

MACKINDER'S THEORY. SOME CONSEQUENCES OF TOO MUCH GEOGRAPHY IN THE FIELD OF GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract. *There is no doubt that the most salient constituent of Mackinder's perspective on the World Island is the geographical one. This article argues that what makes the question of Heartland so important for contemporary geopolitics is mainly the neglected part of Mackinder's theory, namely the political ability of the Russian state to create a community of citizens and a regional, effective infrastructure. Only a highly modernized Heartland could be an unassailable competitor in the world politics. Therefore in highlighting the institutional dimension of Mackinder's theory to the detriment of its geographical one, we contend that sociology has an important say in contemporary geopolitical analyses. The article also pinpoints the pernicious effects of a geography-dominated geopolitics, arguing that bringing mainly geography to the front of geopolitical analyses might transform Mackinder's theory into a geopolitical metanarrative.*

Keywords: *geopolitics, sociology, Mackinder, Heartland, metanarrative.*

Mackinder's Theory

We don't intend to write extensively on Mackinder's theory on the World Island because everyone who is slightly conversant with the field of geopolitics may already know it by heart. And yet we believe that some insights on what resembles a geopolitical metanarrative might be useful for those readers that are less familiar with the field of geopolitics. There are many authors who have written disparagingly about geopolitics on different grounds, mostly ideological

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ones. But those who didn't savage geopolitics on ideological motives, mauled it on theoretical terms. Is Mackinder's theory of any use at the beginning of the 21st century? Saul Bernard Cohen argues that Mackinder's theory is still employed by United States for its macro strategy regarding Eurasia. Mackinder's famous Heartland theory has three options, each one being used by the United States for its grand strategy at different moments in time. "To place Mackinder's views in historical and contemporary perspectives, Cold War U.S. containment policy was based on his Heartland worlds of 1904 and 1919. Post-Cold War American balance-of-power goals are more in consonance with his 1943 global view"¹. Following Cohen's presentation, let's have a closer look at Mackinder's worlds.

Mackinder's 1904 famous article on the "Pivot Area" came at a time when railroads were considered superior to ship lines in terms of reach and delivery performance. Therefore, the impenetrable for sea powers "Pivot Area", that stretched from Siberia's forests in the north to its steppes in the south, and from Lena River in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west, was considered by Mackinder to be the key region for world domination. Surprisingly, Mackinder did not use the term Heartland in his 1904 article. This term, that has so much of the geopolitical theory revolving around it, was coined eleven years later by James Fairgrieve, another English geographer who claimed that China, instead of Russia, had the best geographical position to dominate Eurasia². In an article published fifteen years later and titled *Democratic Ideals and Realities*, Mackinder redrew his initial map. Heartland's area expanded to the west and included Eastern Europe from the Baltic through the Black Sea. The 1919 article was the first one where Mackinder used the term Heartland. But what really made this article famous was this most resonant dictum in the field of geopolitics: "Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands World-Island: Who rules World-Island commands the world." After WWII concluded, Mackinder's worst geopolitical fears came true, for the Heartland came under the sway of USSR. Nevertheless, following the balance of power strategic culture specific to the British Empire, Mackinder came up with another map in 1943, a map which foreshadowed NATO. According to this new map, the vast swathes of land under USSR's sway could be balanced by a combination of Western Europe, North Atlantic Ocean and the Eastern parts of the United States. The most important countries of the Midland Ocean region, a territory that was designed to balance a USSR dominated Heartland, were United States, Canada, Great Britain and France.

The aftermath of both WWII and the Cold War disproved Mackinder's theory. But the political consequences of the above-mentioned conflicts didn't affect the English geographer's perspective. One could argue that the most important

¹ Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics. The Geography of International Relations*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009, p. 19.

² S. B. Cohen, p. 16.

military alliances of the 20th century emerged in order to hinder the fulfillment of Mackinder's prophecy regarding Eurasia. One important condition of Mackinder's prescient perspective regarding the Heartland region is hardly noticed nowadays. A high capacity state was needed, according to Mackinder, in order to transform the giant land mass of Eurasia from a backward area into an unassailable international player. For, unless they are modernized, large swathes of land play just a second fiddle in the international power politics. We are arguing therefore that the political dimension of Mackinder's theory on the Eurasia is as equally important as the geographical one. If one looks at Mackinder's theory only from a geographical perspective, it risks making geography reign supreme in the field of geopolitics. USSR was very close to politically unifying the Heartland region. But a low capacity state, as the Russian state has always been so far, hasn't been able to foster the development of a political community of citizens that would transcend religious, social, and regional cleavages. Apart from not being able to create a coherent and effective social and national infrastructure, the Russian low capacity state has also never forged a highly-modernized territorial infrastructure that could match the more developed infrastructures of the sea powers.

Mackinder's theory didn't run out of steam in the post-Cold War period. On the contrary, it continued to make intellectual waves in the realm of international relations. Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the most authoritative voices on issues regarding world politics, named Eurasia "the decisive geopolitical chessboard"³. For Brzezinski, "Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent". Thus, any power that would control Eurasia would dominate Western Europe and East Asia, namely two of the world's three most industrialized regions. Following in Mackinder's intellectual steps, Brzezinski argued that United States needed to do whatever it takes in order to prevent the formation of a geopolitical block that might control Eurasia. A peaceful and quiet atmosphere is going to dominate over the world's chessboard (quiet and peaceful mainly for the United States) as long as no political institution will control unilaterally the Heartland region. Brzezinski is one of the scholars who has raised the awareness of different American presidents with respect to South Caucasus and Caspian Sea resources which are quite tempting not only for Russian Federation or China, but also for Turkey and European Union. And still Brzezinski is not completely influenced by Mackinder. We argue that Brzezinski's perspective on Eurasia draws especially from Nicholas Spykman, according to whom the Rimland area is the key of controlling the Heartland region. With a milder climate, endowed with a superior infrastructure, and more densely populated than the Heartland region, Rimland needs to be controlled in order to project an effective influence over the Heartland territory. Whereas Mackinder considered Eastern Europe as the key of controlling Eurasia, Spykman

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Marea tablă de șah. Supremația americană și imperativele sale strategice* [The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives], Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House, 2000.

highlighted the importance of the Rimland countries for getting the upper hand on the Heartland region. That is why Brzezinski claims that Russian Federation should not be allowed to control the peripheries of Eurasia. It is well-known Brzezinski's exhortation for different American leaders to whom he recommended to dislodge Ukraine from Russia's sway.

Geopolitics between Geography and Sociology

At an early phase, geopolitics undoubtedly developed under the sign of geography. One can easily notice that social Darwinism and Friedrich Ratzel's geographical perspective make up the intellectual structure of Rudolf Kjellen's 1917 book *Der Staats Lebensform*. States have always been involved in a callous fight over territories, the most powerful state being the one which had already dominated over large swathes of land. But although it drew heavily from Ratzel's ideas, Kjellen introduced some novelties in the above mentioned book. Geopolitics was to examine not only the nexus between state and its territory, but mainly the political project of a certain state with an emphasis on the integrative capacity of the state. Thus, different states' capacity to create coherent nations entered the field of geopolitics. Another important novelty that diverted geopolitics from its exclusive prior geographical course was the fact that Kjellen acknowledged the role of sociology, demography and economics in scrutinizing other dimensions of the state, namely the social, demographic, and economic ones. The Romanian geographer Ion Conea, in arguing that geopolitics was to produce political maps, broadened further the field of geopolitics. According to Conea, the political maps were supposed to highlight the geographical and demographic particularities of states, but simultaneously they aimed to offer information on the economic development potential of a certain state, on the population's state of mind, and on the different cultural traditions of that state⁴. The focus of geopolitics was not primarily on cultural traditions, but on the different ethnic minorities that a nation was made of. This is how ethnographic studies were ushered in the geopolitical analysis. In addition to broadening the object of geopolitics, Conea made an interesting differentiation between geopolitics and political geography. Whilst at the center of political geography lies the state with its different geographic, economic, cultural and politic characteristics, geopolitics' focus is rather on the international environment. Thus, geopolitics is mainly interested in the political interplay between states and the international order. We believe that Dimitrie Gusti is the Romanian scholar who has unintentionally dislodged geopolitics from the field of geography and transferred it to the realm of sociology. Gusti argued that the state was primarily a social unit which mirrored society. Considering that general

⁴ Diana Didă, *Școala geopolitică românească, Proiectul sociologic al geopoliticii interbelice* [Romanian Geopolitical School. The Interwar Geopolitics Sociological Project], Bucharest, ISPRI Publishing House, 2012, p. 20.

will is the most important constituent of Gusti's sociological system, we argue that what Gusti intended to stress was that the state reflected the nation. Under such circumstances, geopolitics would have become the most complete way of studying the nation-state, a scientific status that Gusti, as the founder of Romanian sociology, did not want to concede to geopolitics. According to Gusti, the only complete social discipline was sociology which was supposed to study the natural and cultural frames of a society and its specific institutional expressions. The natural frames that sociology was to cover in Gusti's view were the cosmic frame, which was tantamount to the geographical setting of a certain nation-state, and the biologic frame, which referred to the human communities within a territory. Geography was the social science summoned by Gusti to examine the cosmic frame, whilst demography was to address the biologic frame. In addition to that, sociology, as the most complete and appropriate way of studying the nascent Romanian state, was supposed to examine the cultural frames of every society, that is the historic frame and the psychological frame. The historic frame was to be scrutinized by social historians and the psychological frame by ethnologists. Gusti's sociology was also designed to study the fundamental activities of a society, the economic and cultural ones, and also the regulatory activities of a society, namely the juridical ones. Following in Frederic Le Play's footsteps, Gusti called his method of research monographic sociology. Through this particular type of sociology, Gusti intended to come up with a general sociological map of inter-war Romania. The task of geopolitical studies, at least according to Ion Conea, was to produce political maps that highlighted the geographical, demographic and cultural particularities of the state. One can easily notice that there were strong similarities between Conea's geography and Gusti's sociology. And yet there was an important difference, in the sense that Gusti stressed the social character of the nation-state instead of its mainly geographical allure. Therefore, Gusti was less prone on giving priority to geography in the study of society, as interwar geographers used to do. Gusti's monographic method, that focused on the social traits of societies to the detriment of the geographic ones, started a little row between Gusti and George Vâlsan, a well-known Romanian geographer, who was offended for the lack of deference sociology manifested towards geography⁵. Vâlsan made two important remarks. The first one referred to the large scale use of monographic method in geographical studies, drawing attention on the fact that sociology is rather indebted to geography and not the other way around. The second remark was about the social range of monographic studies. Using monographic method to study small communities was rather ineffective, contended Vâlsan, who advised Gusti to carry out monographic studies only at a regional level. What's interesting in the case of inter-war Romanian sociology is that its most important representatives managed, in a rather effective

⁵ Călin Cotoi, *Primordialism cultural și geopolitică românească* [Cultural Primordialism and Romanian Geopolitics], Bucharest, Mica Valahie Publishing House, 2006.

manner, to “sociologize” geopolitics. We argue that this is the only way to get over the absolute dominance of geography in the field of geopolitics with its specific pernicious effects that are to be addressed in the next section.

*Consequences of too much Geography
in the Realm of Geopolitics*

George Schöpflin is one of those authors who have criticized geopolitics without salvaging it. In other words, what Schöpflin questioned was not the ideological basis of geopolitics, but its fundamental methodological assumptions. Without trying to belittle Schöpflin’s examination of the very basis of geopolitics, we argue that the Hungarian scholar errs in not making a sufficient clear distinction between modern geopolitics and postmodern geopolitics. Whilst at the heart of modern geopolitics one finds the state and its relationships with geography, postmodern geopolitics lays emphasis on ethnic groups, identity problems, economic issues, and social conflicts engendered by either illegitimate political actors or by environmental degradation. To be more precise, postmodern geopolitics focuses also on the internal problems of nation states, starting with the premise that states and nations are not necessarily monolithic institutions, whereas modern geopolitics, in arguing that the smallest rift between states and nations would be inconceivable, is interested only in the nexus between state’s power and geography. Loaded with too much geography, modern geopolitical studies lack a salient sociological and political dimension. To sum it up, George Schöpflin’s critique of geopolitics is focused mainly on modern geopolitics and its fundamental methodological assumption according to which state power is decisively influenced by the size of its territory.

Maybe the most important weakness of geopolitics, argues Schöpflin, is its deterministic character. As a consequence, the most important constituents of state power are its territory, population and resources. Given that power politics is at the heart of (modern) geopolitical analysis, a state with little resources at its disposal will play just a marginal role in a Hobbesian environment. It is already a common place in international relations that thanks to an astute diplomacy, small states have managed not only to survive in a violent international milieu but also to obtain important strategic gains. But geographers and military men who represented the intellectual backbone of modern geopolitics did not delve too much into the influence of “subjective” factors, such as diplomacy, on state power. This materialist approach, that lies at the heart of Schöpflin’s critique, made geopolitics blind to one important source of social power, namely ideology. Wedded mainly to geography, modern geopolitics paid only scant attention to the influence of ideas on state’s actions. It also turned a deaf ear to restraints on state power such as legitimacy, human capital and ethical constraints. Striving to examine the political interactions between states only in terms of

territory, resources and population, modern geopolitics has produced a Manichean image of international relations, a realm dominated by great powers where small states have no say. Under such circumstances, it is pretty difficult to discern any theory of social change in geopolitical thinking. If the international politics is just a Hobbesian milieu where big states might resort to force at any time with no effective institutional restraints on such illegal actions, small states and their inhabitants will be always out of options. Of little use could be also the realist perspective counterpart, namely the liberal one, which pays no attention to power inequalities in the field of international relations, and stresses the equality between big and small states regarding the acceptance and observance of international norms. We argue that the followers of either a Hobbesian international context or a Kantian perpetual peace milieu are equally wrong in their basic assumptions of world politics because they cannot predict the Black Swans. “The significance of Black Swans, therefore, is that they cut across the linearity of predictable processes and introduce unforeseeable elements into, say, political power, often enough from ostensibly non-political activities. And, equally important, no state – however powerful in the traditional terms of military, economic, and geographic power – can withstand non-state determined, emergent processes”⁶.

What are the consequences of such a modern geopolitical perspective, that rests its political explanations only on geography? According to Schöpflin, the consequences are many, and they are dire. First, by ignoring “the double hermeneutic” process, these type of analyses may come up with flawed conclusions. Consequently, one will attribute to its counterpart reasons that the latter may not have. In its modern version, geopolitics has a very limited understanding of power. Secondly, considering state, territory and population the only sources of power, modern geopolitics could prove itself quite clumsy in coping with alternative sources of power, such as the state’s integrative capacity, human capital, technology, ethical constraints on the international interplay between states and international institutions. Thirdly, the very premises of modern geopolitics imprints the international context with a dominating Hobbesian perspective that will produce low levels of trust among interlocutors. Finally, for its methodological premise is rather unsophisticated, modern geopolitics cannot predict or examine Black Swans, namely unexpected change.

The Reign of Geography. Mackinder’s Metanarrative

How can one explain the long lasting influence of Mackinder’s theory on geopolitics? Saul Bernard Cohen argues that Mackinder’s theory, in all of its three variants, has always been present in American strategic thinking with respect to Russia. To be more precise, Mackinder’s three types of Heartland have been employed by American strategic thinkers both in their Cold War and Post-Cold War undertakings related to conceiving an effective security strategy on

⁶ George Scöpflin, *Politics, Illusions, Fallacies*, Talin, TLU Press, 2012, p. 257.

Eurasia. In order to verify Saul Bernard Cohen's claim, one just needs to read George Kennan and Zbigniew Brzezinski's security recommendations. There is no doubt that American authors' influence on the field of IR and geopolitics is huge. But still, this intellectual dominance does not cogently explain Mackinder's importance for contemporary geopolitics. We believe that Alexandros Petersen delivers the decisive motive in this sense: "The essential geography of the world remains today what was in antiquity. And for that reason Mackinder's analysis and warning are as relevant now as ever"⁷. Alexandros Petersen's assessment of Mackinder's theory is correct. But exactly this specific type of reasoning consecrates the supreme reign of geography in the field of geopolitics. Of course, if geopolitical analyses don't focus on the geographic determinants of political processes, they will be incomplete. But geopolitical analyses will also be incomplete if they rest only on geographical traits. The most salient constituent of Mackinder's perspectives on the World Island is the geographical one. And yet we argue that what makes the question of Heartland so important for contemporary geopolitics is mainly the neglected part of Mackinder's theory, namely the political ability of the Russian state to create a community of citizens and a regional, effective infrastructure. Only a highly modernized Heartland could be an unassailable competitor in the world politics. In other words, the political institution that might dominate the entire Heartland region should have attained a higher and more effective level of modernity than its most fierce competitors, that is, the sea powers, in order to become a superpower. USSR and the Russian Federation have both failed in forging a transcendental political community of citizens that could overcome religious, ethnic and economic rifts mainly because the processes of modernization have proved rather unsuccessful in the Heartland region. Additionally, the infrastructure forged by both USSR and the Russian Federation looks rather inchoate in comparison to the high-ways, railroads, airports, bridges, and harbors built by sea powers throughout the 20th century. There are many ways of explaining the differences between Western Europe's complete modernity and Eastern Europe's incomplete modernity. Perhaps the best way to explain it is to stress the difference between the high capacity states of Western Europe and the low capacity states from the Eastern parts of Europe. That is why we've highlighted the sociological dimension of Mackinder's theory. Only a high capacity state could have transformed the Heartland region in an unassailable competitor in the realm of international relations. Formal citizenship, the state of law, and political accountability have never been among the institutional strengths of both USSR and the Russian Federation.

We argue that if one understands Mackinder's theory only from a geographical perspective, it might transform it into a metanarrative. Like every other modern prophecy, Jean Lyotard's important announcement regarding the death of grand

⁷ Alexandros Petersen, *The World Island. Eurasian Geopolitics and the Fate of the West*, Denver, Praeger Security International, 2011, p. 150.

narratives proved to be false. Postmodern culture, argues Fredric Jameson, cannot be grasped properly apart from seeing it as the supra-structure of an American military and economic domination that reached its climax once the Soviet Union dismantled. Post-Cold War American hegemony transformed rapidly into an unrestrained use of power politics that needed to be legitimated somehow. Robert Kagan claims that the Soviet Union's military might represented the most important structural legitimation not only for huge defense spending in Washington, but simultaneously for a wide-spread acknowledgement of America's involvement in power politics⁸. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States' allure of an international Leviathan looked rather dubious. Therefore a new Leviathan emerged and the United States just played the role of the "enforcer" of the newest source of order in international politics, namely the omniscient market. Therefore, neoliberalism with its emphasis on unrestrained market forces, shock therapy for former state dominated economies in the Eastern parts of Europe, and free international commerce has become the first grand-narrative of a new world order from which the Soviet Union has been abruptly excluded. The postmodern order produced other grand narratives, too. These are, according to George Schöpflin, the Grand Narrative of Nazi Germany, the war on terror, colonialism of former communist countries, European integration etc.

Every Grand Narrative, contends Schöpflin, has tried to offer what human communities have always been desirous of, and that is order. Usually, a political institution has served this need by inventing a certain narrative with which it "sacralizes" the basis of order. Because it needs to hide one human community's social discontinuities, solidarity rifts and institutional malfunctions under a sacred veneer, every story that aims at transforming itself into a Grand Narrative should fulfill at least three conditions, namely supra-temporality, supra-spatiality, and universality. Additionally, because it is supposed to solve a social crisis usually caused by rapid social change, a Grand Narrative should come up with a myth of emancipation. Otherwise, without pointing out to a glorious future, and without delivering a suitable guide for action and interpretation, it will produce a lackluster social and political performance. Schöpflin argues that no matter how successful a Grand Narrative might be at a certain moment in time, its alleged unassailable character would be proved wrong by another wannabe Grand Narrative. Therefore, considering that every Grand Narrative strives to sacralize the order projected by a certain institution, once that institution is challenged to adapt to new economic and political realities, it is forced to come up with a new Grand Narrative. "The problem is that no narrative can encompass the entirety of human experience, not even a well-constructed cosmology can do that, hence there will always be counter-narratives and anomalies"⁹.

⁸ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York, 2004, Vintage Books.

⁹ George Schöpflin, *Politics, Illusions, Fallacies*, Talin, TLU Press, 2012, p. 157.

Schöpflin is right because every grand narrative is subjected to contestation, no matter how ubiquitous might seem at times. Since no human institution is going to last forever, so is the case of Grand Narratives. The monolithic character of Grand Narratives is massively dependent on the stability of the institutions they legitimize. When an institution legitimized through a Grand Narrative starts changing, the contingent character of the grand story is revealed.

If geography reigned supreme, it would transform geopolitics in a quasi-natural science. Arguing at the beginning of the 21st century that social sciences are context dependent, and, consequently, unable to produce long-term predictions is rather banal. The reason for this is the impossibility to reduce human activity to a set of rules¹⁰, considering that rules are forged by specific institutions and every institution's activity is context dependent. Without a context-independent, general rule of human conduct, it is impossible to come up with a grand theory in social sciences. The same line of reasoning also applies to geopolitics. If state's behavior in international relations is related only to a short-term interest, namely its survival, and this short-term interest is heavily dependent on the question of what state controls the Heartland region, Mackinder's theory will become a grand theory, a law that might transform geopolitics in a natural science. Mackinder didn't have such an intention, nor would it be possible. As we've pinpointed earlier, the most important layer of Mackinder's theory is not the geographical one, but the political one. Only a high capacity state that could effectively modernize the Heartland region could become a superpower in international politics.

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