

Mackinder, H J

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Mackinder, Halford (1861–1947)



Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) was born into a lower middle-class family as the son of a medical doctor in the English market town of Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. After a decent scientific education at a school for the sons of doctors, he went to Oxford University where he studied physical science and took courses in law that prepared him for subsequent studies to qualify as a barrister in London. Neither his heart nor his head were in law and he had barely begun to practice when he was seduced by, first, education and, then, politics. Oxford University made a modest investment in the education of the working classes through sending peripatetic extension lecturers around the country to give night classes. From 1885, Mackinder was one of these teaching, initially, natural science and economic history, as local tastes dictated. Yet, this range of interests could, be believed, be synthesized as the discipline of geography, a subject taught badly at school as the memorizing of lists of capes, bays, capitals, rivers, and mountains, and taught not at all in English higher education, although well established in Germany as a field of academic research. Mackinder began to give classes on what he called a ‘new geography’, which would be adequate to the needs of Imperial Britain. In 1887, he was drawn into the national campaign to

establish geography as a university subject, when he was invited to speak to the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) on ‘The scope and methods of geography’. In the paper, published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* in 1887, he described a discipline that would trace the effects of environmental variation upon patterns of human activity. With funding from the RGS, Mackinder was set up as Reader in geography at Oxford and he began to try to find an audience for geography among students reading for other degrees. In this he was most successful with historians. Not until 1899 did Oxford create a School of Geography, where students could graduate as geographers, before proselytizing within British education the gospel of Professor Mackinder. The educational reformers had lost control of the RGS, which was only persuaded to stump up funds for this initiative after Mackinder had gained his bona fides as an explorer by completing the first European ascent of Mount Kenya in the summer of 1899.

From his involvement with adult education, Mackinder became from 1892 the principal of a new University Extension College at Reading, which grew to become a university. From his involvement with politics, came duties as part-time lecturer at the London School of Economics (LSE) (1894) and then as full-time lecturer (1902) and finally as director (1903). From 1887 to 1903, he had three simultaneous educational careers, at Oxford, Reading, and the LSE. In 1903 he resigned from Reading, in 1905 from Oxford, and in 1908 from the directorship of the LSE. At the age of 47, he turned to politics, almost full time.

Mackinder’s interest in politics was evident from his days at Oxford where he followed men much wealthier and of higher social status than himself as president of the Oxford Union, a debating society where the politicians of tomorrow cut their teeth in, sometimes whimsical but always fierce, debate. His election was an extraordinary testimony to the hopes that many held out for his political future. Unlike, earlier presidents, such as his predecessor George Curzon, Mackinder did not have the private income needed to pursue a career in politics. Education was a passion but it did not pay well and it left little time for campaigning, after lectures given in Oxford, Reading, and London, or summers spent writing the new textbooks, such as *Britain and the British Seas*, in 1902,

for the young subject. Mackinder was an imperialist and he supported, first, a group known as the Liberal Imperialists before, in 1903, hitching his star to the strong-Britain policies of Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign. Britain, he argued, should use its empire to sustain its role in the world and this required keeping competing nations out of British and imperial markets. Britain no longer had the competitive advantage that could bear free trade competition and, in any case, many of its rivals were industrializing fast behind their own protectionist tariffs. In 1908, he received a retainer to work politically for 4 years for the cause of the economic integration of the Empire. In 1910 he was elected as a Liberal Unionist (Conservative) Member of Parliament for a Glasgow constituency. The imperial policy of building up the navy was very popular in this ship-building district.

Mackinder was now at the heart of imperial decision making. He did not cut the dash there that he had at the Oxford Union. His shyness seemed to have become worse after the failure of his marriage at the start of the century. His time lecturing seemed to have left him with little rhetoric and a passion for facts. His speeches were long, detailed, and boring. He found matters of imperial principle in subjects both great and, unfortunately, trivial. His final cause in Parliament concerned soda fountains and he argued that it was unfair that domestic producers of bottled soda paid duty whereas soda fountains of foreign origin dispensed limitless amounts of sweetened water without duty. This was hardly the sparkling career so many had anticipated. In the election of 1922, he was rejected by the voters in Glasgow, and his parliamentary career was over.

The Glasgow dockers who had been so keen on his shipbuilding rhetoric before World War I, were less keen on his anti-Bolshevism after it. Yet, Mackinder's legacy rests in large part upon just this crusade and it was the only matter where he was given responsibility to act imperially in ways consonant with his writings. In 1917, Russia left World War I in the wake of its revolution. To the British, this was a betrayal of Russia's obligations to the anti-German alliance and posed a dangerous example of revolution to British workers. The allies decided to reopen an eastern Front against Germany even though this meant fighting from within the territory of the nominally sovereign Russian state, now under Bolshevik rule. After the war, Curzon and Winston Churchill were among those who wanted to turn the allied troops directly upon the Bolshevik regime itself and establish in Russia a regime more friendly to the capitalist powers. There was opposition to this from soldiers waiting to be demobilized, from workers sympathetic to communism, and from members of the British cabinet worried about the cost of prolonging a wartime economy. At the moment when the anti-Bolshevik forces appeared closest to

an advance upon Moscow, Mackinder was selected by Curzon to go to South Russia as British High Commissioner in an attempt to knit together the various oppositional forces into a coherent group. He was asked to persuade them to attenuate their reactionary politics and accept some of the social reforms promised by socialists in order that they might be acceptable to workers and peasants in Russia, and their friends in Britain. Mackinder took 6 months to research this fully and went to Russia with plans for reorganizing the war-torn economy of South Russia. By the time he arrived, he could only organize the evacuation of the families of counter-revolutionary officers for the game was up. Trotsky's Red Army was sweeping the White Russians out of the country. When he reported back to London, he could only resign and the great anti-Bolshevik crusade was over, at least for the time being.

Mackinder continued to serve on many parliamentary commissions inquiring into economic issues, particularly relating to the Empire but his public role was minor. He continued to preside at geographical congresses and the award of the Patron's Medal of the RGS (1945) came near the end of a life devoted to the cause of the Empire in both education and politics. There is a fine biography of Mackinder written by Brian Blouet and published by Texas A&M University Press in 1987.

When Mackinder studied physical sciences at Oxford the Darwinian revolution was recent and exciting. Darwin's research methodology had been profoundly geographical. He examined the effect of the environment on natural selection and he examined species distributions for evidence of species shift. These ideas were applied to human society in ways that took natural selection away from its place in species selection and recast it as promoting class-, race-, and national-selection. Social Darwinism justified (as competition) the role of force in human affairs, and justified (as natural selection) the primacy of the powerful in politics. Mackinder's view of the unity of Geography drew much on the environmentalism of Darwinism but his views on global political geography drew on the ideology of Social Darwinism. For Mackinder, geography comprehended a continuous chain of reasoning from the dynamics of Earth surface processes through to the unstable geographies of settlement, trade, and war. He emphasized the importance of a geographical vision – an environmentalist and strategic reading of human geographies.

His global perspective took up recent views of British authority as based on its sea power and questioned the permanence of this predominance. Mackinder argued that the interconnected world of the early twentieth century lacked the 'empty' spaces of the period of European colonization. Competition between European nations would no longer be fought out as a race to acquire ever more of the territory outside Europe as

colonies. Instead, European nations would be brought face-to-face at every point on the globe. In this new era, the resources of the homeland would be the critical determinant of international competition. The balance was shifting from sea power to land power. If Britain, and what he called the Anglo-Saxon race, were to prevail it would be in alliance with the land power of North America. Facing Britain would be either Germany or Russia, depending upon which of them managed to consolidate the resources of Eastern Europe and Western Russia. The land power of Europe derived, he argued, from an area, rich in minerals and soil fertility that was located beyond the reach of sea power. This was the inaccessible vast fastness of what he first termed the 'geographical pivot of history' and later in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* in 1919 called the 'heartland'. Here was the danger of Bolshevik Russia and Mackinder was one of the earliest to argue for the containment of the Soviet Union by denying it access to any warm-water ports.

Unlike Isaiah Bowman for the United States or Paul Vidal de la Blache for France, Mackinder was not retained as a geographical expert to develop his country's geographical vision for the Europe that would be planned at the Paris Peace Conference. *Democratic Ideals and Reality* in 1919 is the advice that he would have given. He was suspicious of the 'idealism' of Woodrow Wilson's agenda for peace. The geographical realities, he believed, would produce new empires and a new global struggle. The geopolitical template could at best delay this by creating buffer states between Germany and Russia. His geopolitical strategy explained ways of containing the land power of Russia so that it could not serve as the basis for a sea power that might take communism globally. Mackinder's account of the land-power basis for a global empire was taken up in Nazi Germany as a promise of success from the drive to occupy lands in Eastern Europe and western Russia. This avowal of his ideas by Karl Haushofer embarrassed Mackinder. It also embarrassed political geographers in the United States who tried unsuccessfully to establish differences in principle between Nazi geopolitics and Anglo-American political geography. Yet Mackinder's ideas were soon dusted off and pressed into service as justification for the Cold War policy of Soviet containment. W. H. Parker published a good survey of Mackinder's geopolitical ideas as *Geography as an Aid to Statecraft* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). More recently, his ideas have served again to figure the global threat of Islamism and the need for global

politics to be based on the realities of force and not the ideals of constitutions and treaties. Mackinder's geographical ideas sit ready to be used to justify a zero-sum vision of world politics in which democracy can survive only by force of arms. This is global Social Darwinism.

See also: Darwinism (and social Darwinism); Environmental determinism/environmental geography; Eurocentrism; Geopolitics; Historical geographies of nature; Kropotkin, P; Lamarck(ian)ism; Lebensraum; Nineteenth-century geography; Political Geography.

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Relevant Websites

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