

Friedrich Ratzel, *The History of Mankind* (1894)

Abstract

Friedrich Ratzel was a popularizer of geography and ethnography. He first began as a journalist and travel-writer before becoming a professor at Munich and then at Leipzig. He published numerous books on geography and ethnography, and he is credited with popularizing the notion of *Lebensraum* (as the inexorable competition for “living space”) in a 1901 essay, an idea that was adopted by Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists several decades later.

Ratzel’s three-volume, richly illustrated tome *Völkerkunde*, translated into English as *The History of Mankind*, was published as a second edition in 1894. This excerpt from his introduction reveals a complex vision of human experience and humanity itself.

Source

1. The Task of Ethnography

Our business in this work is to impart a knowledge of mankind as we find it to-day throughout the earth. Owing to the long-established practice of considering with any attention no races save the most progressive and most highly civilized, until it is from these almost exclusively that we form our notion of mankind, and of their doings that make up the history of the world, it becomes the duty of ethnography to apply itself all the more faithfully to the neglected lower strata of humanity. Besides that, its aim must also be to take up this conception of humanity not in a merely superficial way, just so far as the races have grown up in the shade of the dominant civilized peoples, but to trace actually among these lower strata the processes which have rendered possible the transition to the higher developments of to-day. Ethnography must acquaint us not only with what man is, but with the means by which he has become what he is, so far as the process has left any traces of its manifold inner workings. It is only so that we shall get a firm grasp of the unity and completeness of the human race. With regard to the course that our investigation must follow, we have especially to remember that the difference of civilization which divides two groups of mankind may bear no kind of relation to the difference of their endowments. This will be the last difference which we shall have to think of; the first points to consider will be differences in development and surroundings. [...]

The geographical conception of their surroundings, and the historical consideration of their development, will thus go hand in hand. It is only from the combination of the two that a just estimate can be formed.

Our growth in intelligence and culture, all that we call the progress of civilization, may better be compared with the upward shoot of a plant than with the unconfined flight of a bird; we remain ever bound to the earth, and the twig can only grow on the stem. Human nature may raise its head aloft in the pure ether, but its feet must ever rest on the ground, and the dust must return to the dust. Hence the necessity of attention to the geographical point of view. As for historical considerations, we can point to races which have remained the same for thousands of

years, and have changed their place, their speech, their physical appearance, their mode of life not at all, their religion and their knowledge only superficially. [...] They are to-day no poorer, no richer, no wiser, no more ignorant, than they have been these thousands of years. They have acquired nothing in addition to what they possessed then. Each generation has repeated the history of the one before it, and that

repeated its predecessors; as we say, they have made no progress. They have always been men with certain gifts – strong, active, having virtues and defects of their own. There they stand, a fragment of bygone ages. In the same space of time we have emerged from the darkness of our forests on to the stage of history; we have made our name, alike in peace and war, honoured and dreaded by all nations. But have we as individuals undergone any so great change? Are we in physical or intellectual power, in virtue, in capacity, any further ahead of our generations of ancestors than the Tubus of theirs? It may be doubted. The main difference lies in the fact that we have laboured more, acquired more, lived more rapidly, and above all, have kept what we have acquired and known how to use it. Our inheritance is larger, fuller of young life; and therefore a comparison of national positions gives us a higher standing among mankind, and indicates too how and why we have become what we are, and what road we must take in order to advance a stage farther.

Throughout all national judgments we find unmistakably as a fundamental fact the feeling of individual self-esteem causing us to take by preference the unfavourable view of our neighbours. We must at least try to be just; and the study of mankind may aid in that direction, impressing upon us as it does the important principle that in all dealings with men and nations we ought, before forming a judgment, to consider that all their thoughts, feelings, and actions bear an essentially graded character. In one stage or another anything may happen, and mankind is divided not by gaps, but by steps. [...]

We can conceive a universal history of civilization, which should assume a point of view commanding the whole earth, in the sense of surveying the history of the extension of civilization throughout mankind; it would penetrate deep and far into what is usually called ethnography, the study of the human race. [...]

Source: Friedrich Ratzel, *The History of Mankind*. Translated by A. J. Butler. London: Macmillan and Co, 1896, pp. 3–5.

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