 1914, ran to 19 editions, with 35 000 to 37 000 copies sold; his *Ideen von 1914*, published in 1915, sold between 10 000 and 12 000 copies, figures comparable with those for Friedrich Nauman’s successful book on *Mitteleuropa* (Kost, 1988; Meyer, 1955). His work became increasingly popular and its reception ever more positive in the space of just a few years: from the early almost skeptical book review by Robert Sieger (1903, 1906) and the refusal to consider his books as anything more than ideological and partial accounts of world politics, to the favourable and even enthusiastic reactions of Grabowski (1914), Merz (1915), Hasinger (1917), Vogel (1926), Maull (1929), Meinecke (1916) and eventually even Sieger (1924) from the beginning of the First World War onward.

Indeed, Ratzel was a fundamental point of reference in Kjellen’s work, particularly in his 1916, *Staat als Lebensform*, translated into German in 1917 (Holdar, 1992; Kost, 1988). In this work, Kjellen declared his intention to overcome the existing political approach to the State, which was based on an abstract juridical definition as *Rechtsstaat*. In his view, this general and univocal idea of the *Rechtsstaat* overlooked the complexity and denied the political essence of the State: hence, the necessity to innovate in political science by grasping the complex and multifaceted nature of the State, both as a juridical institution and as a form of life – *Lebensform*. Here, the paramount relevance of geopolitics and of Ratzel’s political geography came to the fore: “geopolitik”, a new science so named by Kjellen, taking inspiration from Ratzel, would deal with one of the many dif-

ferent aspects of the State. Ratzel’s suggestion that the State was a form of life was the clearest intuition of the real territorial nature of a State; but, Kjellen asserted, the political geographer could not have the final word about the State, because he considered only one aspect of it – the geopolitical (Kjellen, 1917:21). Moreover, he pointed out, the difference between political geography and geopolitics was in their nature: the latter was a political science, “the doctrine of the State as a geographic organism or as phenomenon in space – State as land, territory, area or specifically as Reich” (Kjellen, 1917:46), while the former was a natural science. Geopolitics, unlike political geography, aimed not at considering the general relations between humans and territory, but at investigating the State. Kjellen made it clear that not every territory would be a subject of geopolitics, but only lands “penetrated” by political organizations. According to Kjellen, geopolitics was only one aspect of the multifaceted study of the State, which included ecopolitics, demopolitics, sociopolitics and kratopolitics (Kjellen, 1920): geopolitical life was subsumed into the State organization. Indeed, in contrast with the Swedish political scientist, Ratzel had stressed in his work the understanding of the State as a life process, opening his major work on political geography with the subsumption of the State into the World organism, as the coalescence between a particular people and their territory (Ratzel, 1897:3). Ratzel’s biogeography encompassed, so to speak, the study of political behaviours and institutions (Bassin, 1987; Klinke, 2019).

So, Kjellen’s reference to Ratzel’s biogeography was superficial; yet it became a powerful tool in the undermining of the obsolete juridical and liberal idea of State as a mere constellation of norms (Tunander, 2001). The State had now to be seen as a form of life (*Lebensform*) intertwined with its territory, as a unity of *Land und Volk*, Territory and People: this was the neglected natural side of the State that Kjellen claimed to have discovered, whereas the law – constitution and administration – was the complementary juridical side, the only aspect hitherto considered by the liberal doctrine of the State (Kjellen, 1917:12). His interpretation of Ratzel’s view of the State was therefore the starting point on the path to acknowledgement of the one-sidedness, to overcoming the obsolete juridical doctrine of State and complementing the *Rechtsstaat* with the *Machtsstaat*, namely a State whose aim was to exert political power. So the old political science was bound to be replaced by a new “emancipated science”, which would recognize the concreteness and complexity of the State, not as an abstract construction of norms and institutions, but as an agency on the stage of contemporary global politics, characterized by new protagonists – *Grossmächte* – and by a new behaviour – the Darwinian battle for survival. This science “rises as a synthesis above the thesis of the old doctrine of the State and the antithesis of geography” (Kjellen, 1917:32).

It was not in peace but in war that the true essence of States was revealed, according to the founder of geopolitics. War

emerged not only, as in Ratzel, from the need for a living State to grow and expand as part of the natural life process (Ratzel, 1889:193); it revealed foremost the essence of politics – here lies another relevant difference to Ratzel.

Never is the Reich’s organic nature revealed better than during the war. The war thus becomes a field of experimentation for Geopolitics - the modern war aims to break the opponent’s will and the most radical way to do this is to take his Reich (Kjellen, 1917:62).

The meaning of an aggressive foreign policy as the truth value of any great power was therefore paramount: the aim or rather the essence of any State was the fight to live and grow – or, as Kjellen stated, referring to Ratzel, the battle for space.

When the battle for space and existence becomes stronger, we perceive the natural aspect of the States, whereas their legal aspect seems to disappear” (Kjellen, 1917:28).

War was therefore the exceptional event that revealed the true nature of States and the reality of power.

Through war for space, States strove to create organic entities and to achieve their process of geographic individualization – “*geographische Individualisierung*” – becoming complete and individual organisms (Kjellen 1917:65). The living State should be also a compact economic unity. So, Kjellen opposed his organic view of the aggressive State to the classical idea of *Rechtsstaat*, not only by describing it as *Lebensform* but also by claiming that the State *should* become an individuality, namely an autarchic economic and political organism, needing an expanded territory – the *Reich* – in order to support and feed its population and enable it to grow. Here, contrary to Ratzel, whose aim was to describe natural processes, the prescriptive quality of Kjellen’s analysis becomes clear: the State ought to become an autarky if its aim is to attain an individual character. These passages make clear Kjellen’s interest in – and distance from – one of the main themes in German historical literature, namely States as individuals, in line with Ranke’s tradition of thought (Holdar, 1992). In Kjellen’s perspective, economic autarky is intertwined with political autarky, and makes it possible for the State to become an individuality:

The Reich has to be formed as a natural area which guarantees an appropriate Autarky – this is the real vocation of the geographic internal individuality. On this is built the bridge between geopolitics and economic politics (Kjellen, 1917:76).

In actual fact, in contrast with Ranke’s idea of State and the classical *Rechtsstaat*, which was not necessarily autarchic, Kjellen’s ideal state aimed to achieve its political and economic autarky in a “planetary” politics:

Autarky is the solution to the general economic problem, the symmetry between what he calls overcivilisation (*Überkultur*) and colonial civilisation (*Kolonialkultur*): economic autonomy so that the essential needs of the Volk may be satisfied by the Reich resources (Kjellen, 1917:160).

Germany had a paramount role in Kjellen’s vision: Germany and *Mittleuropa* were the political realities that had to be constructed and developed to forge a new role for Europe. This presupposed that the limited boundaries of the classical German State might be overcome – as had happened with other colonial empires – in order for it to become an individuality and appropriate a rightful area of expansion, namely “the sphere of interest”:

The German problem is the same as the English one: this country too has to gain a safe market to buy raw materials and sell products. The solution to this issue has to be found in the creation and separation of a sphere of interest... Germany has to create her sphere of interest (Kjellen, 1917:164).

Kjellen thus introduces into his writings a concept used by Ratzel in *Der Staat und sein Boden*. In this work, Ratzel (1896:28) used the same term, taking Mediterranean Europe and Eastern Europe and *Mittleuropa* as examples, and suggesting a possible extension of State intervention into a sphere of interest (*Interessensphäre*) and cultural area (*Kulturgebiet*) outside its boundaries, though without exactly defining the economic, cultural or directly political nature of this expansion. Ratzel’s *Mittleuropa* was therefore generally described as Germany’s natural area of dominance – whereas the question about the possible political meaning of German hegemony was left open (Ratzel, 1904, 1940).

For Kjellen more than for Ratzel, *Mittleuropa* and Germany evoked a claim and justification of imperialist conquest. Referring to Nauman’s and Rohrbach’s concept of Middle European economic union, Kjellen stated the need to construct an autarky, which would represent the strength of a united *Mittleuropa*:

This is *Mittleuropa*, the union Germany–Austria–Hungary, that grows in the Balkans and Asia Minor towards the project Berlin–Bagdad: a large diagonal strip through the Old World, a political bridge between the North Sea and the Persian Gulf, a buffer between Russia and Western Europe and a planetary counterweight against the already existing world powers (Kjellen, 1921:70–71).

Germany represented here the emerging power, that ought either to fight against the other great powers or to die, its political role and meaning depending on the particular geographical position “in the middle of tensions, oppressed from three sides, by the bulks of the Anglo-Saxon, Roman and Slave worlds” (Kjellen, 1921:171).

While Ratzel described the pros and cons of the German “position in between” in very general terms, suggesting that it could be either a force or a weakness, depending on the political ability to be strong (Ratzel, 1898:88–89), for Kjellen, on the eve of the First World War, Germany’s destiny was clear: it had to seize power and expand into the natural sphere of intervention in order to take on its role as a great power – *Großmacht*. *Mittleuropa* was therefore the political and territorial space for the autarchic German Reich, which only through expansion might become an individuality. In this Darwinian perspective, there was no place in history for States that were not individuals – States not possessing a Reich that allowed them to be autarchic:

States full of energy of life (*Lebenskräftig*) whose space is reduced, are subjected to the political categorical imperative to expand their space through colonisation, annexation or conquest (Kjellen, 1917:81).

In a planetary politics – which coincides with the Darwinistic struggle for life – there was no place for traditional States but only for great powers (*Grossmächte*) (Kjellen, 1916:3). This means that *Mittleuropa* – in its smaller (Nauermann) or greater (Jäckh) version – had to merge under German leadership (Kjellen, 1921:54–56). “War” was, then, in Kjellen’s works both a political category, an abstract concept which explained political history, and the concrete and real war for Germany and for *Mittleuropa* – or, rather, as Kjellen stressed in his famous work – the conflict between the old Europe of 1789 and the new German Europe of 1914.

3 Schmitt and *Großraum*

Unlike Kjellen, who is neglected in the contemporary literature, Carl Schmitt is a celebrity. Defined by Jan-Werner Müller as a “dangerous mind” (Müller, 2003), he was certainly a strong, dangerous opponent, not only of liberalism but of all international institutions: his thinking had and still has a strong impact on conservative and progressive public opinion and intellectual milieus (Buck-Morss, 2008; Mouffe, 1999; Zolo, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Odysseos and Petito, 2007; Scheuermann, 1999). Moreover, his ideas are debated not only in the political and juridical disciplines, but in many other academic and non-academic fields. In these pages, he is considered as a jurist, who reflected on the positivist, liberal and illiberal approaches to constitutional and international law, and who defended the National Socialist new European order – or what Schmitt thought it could be. Methodologically, his attack on and confrontation with liberalism and juridical positivism constituted, as Benno Teschke (2016) sees it, not only a political and academic challenge to the positivistic school of thought, but the rejection of any value-neutral idea of academy and science. In political relations, as well as in intellectual disputes, Schmitt’s perspective was polemical, and specifically

combative against all forms of academic or political explanations that denied the fundamental conflicting origin of all political institutions and promoted any form of universalism. His position concerning National Socialism was not always favourable: the so-called “Kronjurist” became gradually marginal in Hitler’s regime from 1936 onwards, as Bendersky (1983), Maschke (1995) and Blindow (1999), among others, have shown. Yet, it is clear that he was always a central academic thinker and that his legal interpretation of the Weimar constitution paved the way for Hitler’s seizure of power (Schlink, 1996). Schmitt never opposed or even criticized National Socialism and Hitler’s anti-Semitism.

From his wide intellectual output, the essays that are considered here are those about war and *Großraum: The Turn to the Discriminating Concept of War of 1937* and *The Großraum Order of International Law with a Ban on Intervention for Spatially Foreign Powers: A Contribution to the Concept of Reich in International Law* at the Kiel conference on 1 April 1939. It is noteworthy that the last essay, which makes open reference to Ratzel, was attacked by many National Socialist followers from the academic and political core of the regime, even though it justified and praised Hitler’s aggression in Bohemia and Moravia. The reception of this essay was peculiar: on the one hand, it provided an account of and promoted a strong interest in the National Socialist elites for the legitimization of a German Monroe Doctrine (Schmitt, 2007:13). Nevertheless, the competition between possible projects for a new organization of Europe was strong and violent, leading to the attack against Schmitt’s *Großraum* by some National Socialist academic and political heterodox exponents of the regime’s anti-Semitic doctrine, like Werner Best, Werner Daitz and Carl Bilfinger (Jureit here). Far from being criticized for its geopolitical perspective, as happened later with Haushofer’s works (Bassin, 1987), it was rejected on account of Schmitt’s allegedly old traditional juridical argumentation and the lack of stress on the *Reich*’s ethnic and racial foundation (Jureit here; Nunan, 2007). The reason for this strange reception may be found in the particular context in which Schmitt’s conference took place. In 1939, with the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, the international order was at stake, as was the definition of new actors and rules of behaviour, which meant a lively, turbulent discussion in the German camp, and in the rest of Europe about the crisis of the old international political order and rules. Schmitt’s lecture on *Großraum* can be considered one of the pivotal texts of the new narrative about the future international vision. It was not a mere scholarly achievement, but a “militant” formulation and justification of a new state of affairs. The competition between his project and other visions of eminent representatives of National Socialism may explain the vehement attack on Schmitt’s *Großraum* idea.

War, both generically and in the sense of the concrete Weimar civil war, was (McCormick, 1994) the starting point for Schmitt’s early investigation into the essence of the political: his time was the “terrible time of civil war . . . where

all legitimate and normative illusions with which men like to deceive themselves regarding political realities in periods of untroubled security vanish” (Schmitt, 1976:52). Indeed, by observing the political Weimar crisis, Schmitt realized that the real foundations of politics and law were to be found in a situation of chaos, in the state of exception, which emerged from the absence of norms and authority. In his perspective, the genesis of the political lay in the sovereign power, which was able to decide about the state of exception, and define who was the enemy and who was the friend. Hence, any legal order had to be traced back to its genesis, to the original sovereign decision (Schmitt, 2005:12–13). So the answer to the pivotal question of *Quis iudicabit* was identified by Schmitt not in political or juridical institutions, and even less in the values of the liberal democracy, but in a fact, namely in the decision taken in civil war and disorder (Vinx, 2019). Real facts, like conflict, war and opposition, were therefore the truth, the essence of politics.

It is necessary here to stress the subsequent transformation in Schmitt’s approach, from what has been defined as his “decisionism” to the theory of concrete orders, in a 1934 essay (Schmitt 2004) that predates the *Großraum* doctrine and in which he attacked liberal and positivistic thinking. Here he asserted that concrete order was the cornerstone of law and that “order was also juristically not primarily ‘rule’ or summation of rules, while conversely, rule was only a component and a medium of order” (Schmitt, 2004:48). Hence, the concrete order thinking (*konkretes Ordnungsdenken*) revealed that law was always referring to a specific relation to a social and political context, namely to a constellation of power relations. In the considerations about the discriminating concept of war in 1937 and the Kiel conference on the *Großraum* in 1939, as Teschke sees it (Teschke, 2011:187),

Schmitt’s reinterpretation . . . is bound to the concrete situation of the intellectual and political crisis of legitimacy generated by Hitler’s spatial revolution, for which Schmitt offered the most incisive and comprehensive politico-jurisprudential justification, grounded in concrete-order-thinking.

The concrete acts – the concrete events – that affirm the new geopolitical system and that challenge Schmitt’s thinking are the Versailles Treaty and the act of annexation of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939. Here the relevance of geopolitics comes to the fore as a demonstration of the efficacy and validity of the new European relations of power.

In the 1937 text, Schmitt denounces the reemergence of a discriminatory view of war in the jurisprudence, which is revealed by the treatment of Germany and its emperor after the First World War. In this interpretation, two facts have changed the old non-discriminatory concept of war: Germany’s exclusion from the peace negotiations, and the introduction of war guilt and war crime into international law after 1919. This transformation and the role of the League of Nations in controlling and banning war meant, according

to Schmitt, the first concrete act: the introduction of a new discriminatory idea of war that moralized conflict, and connoted the belligerents, on the one hand, as barbarians and immoral and, on the other, as agents legitimated to defend their rights. The main issue about the new idea of war was that the decision concerning who was right and moral and who was wrong and immoral was taken by the winners of the First World War, thus bringing an end to the *Jus publicum Europaeum*, that saw interstate war as morally neutral – non-discriminatory – and as an affair that had to be decided by the two belligerents. In this way, the boundaries between civil war and interstate war became porous: the decision to ban a subject as “criminal” and to deem a behaviour dangerous for the State could also be taken by an international organization (the League), which had no title of sovereignty. The League of Nations, which claimed to defend universal rights and peace by condemning any war of aggression was trapped in a contradiction: while attempting to control wars and judge the justice or injustice of conflicts, it behaved like a federation of States or as a universal judge, whereas in fact it was simply an international organization. By discussing and criticizing Scelle’s and Lauterpacht’s justification of the power and competence of the League of Nations, Schmitt was not only reopening the delicate issue of the conflict between state sovereignty and the competence of international law and organizations but was also denouncing and exposing the real hegemony of the winners of the war, Britain, the US and France.

In his next work, in 1939, Schmitt points out the way to overcome the global power constellation in an event that signals the beginning of a radical upheaval, namely Hitler’s expansion in 1939 into central Europe. The questions posed by Schmitt in his 1937 text on the discriminating concept of war – the meaning of the Versailles Treaty and the introduction of a new idea of war by the League of Nations – are answered with the ideas he put forward in 1939 about the new international order. That is, the contradictions of the Versailles international order and of the League of Nations are overcome not through discussion of the issues of international justice and rights, but by pointing to a fact, namely Hitler’s international order. Hitler’s aggression reveals, according to him, the possibility of creating a new order and also “reinventing” the new international law, by introducing a new idea of political space, juxtaposed to the space of free trade and liberal democracy dominated by the world empires (Britain and the US). The new international order emerges with the violent revelation of a concrete order that involves the destruction of the thin crust of the old institutions: a new order based on something more original and real – a concrete order, namely the relation between a *Volk*, a territory and a legal order. It is necessary to see that here Schmitt’s strategy is analogous to Kjellen’s approach: the refoundation of the political order happens outside of and in spite of the legal liberal institutions. Both scholars shift the answer to the question about the foundations of the national and international order from

a legal perspective to a natural and geographical view of the State and of an event that causes institutions to collapse – war.

Schmitt anchors his new view on the political international order on five dimensions: on Hitler’s mere act of the seizure of power; on the Monroe Doctrine seen as a political “leading case”; on a historical development – the creation of a central European network of *Großraumwirtschaft* (Schmitt, 2007:78); on the unsolved issues of German minorities scattered in *Mittleuropa*; and, last but not least, on a new, geographical and political view of planetary politics. I will consider in particular the last issue, which is related to the issue about German minorities. The connotation of the Middle European great space is the starting point for Schmitt’s argumentation: it has a concrete geographic definition and a political meaning and corresponds to “the political idea for the Central and East European space in which there live many nations and national groups that are, however, not – apart from the Jews – racially alien from one another” (Schmitt, 2007:99). Therefore, Hitler’s declaration on 20 February 1938 that German minorities outside Germany are to be protected as well as the German Russian non-aggression pact of 1939 give birth to a new order which, at the same time, mirrors the concrete order that determines the necessary relation between a – homogeneous – people, a territory and a political institution.

Structurally, the dimensions in which the great space should act politically are external and internal. Externally, the new order (*Großraumordnung*) is based on the global co-existence of *Großräume*: the *Großraum* led by Germany lives side by side with the US Western Hemisphere, for instance. Internally, *Großräume* are led and represented by their respective *Reich*:

A *Großraum* order belongs to the concept of *Reich*, ... *Reichs* in this sense are the leading and bearing powers whose political ideas radiate into a certain *Großraum* and which fundamentally exclude the interventions of spatially alien powers into this *Großraum*. The *Großraum* is, of course, not identical with the *Reich* in the sense that the *Reich* is not the same as the *Großraum* protected from interventions by that *Reich* (Schmitt, 2007:101).

This means that Germany is the core and has the leading role in a space connoted by racially similar peoples.

The three major principles which guarantee the unity of a great space are: a *Volk*, a space in which interventions from outside are not permitted and a political idea. Yet a *Reich* is not an empire: what makes the German *Reich* different from the English Empire is its embeddedness in a space and a *Volk*, and, also, its refusal to spread a false universalism. In the view of the German jurist, British and American universalism, as well as that one embodied by the League of Nations, impose their market open economy and their hegemony all

over the world (Schmitt, 2007:102). The political alternative in the 1930s is perceived by Schmitt as a choice between the “non-universalistic, völkisch order of life with respect for the nation” and the “nation-assimilating West and the universalism of the Bolshevik” (Schmitt, 2007:102). American and British imperialism based on the “doctrine of the security of the traffic routes” is juxtaposed with the German “non-universalistic legal order built on the foundation of respect for every national identity” (Schmitt, 2007:90).

It is necessary at this point to stress that Schmitt is arguing in this text not for the emancipation of a nation from the yoke of colonialism and capitalism, but for the occupation of a sovereign state by the German *Reich*, purportedly seeking to control its sphere of influence. Schmitt’s defense of a coexistence of great spaces collides therefore with the defense of political sovereignty. Hence, reading Schmitt carefully, the dichotomy between a false universalism and a good partition of the political space, based on the concrete orders, does not stand up to the test of historical reality. As Koskeniemi (2004) remarks, we are confronting in this text two forms of global organization: one based on the concrete order and *Großraum*, and the other founded on the principle of self-determination, declared by the League of Nations and damaged by Hitler’s invasion in 1939.

Possibly the reference to Haushofer’s geopolitics and to Ratzel came to Schmitt’s aid at this point, as the last pages of his 1939 work suggest. For Schmitt, geopolitics, in particular Haushofer’s doctrine, explains and promotes a new understanding of global politics that justifies the end of the old order based on the partition of States. In particular, Haushofer’s idea of *Raumüberwindende Mächte* – powers that overcome space (Schmitt, 2007:87) – makes it clear to Schmitt that, from the 20th century onward, only great powers may act on the global stage, and that these powers are no longer the small sovereign European States but competing powers able to control great spaces. Even if Schmitt admits that a pure geographical perspective, like that put forward by Haushofer, cannot become a political principle, he also remarks that, conversely, a politics that neglects the relation to space – and to expanding spaces – is bound to fail.

According to us – he writes – there are neither political ideas without space nor, on the contrary, spaces without ideas or principles. It is appropriate that any specific political idea must be supported by a specific *Volk* and that [any political idea] faces a specific opponent – which makes it a political idea (Schmitt, 2007:87).

The Darwinistic idea of a competition between powers which overcome spaces gives a new meaning to international politics and implies a new interpretation of the whole edifice of international law. Geopolitics illustrates a fact that determines a transformation of abstract legal thinking and of concrete global politics. War plays a crucial role here, by accelerating the decline of the old liberal international order and

by showing the reality of politics, which is a game between big powers expanding across great spaces. The combination between war and a new spatial thinking, which emerges in political geography and in geopolitics, brings about the decline of the old positivistic philosophy of law and creates a new law and order which corresponds to “concrete orders”:

When these *Reichs* collapse, those second and third coats of paint of a subaltern positivism that distracted from the core question – which is always also a spatial question – peel off. The basic concepts that rule and uphold every system of international law, war and peace become visible in the concreteness of their era, and the specific conception of the globe, of a spatial division of the earth, that characterizes every system of international law, becomes fully evident. The centuries-long tradition of a sort of geopolitical claustrophobia in the spatial concept of the German state, which was almost always like that of a small or medium-sized state, obstructed the horizon of international law for us until now. This timid approach is rendered obsolete today with the same speed with which the great military and political events take their course and bring about the victory of the realization that not states, but rather *Reichs*, are the real “creators” of international law (Schmitt, 2007:112).

Moreover, the transformation caused by the new order entails a change in language, according to Schmitt. The real transformation of international power relations, originating in war, affects the ways of thinking and the language of politics and law. Referring to Rudolf Jehrings’ juridical thinking, Schmitt states that “every juridical concept is subservient to . . . the pre-demand of its conceptual neighbors. . . . The mutual determination of concepts through their systematic conceptual connection is most illuminating. Words like: space, soil, land, field, areal, grounds, area, and district are not more or less arbitrarily exchangeable and only “terminological” nuances. Every concept can be most securely understood and, in case of need, refuted, on the basis of its own standpoint (Schmitt, 2007:119–120). With this sociological and linguistic observation, Schmitt is pointing out not only the emerging of a new era, but also the need to come to terms with it and to accept it. A change in international relations and even in language is not only a fact but at the same time a necessity: this is the only perspective for a suitable *jus gentium* – the same goes for the transformation from a State system to a *Großraumordnung*. Any possible resistance or dissent is therefore rejected by Schmitt.

In this transformation, Germany plays a pivotal role, thanks to her leading position in Europe and in particular in *Mitteleuropa*. It is up to the German jurisprudence to find a third way between the conservative idea of interstate relations and the universal international law promoted by America and Britain, to find

a concrete great spatial order, one that corresponds to both the spatial dimensions of our picture of the earth as well as our new concepts of state and nation. For us, this can only be the juridical concept of the *Reich* – *Reich* as a *Großraum* order ruled by certain ideological ideas and principles, a *Großraum* order that excludes the possibility of intervention on the part of spatially foreign powers and whose guarantor and guardian is a nation that shows itself to be up to this task (Schmitt, 2007:110).

The reason why Germany in particular has the pivotal role of overthrowing and overcoming the theoretical and political crisis of global international law and order is this: German thinking – the jurisprudence, the historical tradition, the geographic school of thought – has demonstrated a consciousness of the meaning of space and of the essential relation between space and law, between a particular position (*Ortung*) and the norm. In opposition to American and British universalism and to the “Jewish influence . . . driving forwards towards the empty conception of space” (Schmitt, 2007:121), the German sciences and philosophy strive to recover the meaning of space and of the primary role of concrete orders. Friedrich Ratzel, here, is seen as the most famous representative of the German formulation of a comprehensive theory of space. He “has already recognized that coming to terms with space is the defining trait of all life” (Schmitt, 2007:122). The idea of a great space is, according to Schmitt, a German achievement and, in particular, Ratzel’s main legacy. In a sentence that strongly echoes Kjellen’s writings, Schmitt affirms that “*Groß*” (Great) for Ratzel and for him “contains a meaning that is more than merely quantitative and mathematical–physical. In many phrases involving the word ‘great’ – ‘great power’, ‘great king’, the ‘great’ revolution, the ‘great’ army, etc., for example – the word amounts to a qualitative escalation and not an increase in the sense of mere expansion”. The Kronjurist, though, never quotes Kjellen: he quotes Ratzel and his idea of great space. He writes: “There is”, as Ratzel says, “already something greater – I would almost say creative and inspirational – in the wide space” (Schmitt, 2007:119). This interpretation of space is not, for Schmitt, a minor issue, because it leads to the transformation of the whole conception of law:

The addition of the word “great” should and can change the conceptual field. This is of decisive significance for jurisprudence, especially for conceptual formation in international and state law, since all linguistic and, therefore, all juridical concepts are determined through the conceptual field and coexist and grow in turn with their conceptual neighbors (Schmitt, 2007:119).

Schmitt’s idea of biological vital space, which he traces back to Ratzel’s and Haushofer’s interpretations, seems to

suggest the idea of a natural expansion of great powers that overcome and dominate the space. So, in Schmitt’s view, movement – biological and possibly political – should actually be defined not as an action in space but as something that produces space. That is, the concept of space of achievement (*Leistungsraum*), so named after the biologist Victor von Weiszäcker, also shows the relativity of a fixed concept of space.

The spatial as such is produced only along with and in objects, and the spatial and temporal orders are no longer mere entries in the given empty space; they correspond, rather, to an actual situation, an event (Schmitt, 2007:123).

It might seem here that Schmitt is buying into a biological and vitalistic idea of expanding spaces, whose center is the biological struggle for life. Elsewhere Schmitt seems to refrain from adopting this kind of biological, Darwinistic perspective on life and politics, when he stresses the relevance of position, of location and of measure that make clear the relation between a particular people (*Volk*) and a territory. In other words, perhaps in the end, the geopolitical and biological approach to space, implying an expanding never-ending movement, seems to dangerously go beyond any possible juridical and political order. In a remarkable twist, Schmitt stresses his distance from geopolitical thinking, affirming that the political space must be created, perceived in a historical – not biological – process, or in an abrupt event such as a war, and that it has always to come to terms with a “concrete order” and with a measure. “Space as such – he writes – is, of course, not a concrete order. Still, every concrete order and community has specific contents for place and space. In this sense it may be said that every legal institution, that every institution contains its own concepts of space within itself and therefore brings its inner measure and inner border with it” (Schmitt, 2007:123).

What meant the space that was legitimately claimed by Germany? What was Germany’s *Großraum*? Was Schmitt thinking of a “Middle European” area and culture, when he constructed his idea of a *Großraum*? What is the relation between his idea of *Großraum*, the *Reich* and Europe? Schmitt did not define the boundaries of a *Großraum*, but according to some interpreters (Maschke, in Schmitt, 1995:XXI–XXII; Blindow, 1999), the *Großraum* overlapped with *Mitteleuropa*. This idea of a Middle European *Großraum* and therefore the “limitation” of German expansion within the Middle European area provoked the controversy that developed between Schmitt and the “orthodox” lawyers of the *Reich*, i.e. Best and Höhn. The dream of a united European *Großraum* revealed in Carl Schmitt’s thinking and in the thought of many young conservative the “original” ambivalence of these projects: the tension between the attempt to preserve plurality and the defence of a particular exclusive identity; the tension between the acceptance of modernity and the eschatological view of its overcoming.

Schmitt’s complex, obscure and sometimes contradictory argumentation is clearly aimed, then, at opposing the tabula rasa of positivistic and liberal juristic thinking and also the “empty concept of State territory to raise the Reich to the decisive concept of . . . legal thinking in both spheres of constitutional and legal thought” (Schmitt, 2007:124). This means concretely to reaffirm the concrete order that leads to German domination in Central Europe: this is at the same time, a specific political achievement, which creates a *Reich* internally vivified by Germany, and also – in spite of Schmitt’s declaration – a universal idea that should radically change and inspire the global political system. This revolution in the political world and in juridical language does not need any acknowledgement or legitimation from the political community: it is conceived by Schmitt as a self-asserting order, as natural and concrete as biological life may be. At the same time, the new order is also revealed by an event, an act – Hitler’s war of annexation – that paves the way for a new global order.

4 Conclusion: why Ratzel?

The above account shows that any idea of a linear reception of Ratzel’s work from Kjellen and Schmitt, of a continuity from *Lebensraum* to *Reich/Großmacht* (Kjellen) or *Großraum* (Schmitt) is based on a rough generalization and on the simplification of a complex process in which concepts and theories are revised and redeployed in different milieus, methodological fields and historical times. Instead of showing how faithful Kjellen’s and Schmitt’s interpretations of Ratzel’s ideas are, this paper has raised questions about the ways they referred to him. In their system of thought, Ratzel’s perspective on human affairs grounded on a vitalistic approach took on a particular meaning: as the main starting point for innovation in their disciplinary fields, as a new way to reformulate the subject of their research, and as a way to interpret their political contemporary life, particularly war, seen as a general recurring phenomenon of political life. War, both generically – as a category of political and human behaviour – and as a particular historical event – the First World War and Hitler’s expansion into Central Europe – is then the precondition to understand the reception/appropriation of Ratzel’s thinking by Kjellen and Schmitt, and also the success of the works written by the two theorists. War plays a pivotal role as the main background to Ratzel’s reception and reinterpretation.

The above analysis has shown the relevance of two methodological issues that have emerged in the study of the reception of Ratzel. Firstly, scientific concepts change their meaning not only if they are used in different historical contexts but also when there is a shift from one discipline to another, from one discourse to another. In other words, concepts like *Mittellage*, *Lebensraum*, *Großraum* and *Raum* are not vessels voyaging on the sea of history: they are not travel-

ling across disciplines or through discourses while remaining the same; secondly, the line between scientific and political assertions in some literature is not only very thin but is deliberately rejected. This means that concepts like space, state and people (*Volk*) are deliberately used as “swords against the enemies: such words are weapons” (Weber, 2009:145). This does not mean that they lose their scientific value but that they are used also for a political purpose – they aim to justify a war – and that they are formulated in order to achieve this aim. Schmitt’s writings concerning the discriminating concept of war and Hitler’s expansion across Central Europe cannot be read as intellectual works separated from the political battle of their author, who, moreover affirmed that every knowledge is located and that “he who has real power is also capable of determining concepts and words; Caesar dominus est supra grammaticam: Caesar is also the lord of grammar” (Schmitt, 1988:202). As far as Kjellen and Schmitt are concerned, scientific neutrality is not a goal: they reject the concept of value-free science and embrace a militant idea of theory, in an attempt to discover the dark origins of false liberal science or of false universalism.

In Kjellen’s and Schmitt’s work, Ratzel is not referenced in order to interpret and explore the scientific or political value of political geography. What Ratzel provides is a pretext, a device they use to justify their methodological approach and shift the discussion from a debate about rules, conventions and binding agreements to another level, in which extra-legal facts – social orders, relations of power and decisions – are the main heuristic tools. In this sense, political geography, seen as the first science to acknowledge the role of the German geographical position in Europe and of the relevance of the soil, is one important means of legitimizing a new politics and, with it, a new international order. This new order is, according to Kjellen and Schmitt, the spatial order given by German imperialism and – for Schmitt – by aggressive National Socialism. The space that they evoke is not a space organized by the deliberation of peoples and states, by discussion or by mediation of interests: it is the space determined by war, in a situation of mobilization, where mass mobilization and the fight against the enemy become necessary. So, war and opposition are not only the main context in which Kjellen and Schmitt formulate their works, but become the sense and the origin of politics and law. Civil war, not external war, represents the “moment of truth” for politics. War is thus not only a philosophical category but also a concrete event that changes world history.

The issue that remains unsolved is why they chose political geography and Ratzel to justify their methodological shift. Some hypotheses may be suggested here. Political geography, an allegedly “German” science that looked at the relation between a territory and a people, opened up for them a new perspective on the relations between nature and politics and between the laws of natural phenomena and human behaviour. Ratzel’s vitalism, the strong analogies between war as a competition and the Darwinian struggle for life, which

saw the struggle for space as the natural condition of human behaviour, resonated in the political literature in the troubled years of war. Moreover, the references to the natural world and to scientific facts, established by geographic and biological science, became very common, even in many areas of National Socialism. Rooting a philosophical or political argument in natural facts, like the struggle for life, the need for a *Lebensraum*, the organism’s impulse to grow, meant reinforcing and justifying a political argument, anchoring it on the solid ground of the evidence of natural phenomena and avoiding discussion, namely rejecting to explore further or submit an argument to the test of open academic or public debate. As Klinke has recently shown, Ratzel’s vitalistic praise of war as a creative force of nature (Klinke, 2019) was able to attract a generation destined to fight and die in war. War thus became the most original and central experience of human life and the measure of a politics deprived of “all legitimate and normative illusions with which men like to deceive themselves” (Schmitt, 1976:52). These are illusions that, nevertheless, postulate the possibility of freeing humans from the choice between the eternal return to sameness or to blind belief in Promethean suicide.

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