



The Geographer in Schmitt

A comparison between the spatial thought of Carl Schmitt
and Halford Mackinder

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Abstract

This thesis compares the spatial thought of the British geographer Halford Mackinder (1861 – 1947) and the German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888 – 1985), with attention to the way in which they conceived of the ‘spatial revolution’ in the beginning of the twentieth century, and the ways in which these theories legitimated brute political realities of their time. This thesis points to the fundamental dissimilarities in the spatial ontologies of these authors but emphasizes that both works explicitly justify dubious political practices. Therefore, this thesis concludes that Schmitt’s infamous reference to Mackinder, in the foreword of Schmitt’s work *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950), is likely rhetorical in nature. Moreover, it suggests that Schmitt’s reference is likely premised upon ignorance of Mackinder’s network and influence – as a so-called ‘aid to statecraft’. Despite the differences in spatial ontology among these two authors, this thesis argues that the comparison between the work of Carl Schmitt and the tradition of ‘classical’ geopolitics is justified, and even beneficial. Uncritical contemporary reappropriation of Schmitt’s (spatial) categories seems undesirable, but that does not mean that Schmitt’s spatial thought ought to be neglected. Critical analyses of Schmitt’s spatial thought illustrate the ways in which complex spatial ontologies justify dubious political practices, beyond the often-repeated examples of Darwinist conceptions of international politics.

“*Arme Schmitt: die Nazis sagten Blut und Boden — er verstand Boden — die Nazis meinten Blut.*” – Hannah Arendt.¹

Introduction

The geographical discipline is home to many tainted figures; authors who claimed to have objectively studied the effects of the physical environment on international politics, but whose theories were unambiguously used to legitimize dubious policies.² Carl Schmitt (1888 – 1985) is indeed an example of such a tainted figure, interesting if only for his widely fluctuating reputation³. Considered by some as the *Kronjurist* (‘crown jurist’) of the Third Reich, Schmitt was an active member of the Nazi Party and a member of the governing board of the main Nazi legal organization, BNDSJ.⁴ He was expelled from the party in 1936 but retained his academic appointment. During his later Nazi years, Schmitt turned to questions of international (spatial) thought, presumably attempting to justify the expansionism of the *Reich*, but this is contested.⁵

Despite Schmitt’s Nazi associations, many contemporary commentators have appropriated Schmitt’s ideas in order to criticize the excesses of liberal universalism and to conceptualize a multipolar alternative.⁶ This type of engagement is, however, strongly opposed by others, who consider such appropriations ‘dangerous’ and argue that it is impossible to separate Schmitt from his political activities.⁷ Moreover, some qualify Schmitt as a geographer, while others argue that Schmitt’s references to geography are nugatory and rhetorical in nature, or that the deficient influence of geography in Schmitt is in stark contrast to the influence of mythical thought.⁸ Thus, there is an ongoing discussion about the significance and value of his thought, especially his spatial thought.

¹ In the marginalia of Hannah Arendt’s copy of *Nomos der Erde*. See Anna Jurkevics. “Hannah Arendt reads Carl Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth: A dialogue on Law and Geopolitics from the Margins*.” *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, no. 3 (2017).

² For example, Géaroid Ó Tuathail, “Thinking critically about geopolitics,” in *The Geopolitics Reader*, eds. Géaroid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby & Paul Routledge (Psychology Press, 1998), 1-14. The most infamous example of this tradition is undoubtedly the German School of geopolitical thought [*Geopolitik*], which is typically credited for inspiring and providing the theoretical legitimation for Nazi expansionism through the concept of *Lebensraum* (‘living space’).

³ Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: an intellectual portrait of Carl Schmitt* (Verso, 2000), 1.

⁴ Between 1933 and 1936 Schmitt was an active member of the Party in the sense that he actively supported its policies, like the purging of Jewish influences in German jurisprudence. An interesting discussion of Schmitt’s joining the Party and his early involvement with it, is chapter 13 in: Balakrishnan, *The Enemy*, 176-191

⁵ For one, Hannah Arendt’s comments on *Nomos* seem to reflect a disbelief in Schmitt’s associations with the Nazi Party, and even a certain amount of pity for Schmitt.

⁶ Examples of this appropriation of Schmitt’s theories include the work of Chantal Mouffe; Chantal Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*. Verso, 1999. See also: Chantal Mouffe, “Carl Schmitt’s warnings of the dangers of a unipolar world,” in *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt*, eds. Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito (Routledge, 2007), and others in part II “The crisis of order in the post-9/11 era” in *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: Terror, Liberal War and the Crisis of Global Order*, eds. Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito (Routledge, 2007). This appropriation has been criticized, most notably in: David Chandler, “The revival of Carl Schmitt in International Relations: The Last Refuge of Critical Theorists?” *Millennium* 37, no. 1 (2008): 27-48 and Stuart Elden, “Reading Schmitt geopolitically: Nomos, Territory and Großraum” *Radical Philosophy* 161 (May/June 2010), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/reading-schmitt-geopolitically#fnref44>

⁷ Claudio Minca & Rory Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, (Routledge, 2015), 63.

⁸ Respectively Michael Heffernan. “Mapping Schmitt,” in *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos*, ed. Stephen Legg (Routledge, 2011). Elden, “Reading Schmitt geopolitically”. Contrast this to Hooker, who argues his ‘bold vision of the importance of spatial concepts in shaping the possibility of political

These questions justify a comparison with another ‘tainted’ figure in geography, on whom similar questions can be projected; Halford J. Mackinder (1861 - 1947).⁹ Mackinder was a British geographer, imperial politician and educator, who is often conceived as the founder of the discipline of (‘classical’) geopolitics.¹⁰ Mackinder’s spatial thought evokes the same question as Schmitt: it is simultaneously celebrated for its timeless strategic value, and, as of lately, questioned as a dubious, biased piece of geographical scholarship that has been used, directly and indirectly, to legitimize imperialism.¹¹ Moreover, the relation between Schmitt and Mackinder is by no means arbitrary. In the foreword his 1950 book *The Nomos of the Earth* (hereafter *Nomos*), Schmitt mentioned how he was influenced by Mackinder:

I am much indebted to geographers, most of all to Mackinder, [yet] nevertheless, a juridical way of thinking is far different from geography. Jurists have not learned their science of matter and soil, reality and territoriality from geographers ... the ties to mythological sources of jurisprudential thinking are much deeper than those of geography.¹²

Given the debates surrounding the significance of Schmitt’s spatial thought, it is remarkable that the most pressing question surrounding this paradoxical quote has not yet been answered: what does it mean? Is it a genuine show of respect to a – in retrospect – tainted figure, or is it a rhetorical tool to further his academic credibility? And what are the implications of the answers to these questions for the scholarly discussion described above? This thesis attempts to contribute to these debates by answering the following question:

What is the relation between the spatial thought of Carl Schmitt and Halford Mackinder, concerning their views on the ‘spatial revolution’ in international politics in the early 20th century, and how does this relation alter current views of Schmitt’s work?

Sources and operationalization

It is difficult to designate whether Mackinder has influenced Schmitt’s thought. Despite the reference in the introduction of *Nomos*, Schmitt does not explicitly cite Mackinder in the rest of the work. This infrequency might be seen as evidence for the hypothesis that Schmitt quoted

order’, qualifies Schmitt as a geographer. See William Hooker, *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: Order and Orientation*. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 196.

⁹ For example, when Halford Mackinder is mentioned in academic works on Schmitt, his name embodies a ‘camp of geopolitical authors’ that has a ‘pseudo-objective’ or a strategic understanding of the relation between space and politics and follows a geographically determinist line of reasoning and views political identities as fixed within spatial containers. Respectively, Robert Meyer, Conrad Schetter & Janosch Prinz, “Spatial Contestation? – The Theological Foundations of Carl Schmitt’s spatial thought,” *Geoforum* 43, no.4 (2012): 688; and Rory Rowan, “A New Nomos of Post-Nomos? Multipolarity, Space and Constituent Power,” in *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos*, ed. Stephen Legg (Routledge, 2011): 147.

¹⁰ The term (classical) ‘geopolitics’ will be discussed later. For now, it suffices to say that geopolitics was a term introduced to give scientific status to the study of geography as an instrument of national power.

¹¹ e.g. Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*. (Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹² Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. Gary Ulmen (Telos Press Publishing, 2006), 37.

Mackinder – a famous geographer held in high esteem – as a rhetorical tool.¹³ The intention behind this move might have been to dissociate his book from the work of the German school of *Geopolitik*, and thereby to cleanse his work from Nazi taint. However, if Schmitt's mark of admiration was genuine, then there is a possibility to reassess the status of his work as legitimation for statecraft – given the dubious status of Mackinder himself. Thus, the prominent question here is how seriously Schmitt has been influenced by Mackinder.

A comparative analysis of Schmitt's and Mackinder's spatial ontologies, conceptualizations and (political) arguments provides more insight in how exactly Schmitt might have been influenced by Mackinder. The first primary source that this thesis will discuss is *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950 [2006]).¹⁴ Published after the eclipse of the Third Reich, this book represents an interesting paradox: it can be considered both a 'fascist epic' that 'bears the boot print' of what Schmitt argued during the war¹⁵ and a respected 'missing classic' in the field, providing 'the missing substantive historical-juridical backbone' to Schmitt's earlier work.¹⁶ *Nomos* thus marks the epicentre of current debates surrounding the significance of Schmitt's (spatial) thought, which makes it interesting for the purposes of this thesis.

Furthermore, this thesis will discuss Mackinder's most famous work *the Geographical Pivot of History* (1904), along with the 1919 book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. The most important similarity between all these works is that they both provide (alternative) explanations for the 'spatial revolution' in the beginning of the 20th century¹⁷, the problems inherent to this 'spatial revolution' and, sometimes implicitly, the political proposals to accommodate these problems.

These sources are, evidently, limited. They are, in the first place, historical relics instead of mines of timeless knowledge. They all seem to fit a particular tradition of geographical theorization. 'Classical geopolitics' is a historic, scholarly field of research or a political practice¹⁸, effectively described by O'Tuathail as 'a hybrid discourse combining self-scientizing geographical discourse searching for universals and speculative governmental discourse on imperial strategy...'.¹⁹ One of many epistemological assumption within this tradition is the clear distinction between object and subject; the pretention of the subject to depict an objective, dissociated view of international order.²⁰ This presumed objectivity is

¹³ However, we also know that the access to libraries in war-torn Berlin was precarious, possibly affecting Schmitt's ability to substantiate his bibliography, see Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 35.

¹⁴ This thesis will use the famous English translation by Gary Ulmen, published by the critical Leftist Telos Press Publishing, which have published more papers on the 'repressed' ideas of Schmitt.

¹⁵ Respectively, Balakrishnan, *The Enemy*, 67; and Elden, "Reading Schmitt Geopolitically".

¹⁶ Respectively, Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito, "Introduction: the International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt", In *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt*, eds Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito (Routledge, 2007), 2 and Benno Teschke, "Fatal Attraction: a Critique of Carl Schmitt's International Political and Legal Theory," *International Theory* 3, no. 2 (2011), 180.

¹⁷ With this, we mean a theory in which the author argues that rupture is taking place within a specific spatialized narrative of history. What this means specifically, and the way it relates to the rest of the authors' spatial theory, it differs per authors and will be illustrated later, in chapter 2 and 3.

¹⁸ Sami Moïso "Geopolitics/critical geopolitics," In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography* eds. John Agnew, Virginie Mamadouh, Anne Secor and Joanne Sharp, 220–234. Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

¹⁹ Géaroid Ó'Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*, (Routledge, 1996), 25.

²⁰ This tradition has some common epistemological and ontological presuppositions, which is a fruitful way to compare the work of various authors belonging to this tradition: some critical geographers have indeed done just this, and this secondary literature can inform the task at hand. David Crikemans, *Geopolitiek: " geografisch*

however exactly the premise of this thesis: in their timely ambition to describe an objective perspective on political order, these works could have been used as ‘aids to statecraft’.²¹ This particular function of geographical theory is explored in this thesis. This approach is inspired by the domain of ‘critical geopolitics’, a subdiscipline of political geography.

The comparison focuses on the question how a particular spatial ontology and corresponding conception of ‘spatial revolution’, serve as a rationale for foreign policy. The ontological dimension refers to questions surrounding the (broad) role of space in the political thought of the writers in question: *in what sense* does space play a role, and *what space(s)* do we mean? Moreover, how do these ontological features relate to their respective conceptualizations of ‘spatial revolution’, and to their vision of what the political shape of the world should be?²² This thesis thus focuses on the following questions:

Category	Main question	Subquestions	Goal
<i>Spatial Ontology</i>	What role does space play in the respective conceptualizations of political order and of history (spatial chronology)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which foundational assumptions about the relationship between space and political order can be traced in these conceptualizations? - What presuppositions can be traced in these conceptualizations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To compare the spatial thought of the authors in question. - To compare the respective relations between spatial thought and political practice. - To analyze how Schmitt’s work relates to Mackinder and classical geopolitics in general.
<i>Spatial Revolution</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does the ‘spatial revolution’ mean – in the terms of this author? - Why is this ‘spatial revolution’ problematic to this author? 	-	
<i>Aid to Statecraft</i>	How do the theoretical considerations regarding this ‘spatial revolution’ relate to (inspire) a political program?		

Figure 1: Operationalization of the sources in this thesis.

Methods

geweten" van de buitenlandse politiek? (Maklu, 2007), 199. This is based upon O’Tuáthail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 105.

²¹ This is based on the famous characterization of William Parker, *Mackinder – Geography as an aid to statecraft*. (Oxford University Press, 1982).

²² This is based on an interpretation of ontology (in general) as a philosophical concept encompassing ‘what there is’ and the ‘problems about the most general features and relations of the entities and which do exist. See Thomas Hofweber, “Logic and Ontology,” in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), via: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/#toc>

Critical geopolitics can be seen as the historical consciousness of the field of political geography. This ‘movement’ in geopolitical thought originated in the 1990s, within the work of various geographers, most notably G  aroid    Tuathail, Klaus Dodds and John Agnew, and is an important strand of geopolitical research to this day. The discipline sought to problematize the allegedly objective intentions of these geopolitical analyses and proposed to analyze these sources as discourses.²³ This thesis is inspired by critical geopolitics in the sense that it scrutinizes the historical context in which the spatial thought too shape, and how these theories subsequently shaped politics.

To grasp how authors might relate to each other, we can conceptualize the tradition as a network of knowledge in which geopolitical ideas circulate. This conceptualization seems useful, as it designates contours and structures of thought, but does not see knowledge as stable ‘schools’ to which authors belong or not. Most of the relations between these authors have already been widely discussed and proven. For example, the Belgian scholar Crikemans notes the similarities between the German geographers Ratzel and Haushofer, and traces Mackinder’s influence upon Haushofer.²⁴ Moreover, Haushofer’s influence upon Hitler is infamous.²⁵

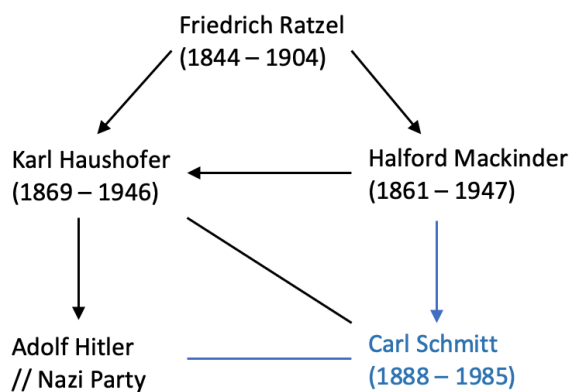


Figure 2: A simplified version of a network of knowledge (In the discipline of classical geopolitics). The color blue represents the main subjects of this thesis.

This diagram is a very crude, and thus limited, representation of the most important relations between authors in the field.²⁶ However, it implies that Schmitt’s reference to Mackinder represents a possible relation with a whole network of knowledge, that is connected to the Nazi Party. Existing similarities between Mackinder and Schmitt would not necessarily exonerate

²³ e.g. Klaus Dodds & James Sidaway, “Locating Critical Geopolitics,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, no. 5 (1994), 515. G  aroid    Tuathail, & John Agnew “Geopolitics and discourse: practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy,” *Political geography* 11, no. 2 (1992).

²⁴ See for the comparison between Haushofer and Mackinder: Crikemans, “Geopolitiek:”, 272-8. See for the comparison Haushofer and Ratzel: Crikemans, “Geopolitiek”, 263-7. Moreover, Kearns notes how Mackinder, disliked the fact that Haushofer’s appropriated the theories. Kearns, “Geopolitics and Empire”, 61-62.

²⁵ See note #2.

²⁶ Other figures that might be involved in this network are scholars like Owen Lattimore, Hans Weigert and Robert Strausz-Hup  , who were ‘part of a group of scholars sharing a theory of geopolitics that saw states as ‘dynamic phenomena, see Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939-1950*. (Princeton University Press, 2017), 64. Moreover, geographers have noted how Schmitt engages with the work of geographers Ernst Kapp and Alfred Mahan in *Land & Sea*. Other noteworthy authors might be the other founder of *Geopolitik*, Rudolf Kj  llen, or Fredrick Turner, see Gerry Kearns, “Closed space and political practice: Frederick Jackson Turner and Halford Mackinder.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2, no.1 (1984), 23-34. This is work for future research.

Schmitt from Nazi affiliations.²⁷ Thus, by drawing connections to ‘classical’ works of geopolitical thought, we are able to place Schmitt in a broader history of grand spatial theorization²⁸ and deduct broader implications about the significance and value of Schmitt’s thought from the comparison with Mackinder.

Structure

This thesis will discuss the spatial thought of Mackinder (chapter 1) and Schmitt (chapter 2). Here, the relations between the historical context of these authors, their spatial ontology and conceptualizations of the ‘spatial revolution’ of the twentieth century will be sketched. Moreover, each chapter discusses how these conceptualizations might have influenced foreign policy. Hence, each chapter follows the structure of the operationalization. We synthesize this knowledge in chapter 3, describing similarities and differences and sketching the historiographical implication thereof, in an attempt to analyze how Schmitt’s theory of ‘spatial revolution’ relates to a broader history of geopolitical theorization and how this affects the significance of value of his spatial thought.

²⁷ It is noteworthy to mention that this diagram shows how difficult it might be to trace the particular influences of Mackinder – as opposed to the work of others who were concerned with similar topics and proposed similar theories. For example, one superficial similarity between Schmitt and Mackinder is their shared preoccupation with the land/sea dichotomy. However, this dichotomy was a recurring theme on (geopolitical) writings on world order in the 1940s. We should note here that the notion of ‘closed space’ might have been commonplace in the early twentieth century too. It is characteristic to Agnew’s concept of ‘naturalized geopolitics’, see: John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics* (Routledge, 2002).

²⁸ This is a pressing issue according to Minca & Rowan, see Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*.

Chapter 1: The Eclipse of the Columbian Epoch: a spatial revolution in Mackinderian terms.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the ways in which Mackinder's geographical work has been used as an 'aid to statecraft'. This will be done by historicizing Mackinder and by analyzing his spatial ontology, from which his conceptualization of a 'spatial revolution', as spatial closure, emanates. In showing that Mackinder's theory is premised on a social Darwinist conception (ontology) of space – in which physical geographical conditions play a central role as the *arena* for competition – this chapter argues that Mackinder's account of 'spatial revolution' automatically translates to a political program. Therefore, Mackinder's spatial analysis is a direct call to imperial restructuring.

A Short Imperial Biography

The alleged objectivity of Mackinder's argument and his political intents have been criticized by critical geographers, who have pointed out that Mackinder's professional career and corpus can be understood in an ideological light. As O'Tuathail aptly summarizes; the geographer's oeuvre is 'an attempt to modernize traditional conservative myths about an organic community in an age where a multiplicity of international and domestic material transformations was eroding the economic foundations of the British Empire and the social world of the aristocratic establishment who ran it'. More specifically, he argues that Mackinder's geography offered 'organic coherence in an age of disequilibrium'. Mackinder was an imperial conservatist, heavily influenced by biological (organic) theory.²⁹

Mackinder's writings have to be placed in this age of 'disequilibrium', of more intense inter-imperial competition and protectionism – referred to as *New Imperialism* by Mackinder's contemporaries.³⁰ An example of this would be the Boer War, which Mackinder saw not only as a challenge to the integrity of the British Empire, but also as an example of the increasing mobility of terrestrial powers, at the expense of maritime actors.³¹ From this, we can conclude that Mackinder's writings are subjective in the sense that they are informed by a clear, context-specific, ideological preoccupation.

Spatial Ontology

This paragraph discusses the role of space of Mackinder's thought. Physical geographical patterns take the centre stage in Mackinder's work, as the main explaining factor for societal (and international political) phenomena. In other words, "man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls."³² Some have argued, in reference to this quote, that

²⁹ O'Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 102.

³⁰ Gerry Kearns, "Geography, Geopolitics & Empire", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, no. 2 (2010), 130.

³¹ Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire*, 38.

³² Halford Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History (1904)'. *The Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (2004), 299. In his opinion, therefore, there is no *rational* political geography without physical geography. Halford Mackinder, "On the Scope and Methods of Geography", *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* 9, no. 3 (1887), 143-5.

Mackinder was a geographical determinist, meaning that he – in his intention to describe ‘a geographical causation in universal history³³’ – allegedly, exclusively focused upon physical geography as the single causal force in history. Though Mackinder of course recognized that geography is an unchanging and constant force of great importance – whose ‘pressure is commonly the exciting cause of the efforts in which great ideas are nourished’³⁴ – he does not consider it the *only* cause in human affairs.³⁵ There are enough examples that show that Mackinder was keenly aware of this.³⁶

Mackinder had a Darwinist vision of space as ‘environment’, which implies that various physical environments created the pattern for emergence of different (racialized) sorts of human societies, engaged in a territorial struggle for existence.³⁷ Historical transformations in the environment alter the balance between the organisms or communities. Geography thus had to be viewed as a changing *arena* for military action.³⁸ His preoccupation with (relative) power struggle is unsurprising. However, he did not overlook the moral dimension: the concept of *balance of power* is prominent in the thought of Mackinder: “a balanced globe of human beings. And happy, because balanced and thus free.”³⁹ Mackinder’s spaces functioned as an extrapolation of the balance of power, and he proposed ‘stable’ – hence, balanced – territorial arrangements after WWI.⁴⁰

The geographer took the entirety of the world as the level of analysis. His interest was not in the individual behaviour of states as in the socio-political development of certain parts of the world, and the effects of these processes upon politics.⁴¹ Moreover, evolutionary reasoning implies that history can be conceptualized as the progressive growth or decline of competitive organisms as environments change.⁴² These two elements of his work allowed him to formulate a spatialization of world history. He conceptualized history primarily as an ongoing confrontation between land and sea powers.⁴³ The relative power of land and sea

³³ Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot”, 299.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 300.

³⁵ Mackinder was no environmental determinist in the crude sense of the term. In the conclusion of *The Geographical Pivot*, he argues that ‘the actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions ... and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment and organization of the competing peoples.’ See Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot”, 314.

³⁶ The most telling one is probably this citation from *Democratic Ideals and Reality*: “The physical facts of geography have remained substantially the same during the fifty or sixty centuries of recorded human history. Forests have been cut down, marshes have been drained, and deserts may have broadened, but the outlines of land and water, and the lie of mountains and rivers have not altered except in detail. The influence of geographical conditions upon human activities has depended, however, not merely on the realities as we now know them to be and to have been, but in even greater degree on what men imagined in regard to them.” See Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: a Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*. NDU Press, 1996; 21.

³⁷ Kearns notes how geographical arguments were central to evolutionary reasoning: there is a distribution of organisms in Space (distributions in space resulting in competition for resources), and in Time (the coming and going of distinct organisms as environments change). Kearns, “Geopolitics and Empire”, 63-8.

³⁸ Mackinder did not, however, actively propose to view geography as an *aim* of political politics, see Criekemans, *Geopolitiek*, 201.

³⁹ See “The Round World and The Winning of the Peace” in Mackinder, “Democratic Ideals and Reality”, 205, cited in Criekemans, *Geopolitiek*, 194.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 196.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 193-5.

⁴² Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire*, 142.

⁴³ Criekemans, *Geopolitiek*, 184.

powers has however shifted continuously throughout history, following changes in the geographical environment.

Thus, changing conditions of physical geography played a central role in Mackinder's thought. This relation was perpetuated by a Darwinist conception of space (environment), in which competition is a natural phenomenon. This allowed Mackinder to conceptualize this perceived sense of 'disequilibrium' as a symptom of a historical change in worldwide geographical conditions, a 'spatial revolution'.

Spatial Revolution

The 'spatial revolution' that Mackinder observed in the end of the nineteenth century can be grasped only when considering Mackinder's spatialized periodization of history. In the *Pivot*, Mackinder distinguishes between a pre-Columbian, Columbian and a post-Columbian epoch. With the ending Columbian epoch, and certain technological enhancements which affected man's mobility and ability to administrate imperial possessions, Mackinder argued that the 'political appropriation' of the world is 'virtually complete'.⁴⁴ He views this as a loss of 'elasticity of political expansion (in lands beyond the Pale)'.⁴⁵

This loss of elasticity represents a return to the pre-Columbian era. During this era Europe was set by physical external constraints, including a yet impenetrable ocean, deserts and pressure from Moghul invasion (land power). As a result, Europe was 'pent into a narrow region and threatened by external barbarism', meaning the continent was a 'closed political system'.⁴⁶ This observation must be cast in Darwinian terms: Mackinder means that the communal organisms in Europe were denied the space, and thus the natural tendency, to grow.⁴⁷ As a result, territorial competitiveness naturally increases: 'every explosion of social forces, being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed...' Of course, this stands in contrast to the Columbian epoch, which 'essential characteristic' was, 'the expansion of Europe against almost negligible resistance', which made possible European exploration.⁴⁸

This condition of 'spatial closure' in the post-Columbian era has multiple strategical implications. Firstly, according to Mackinder, political leaders will resultingly turn their attention from territorial expansion (outside of Europe) to the struggle for relative military efficiency. Mackinder argued that spatial closure 'heralded a conflict between empires that Britain must prepare itself to win'⁴⁹ Secondly, one of the most fundamental characteristics of the Post-Columbian Epoch was the increased strategical capabilities of land powers, especially those located in the so-called *pivot area* or *Heartland*. Technological innovations compressed distances and thereby re-arranged (spatial) social hierarchies. Railway construction would

⁴⁴ Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot", 298.

⁴⁵ Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 40.

⁴⁶ Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot", 298.

⁴⁷ Kearns, "Closed World and Political Practice", 27.

⁴⁸ Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot", 298-9.

⁴⁹ Kearns, "Geopolitics and Empire", 136. Moreover, according to Kearns, Mackinder considered imperialism as inevitable. He formulated different causes, consequences and best responses to imperialism, also resting upon distinct ways of situating this new turn (new forms of imperialism) in terms of the evolution of the global human community. See Kearns, "Geopolitics and Empire", 141-2.

enhance the connectedness (mobility) of terrestrial empires, increasing its relative strength as opposed to maritime entities like Britain, that profited from the Columbian era. Thus, Mackinder's specific theory of spatial closure legitimizes imperial statecraft.

Aid to Statecraft

How can Mackinder's ideas about the 'spatial revolution' be translated to a specific political agenda? The simplest answer to this question is that Mackinder conceived of territorial competition between organisms (struggle) as natural. A change in the environment thus has direct strategical implications. This is true for Mackinder's concept of 'spatial closure' too: the *Pivot* identified major (potential) threats to the Empire, especially the growing strength of the Russian Empire.⁵⁰ This terrestrial powerhouse was identified as the main rival of Britain at the time already, pressing onto the empire's landward margins of the Indian subcontinent⁵¹, but Mackinder's analysis confirmed this by identifying the bigger spatial-historical shifts that increased the land powers' relative strength as opposed to Britain.⁵² Preoccupied as he was with the relative position of the British Empire, the defense of the empire in the post-Columbian era was thus a major concern.⁵³

Thus, Mackinder aimed, through his professional work, to revitalize the strength of Britain. He argued that the aim of geographical education was to make the British population 'think imperially' – 'that is to say, in spaces that are worldwide'. Geographical knowledge was no collection of useless information, but a 'trained capacity', that ought to be applied practically in statecraft.⁵⁴ He combined his functions as a geographer and an educator in the service of imperial politics and 'most of his multifarious statements find a place in a unifying imperial philosophy'.⁵⁵ This is visible in Mackinder's theory concerning spatial closure, which aimed 'to help Britain formulate a new geopolitical strategy in an interconnected closed system where competing imperial powers struggled to attain political and military supremacy'.⁵⁶

Thus, Mackinder's theories on spatial revolution have clearly functioned as an aid to statecraft.⁵⁷ His Darwinist spatial ontology is central to this relation, as it inspired Mackinder's theory on spatial closure. These discussions influenced the discussions on space and politics for years to come.

⁵⁰ Pascal Venier, "The Geographical Pivot of History and early twentieth century Geopolitical Culture. *Geographical Journal* 170, no.4 (2004), 331.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 56.

⁵² O'Tuáthail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 106.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 102-4. See also Criekemans, *Geopolitiek*, 195.

⁵⁴ For the quotes; see Mackinder in O'Tuáthail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 75 and 86. Furthermore: Kearns, "The Political Pivot of Geography", 338.

⁵⁵ Parker, "Mackinder", 60, quoted in Kearns, "Closed Space and Political Practice", 30.

⁵⁶ Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism*, 62.

⁵⁷ To be sure, this service to imperialist politics is by no means necessary. Kearns, for example, has pointed out alternative versions of the 'philosophic synthesis' that many took academic geography to be. see Kearns, "Geopolitics and Empire", 340.

Chapter 2: The Eclipse of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* as ‘spatial chaos’: a spatial revolution in Schmittian terms

This chapter will discuss the ways in which Schmitt’s spatial thought was used as an ‘aid to statecraft’. It will argue that Schmitt’s theory of spatial revolution is based upon a specific conception of order (*Nomos*), in which physical geography is irrelevant, but wherein space is nevertheless foundational in multiple ways: as constituted and constitutive order and as orientation (meaning). This fundamental relation is conceived as being undermined by a ‘spaceless’, liberal spatial consciousness, a concept which is closely related to Schmitt’s concept of a ‘spatial revolution’. Schmitt’s theories are quite abstract, but they ultimately legitimize Nazi warfare.

A Short Biography & The Turn to Space

Carl Schmitt (1888 – 1985) was a jurist and political commentator, famous for his work on constitutional theory and the sovereign exception, written during the Weimar era. Schmitt can be considered a part of the ‘conservative revolution’. Some noteworthy intellectual affinities are the Nietzschean derivation that inherited Western values were nihilistic, a profound (authoritarian) rejection of (liberal) constitutionalism.⁵⁸ He was preoccupied with the question of (political) order, both on the level of the state and of the international.⁵⁹ Schmitt’s spatial theorization represents a later phase in his academic career. He began analyzing international questions around 1939, although he had been a prolific critic of the Treaty of Versailles before.⁶⁰ Schmitt’s reflection on this topic inevitably took shape in the context of Germany’s defeat in the WWI – and the resulting military occupation of Schmitt’s native Rhineland.⁶¹

It is useful to sketch the debate surrounding his spatial thought in more detail. One prominent question is the nature of Schmitt’s relation to *Geopolitik*. Some have drawn parallels between Schmitt’s work and the work figures like Friedrich Ratzel.⁶² However, others emphasize that Schmitt dissociated himself from this tradition, or that his proposals for new international order (*Großraum*) were criticized for their distance to *völkisch* (‘folkish’)

⁵⁸ Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The conservative revolutionary habitus and the aesthetics of horror." *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992).

⁵⁹ Jens Meierhenrich & Oliver Simons “A fanatic of order in an epoch of confusing turmoil.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, eds. Jens Meierhenrich & Oliver Simons (Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

⁶⁰ These works include *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte. Ein Beitrag zum Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht* published in 1939; *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar – Genf – Versailles 1923–1939*, published in 1940 (a collection of essays) and *Land und Meer. Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung*, published in 1942.

⁶¹ e.g. Stephen Legg, “Interwar Spatial Chaos? Imperialism, Internationalism and the League of Nations” in: *Sovereignty, Spatiality and Carl Schmitt*, ed. Stephen Legg (Routledge, 2011), 113.

⁶² Elden, “Reading Schmitt Geopolitically”; Minca, Claudio & Barnes, Trevor. “Nazi Spatial Theory: The Dark Geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 3 (2013): 669-687.

ideology, which is inherent to *Geopolitik*.⁶³ It is questionable how much these differences mattered when faced with the ‘brute realities’ of Nazi expansionism.⁶⁴

Moreover, there are contrasting views surrounding the (contemporary) significance of Schmitt’s spatial thought. The spatial parameters of Schmitt’s thought have received more sustained attention in Anglophone geography over recent years, with engagement ranging from piecemeal engagements with specific aspects of Schmitt’s thought, like borders and theology to more structural engagements that also consider his political activities.⁶⁵ Spatial concepts have also taken a primal role in the contemporary reappropriation of Schmitt in IR. Other geographers have, however, criticized this appropriation, and the reactionary character of his spatialities is only one reason for this.⁶⁶ Heffernan argues that Schmitt’s ‘spatial phrases are deployed in an essentially rhetorical manner, and are often startlingly devoid of content, geographical or otherwise’.⁶⁷ He concludes that:

Schmitt saw no need to concern himself with the discipline of geography, including the geopolitical movement, because he rejected its form of argument and style of exposition, specifically the traditional geographical concern with human–environment relations and the reliance on the map.⁶⁸

Minca & Rowan argue that the status of geographic thought in Schmitt is indeed uncertain, but that this uncertainty mainly revolves around the key roles of geo-elemental geographies (of land and sea) in his account of spatial modernity.⁶⁹

This thesis will go beyond the beaten tracks of comparing Schmitt to *Geopolitik* directly or analysing his geo-elemental geographies, but it will do so with the same questions in mind. Instead, this thesis will focus on one ‘forgotten’ dimension of Schmitt’s ‘geopolitical’ thought: his alleged ‘indebtedness’ to Mackinder and his analysis of ‘spatial revolution(s)’. Thereby, it also attempts to ground Schmitt more profoundly in the history of geographical ideas.

Spatial Ontology?

Strictly speaking, geography plays no role in the work of Schmitt, because Schmitt did not discuss the world’s physical environment and its material relationship with human populations, a central concern of professional geographers at the time.⁷⁰ However, ‘spatial concepts’ were

⁶³ A more detailed explanation on this phase in Schmitt’s career is useful. Despite public manifestations of allegiance, Schmitt was ‘virulently attacked’ for his distance from *völkisch* ideology, skepticism of a biological interpretation of the (geo)political, and his mistrusted Catholicism. Afterwards, Schmitt ceased to comment on domestic political issues and instead focused his work on international issues. See Barnes & Minca, “Nazi Spatial Theory”, 675. These issues were also broad up in Schmitt’s trial after WWII, see Joseph Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁶⁴ Moreover, Minca & Rowan note the conceptual differences between *Großraum* and *Lebensraum* but argue that these ‘counted little when faced with the brute realities of Nazi policy, which Schmitt was willingly throwing his intellectual support behind’. See Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 174.

⁶⁵ Respectively, Claudio Minca & Nick Vaughn-Williams, “Carl Schmitt and the Concept of the Border” *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012); Meyer, Schetter & Prinz, “Spatial Contestation?” and Minca & Rowan.

⁶⁶ e.g. Elden, “Reading Schmitt Geopolitically”.

⁶⁷ Heffernan, “Mapping Schmitt”, 236.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 238.

⁶⁹ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 195.

⁷⁰ Heffernan, “Mapping Schmitt”, 237.

no less fundamental for Schmitt than geography was for Mackinder. Schmitt was concerned with the conditions for the co-existence of different, incommensurate political entities in one shared juridical order.⁷¹ International political conventions were understood as institutions and historicized.⁷² Space was fundamental to these institutions, in the words of Minca & Rowan, ‘in a quasi-ontological sense’; it was the concept ‘from which everything else emanates’.⁷³

The concept *Nomos* refers to the concrete territorial ordering, in which *Ordnung* and *Ortung* [order and orientation] congregate.⁷⁴ *Nomos* can thus be seen as the tangible, spatially visible form of political order. However, Schmitt does not presuppose a neutral, universal or undifferentiated concept of space on which constituted order rested.⁷⁵ No, *Nomos* is also a moment of constituent power; a foundational act that *makes* the relationship between order and space – otherwise nature.⁷⁶ Schmitt’s spatial ontology is thus ‘act and meaning ... coming together and becoming the same thing.’⁷⁷ More specifically, *Nomos* (order) rests on the division of space. This division is established through an act of *Landnahme* [‘land-appropriation’]. This act establishes the fundamental division of space on which conventions and juridical regulations (property relations), were based.⁷⁸ *Landnahme* is based upon the extraction of land, either from space that ‘until then had been considered to be free’ or from a formerly recognized owner.⁷⁹

A historical example of *Nomos* is the *jus publicum Europaeum*. This order was founded on the colonization (*Landnahme*) of the New World and was based upon two spatial divisions: the distinction between Europe and the ‘free space’ of the New World and the distinction between ‘firm land’ and ‘free sea’. The first, ‘most essential and decisive,’ division was ‘the fact that the emerging new world order did not appear as a new enemy, but as *free space*, as an area open to European occupation and expansion’⁸⁰, where ‘force could be used freely and ruthlessly’.⁸¹ In other words, the space of durable order in Europe was structurally dependent upon a space of disorder.⁸² Moreover, Schmitt focused upon the antithesis between ‘firm’ land

⁷¹ On constituted order, see Rowan, “A new Nomos of post-Nomos?”, 153. For the general characterization of Schmitt’s work see Lars Vinx, “Carl Schmitt”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Fall 2019 Edition), via <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=schmitt>. Moreover, the motive ‘order’ is indeed an important and undervalued thread in Schmitt’s oeuvre. See Meierhenrich, & Simons “A fanatic of order,” 4.

⁷² Alessandro Colombo, “The Realist Institutionalism of Carl Schmitt.” In *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt* (Routledge, 2007).

⁷³ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 213-4.

⁷⁴ Odysseos, Louisa & Fabio Petito “Introduction”, in: *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: Terror, Liberal War and the Crisis of Global Order*, eds. Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito (Routledge, 2007), 4; Ojakangas, Mika. “A terrifying world without an exterior.” In *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: Terror, Liberal War and the Crisis of Global Order*, eds. Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito (Routledge, 2007), 213-4. Colombo, “The realist institutionalism”, 27.

⁷⁵ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 213.

⁷⁶ Rowan, “A new Nomos of post-Nomos”, 153.

⁷⁷ Minca, Claudio. “Carl Schmitt and the Question of Spatial Ontology,” in *Sovereignty, Spatiality and Carl Schmitt*, ed. Stephen Legg (Routledge, 2011), 166.

⁷⁸ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 214-7.

⁷⁹ Schmitt, *Nomos*, 45-6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 94.

⁸² Rowan, “A New Nomos of Post-Nomos?,” 154.

and ‘free’ sea but conceptualized the difference as two ‘separate and distinct global orders’ – with clearly distinguished ‘concepts of war and plunder’.⁸³

Global Diagram of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*



Five Soil Statuses of Firm Land:

1. State Territory
2. Colonies
3. Protectorates
4. Exotic Countries with European Extraterritoriality
5. Free Occupiable Land

Figure 3: ‘Global Diagram of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*’⁸⁴

Territorial changes or the changing ‘soil statuses’ of land were seen as important procedures for ‘peaceful change’ (the bracketing of war) in the *jus publicum Europaeum*, specifically in the major peace conferences in the 18th and 19th century, like the Conference of Berlin (1884-5).⁸⁵ Moreover, this graph illustrates how Schmitt is not interested in physical geography but in the status and division of space as a ground for concrete order.

Thus, Schmitt’s conceptualization of order is premised upon space. In his view, spatial division provided a *Nomos*, a stable spatial orientation and thus a stable sense of order in Europe. Schmitt observed, to his despair, that this order was collapsing in the twentieth century. This collapse can be conceptualized as the dissolving differentiation between Europe and the free world on which the *jus publicum Europaeum* was based, but this is not the only meaningful conceptualization of Schmitt’s spatial revolution. The perceived qualitative change in spatial orientation was one of the most important reasons why Schmitt was against this shift.

Spatial Revolution

This paragraph discusses how Schmitt conceived of the ‘spatial revolution’ in the twentieth century and what the political implications of this transformation were, to him. A spatial revolution is a transformation in the ‘spatial consciousness’ – man’s outlook, standards and criteria, and also the very notion of space [*Ortung*]’ that is part of *Nomos*. The spatial revolution in the twentieth century was accompanied by a paradoxically ‘spaceless’ spatial consciousness. This consciousness consolidated the idea of a unified, homogeneous global, which went against Schmitt’s idea of the political: inherently spatially divided (among incommensurate entities).⁸⁶

This situation began with the European scramble for Africa. Schmitt mentioned how this enterprise was a ‘helpless confusion of lines dividing spheres of interest and influenced, failed amity lines simultaneously overarched and undermined by a Eurocentrically conceived,

⁸³ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 184. Moreover, Whereas the *land* was occupiable, belonging to clearly separated (state) territories, the *sea* had no border but was open to free pursuit of maritime wars, trade and fishing. See Schmitt, *Nomos*, 42-3.

⁸⁴ Schmitt, *Nomos*, 184.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 185.

⁸⁶ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 192-4.

free, global economy ignoring all territorial borders.⁸⁷ The ‘spaceless’ consciousness emanated from the growing influence of the United States and manifested itself in multiple ways. In law, the growing influence of positivism in legal theory disregarded the ‘concrete’ of spatial distinction that forms the ground for order, in lieu of the abstracted, universalist and liberal norms, that are considered disoriented in Schmitt’s work.⁸⁸

Schmitt regarded this revolution as negative. Schmitt’s views the spread of (these) new concepts of law as imperialist danger: “A people is only conquered when it subordinates itself to the foreign vocabulary, the foreign construction [*Vorstellung*] of what law ... is.”⁸⁹ Moreover, ‘spaceless’ consciousness promised a terrible era of war, unlimited in scope and intensity.⁹⁰ It suffices to say that the concept allowed no bracketing or limiting of war.⁹¹ Moreover, universalist ideals would impede neutrality, understood as the ability to autonomically distinguish friend and enemy.⁹²

Schmitt’s oppugnance to universalism also seems to have been based upon a ‘strong’ conception of space, in which the concept is associated with the concrete, meaning and dignity.⁹³ For example, the sea and sea powers have no authentic character to Schmitt.⁹⁴ These are the things that the ‘empty’ or ‘spaceless’ visions of order lack as well. Schmitt argued that the ‘spaceless’ spatial consciousness ‘was undermining historical awareness of the concrete, situated nature of political relations...’⁹⁵. Schmitt’s opposition to this ‘spaceless’ consciousness can also be explained by a ‘metaphysical’ idea: the conviction that ‘free historical action’ presupposes ‘a free space, a space of the outside’. This space is part of a meaningful order and a source of orientation, without which nihilism prevails and life is deprived of meaning and

⁸⁷ Schmitt, *Nomos*, 226. An interesting example, inspiring Schmitt, in this respect are the case of Ethiopia. Ethiopia, a League member, was subjugated and annexed by the aggressor Italy, another League member, in 1935. This was, of course, against the League’s (universal) law, and the League installed economic sanctions on Italy. These sanctions however proved to be ineffective, and several League members recognized the annexation in all forms. ‘An extraordinary league!’ said Schmitt, who argued that ‘the essential cause of the failure of the League’ was the lack of any spatial order: it wanted to be simultaneously a European order – which would have meant that Ethiopia was *free space* – and a universal order – defending the independence of all League members. Power was a major factor as well: The League was ‘specifically universal... insofar as the originators and inaugurators of the idea were the American President and the British Empire.’ See: Schmitt, *Nomos*, 242-3.

⁸⁸ This change in spatial consciousness thus initiated new socio-spatial possibilities too.

⁸⁹ We can conclude from this quote that Schmitt regarded the ability to make the friend/enemy distinction and to enforce it (spatially, through law), was considered the marker for sovereignty. See Mika Luomo-aho, “Geopolitics and *grosspolitics*: From Carl Schmitt to E.H. Carr and James Burnham,” in *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt. Terror, Liberal War and the Crisis of Global Order*, eds. Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito (Routledge, 2007), 38.

⁹⁰ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 155.

⁹¹ The concept of war was transformed into a ‘discriminatory’ attitude. The new (universalist) concept of ‘just war’ implied that war would be waged against ‘inhuman enemies’ who ought to be ‘destroyed’, thereby justifying escalation as nihilistic violence and self-righteousness. Jean-François Kervégan, “Carl Schmitt and “World Unity,” in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (Verso, 1999), 59.

⁹² Mika Ojakangas, “A terrifying world without an exterior,” in *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: terror, liberal war and the crisis of global order*, eds. Louiza Odysseos & Fabio Petito, (Routledge, 2007), 205-6.

⁹³ Schmitt, *Nomos*, 237.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 43.

⁹⁵ For example, Schmitt contrasted the ‘empty’ concept of space that he associated with liberalism – and, indeed, with the Jewish ‘way of life’ – from the ‘powerful qualitative conception of vital space emanating from the Nazi Reich.’ See Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 191-3.

dignity.⁹⁶ The observation that space has lost significance is indeed a fundamental assumption to Schmitt.⁹⁷

To conclude, Schmitt's conceptualization of the 'spatial revolution' was based upon his particular spatial ontology, and his concept of 'spatial consciousness' in particular: the revolution was conceptualized as a shift in spatial vision, which coincided with the collapse of 'meaningful' spatial division and the transformation of law and of war. His opposition to the 'empty' universalist conception of space was premised upon his particular 'strong' conception of space and its fundamental association with, and relation to, political order.

Aid to Statecraft?

The most dubious aspect of Schmitt's analysis of this 'spatial revolution' is the fact that *Nomos* not only describes historical change, but that it also proposed a solution.⁹⁸ In the words of Simons: 'Schmitt's definitions were not merely descriptive or historical reflections on a given concept; they were claims and demands, postulations of a new understanding of space'.⁹⁹ Schmitt wanted to replace the 'spatial chaos' – the 'anarchical void' of 'spaceless' universalism¹⁰⁰ – and 'fill' it with a stable sense of order (*Nomos*), a respatialization of the political that would again bring meaning: *Großraum*.¹⁰¹ This idea fits his 'strong' conception of space. Indeed, *Großraum* 'contains a meaning that is more than merely quantitative or mathematical-physical'.¹⁰² Specifically, it represents 'a distinct political idea', a meaningful friend/enemy distinction, above and beyond the territorial nation-state.¹⁰³ In Schmitt's vision, there was thus a choice between a meaningfully divided, politically pluralist, earth or a globalist scheme.

Schmitt's proposal – the (infamous) solution of the *Großraum* – builds upon Schmitt's earlier work. An example of the *Großraum*-model is the original interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine: a regional principle of non-intervention of non-American powers, that preserved the independence of American states. Even though the aim of Schmitt's earlier work on *Großraum* was to identify its 'core thought' to make 'fruitful for other historical situation', Schmitt's concept was 'reasonably translatable' to a 'impermissibility under law of interventions of spatially foreign powers' for Europe¹⁰⁴, under the leadership of the *Reich*. We can therefore agree with Simons when he writes that the concept *Großraum* concept is theoretically vague

⁹⁶ Okajangas, "A Terrifying World without an Exterior", 206.

⁹⁷ Simons, "Carl Schmitt's Spatial Rhetoric", 783.

⁹⁸ It is important to recognize that we are talking about a theoretical legitimation here. Schmitt had no connections to with the leadership of the Nazi Party and therefore did not actually influence Nazi foreign policy.

⁹⁹ Oliver Simons, "Carl Schmitt's Spatial Rhetoric," in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich & Oliver Simons, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 783.

¹⁰⁰ Schmitt's conception of order is based on spatial division. Hence, a 'universalist' conception that overlooks division is to Schmitt inherently disorderly.

¹⁰¹ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 232-4.

¹⁰² Simons, "Carl Schmitt's Spatial Rhetoric", 788.

¹⁰³ Luomo-aho, "Geopolitics and grosspolitics," 39, see also note #88.

¹⁰⁴ This conceptualization is based upon the *Großraumordnung mit interventionsgebot* book: he stressed however that the aim of 'The Großraum Order' was not to imagine a 'German Monroe Doctrine', but rather to identify its 'core thought' in order to make it 'fruitful for other living spaces and other historical situations' However, the idea of impermissibility of 'spatially foreign powers' in a *Großraum* was 'reasonably translatable [in Europe] given the state of political reality', see Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 168.

and abstract, but that it could easily be ‘endowed’ by ‘descriptions whose conceptualizations cannot be differentiated from Nazi ideology.’¹⁰⁵

Moreover, Schmitt’s theory legitimized warfare in the sense that the Second World War ought to be seen, in Schmitt’s vision, as a war that was primarily about the nature of spatial ordering – instead of morality. This is illustrated by the following quote:

The essential juridical question is concerned not with the moral or philosophical problem of war and the application of force in general, but with something entirely different ... Wars between Great Powers [the guardians of a particular spatial order] easily can rupture the spatial order if they don’t function around or within free space. Such wars then become total, in the sense that they must precipitate the constitution of a new spatial order ... Such wars are the opposite of disorder. They are the only protection against a circle of increasing reprisals, i.e., against nihilistic hatred and reactions whose meaningless goal lies in mutual destruction.¹⁰⁶

In Schmitt’s perspective, WWII is indeed ‘the opposite of disorder’; it is a sort of protective war against the ‘spaceless’ universalism that inherently involves nihilistic conceptions of war. This argument is in line with Elden’s observation that Schmitt declared the Second World War a *Raumordnungskrieg*, ‘a war of spatial ordering’¹⁰⁷ – in other words, a war waged over the rightful spatial consciousness of political order. Schmitt was always concerned with the question of how historical developments in the international domain affected Germany’s position.¹⁰⁸ But this quote represents more than that, and it does more than describing historical changes in spatial order: it frames Germany’s war efforts as an attempt to establish a particular type of order (*Landnahme*), and it thereby legitimizes Germany’s expansionism.

Thus, Schmitt’s theoretical work can be used – potentially – to legitimize Nazi foreign policy. Firstly, the *Großraum* proposal legitimized Nazi expansionism, although not explicitly, and secondly, Schmitt’s spatialized history could inform the Second World War in the sense that it could frame the war, instead of a moral issue, as a *Raumordnungskrieg*; a question of spatial ordering. On the background, Schmitt’s opposition to the ‘spaceless’ (universalist or liberal) conception of order, was influenced by his ‘strong’ conception of space, in which territorialized space serves as a ground for order and an alternative to universalism.

¹⁰⁵ Simons, “Carl Schmitt’s Spatial Rhetoric”, 789-90.

¹⁰⁶ Schmitt, *Nomos*, 187.

¹⁰⁷ See Elden, “Reading Schmitt geopolitically”. Basing himself on *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung*, Elden argues that Schmitt’s ideas ‘were hardly critical of, and sometimes explicitly endorsed, National Socialist’s expansionist politics into the East’. In Schmitt’s analysis, the *Großraum* he sets out would be dominated by the *Reich*. Elden argues: “If this means his position has some distance from a policy of explicit annexation, this is little comfort.”

¹⁰⁸ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 155.

Chapter 3: Synthesis – a similar analysis of the ‘spatial revolution’?

“‘The Großraum Order’ was both an attempt to formulate a new basis for international law that reflected real changes in the distribution of global power and an attempt to provide theoretical legitimacy for Nazi foreign policy.” – Claudio Minca & Rory Rowan.¹⁰⁹

This chapter aims to synthesize the findings from chapters one and two, by explicitly comparing Schmitt’s and Mackinder’s theories. This chapter argues that even though there are similarities between their works, especially the periodization, some major ontological differences are more striking. In other words, space plays a very different role in both authors’ work, which means that the similarities remain superficial. Thus, it is likely that Schmitt’s appropriation of Mackinder was rhetorical in nature.

However, we need to focus on similarities too. The ways in which these foundational spatial theories can be used as an aid to statecraft are fundamentally alike. This shared function justifies connections between Schmitt and the ‘classical’ school of geopolitics. Therefore, Schmitt’s spatial thought is not entirely uninteresting for geographers today. The reactionary assumptions underlying Schmitt’s relation to Nazi realities must be recognized. Critical geopolitics must heed the ways in which complex spatial ontologies translate to political realities.

Similarities and differences

This first paragraph focuses on the first two topics of our analysis: spatial ontology and spatial revolution, in order to answer the first part of the research question concerning the relations between the two bodies of spatial thought. What are the most important similarities?

The first is an ontological similarity: the attention paid to the (geo-elemental) concepts of land and sea. This aspect is rather obvious. Schmitt conceptualizes land and sea as two clashing powers and two opposite conceptualizations of order (*Ortung*): ‘firm’ and ‘free’. Just like Mackinder, he conceptualizes history as an ongoing struggle between these geo-elemental geographies. Schmitt’s idea and aversion of the free sea can be coupled to his conceptualization of ‘spaceless’ order. This similarity is however problematic, because the land/sea dichotomy was a central theme in geopolitical writing generally. This theme is therefore irrelevant for answering the question whether Schmitt was actually inspired or influenced by Mackinder himself.

The second similarity is also ontological. Relying on O’Tuáthail’s concept of ‘spatialization of history’, which can be explained as ‘the reduction of the complex and heterogeneous emergence of the modern world system to spatially defined categories that have a supposed innate transparency’,¹¹⁰ both Mackinder and Schmitt propose such a ‘spatialization of history’. They are both looking to a certain spatial foundation of international politics and the changing spatial properties of this foundations throughout history. Firstly, Mackinder’s

¹⁰⁹ Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 166.

¹¹⁰ Ó Tuáthail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 27.

periodization corresponds with historically successive notions of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ spaces, which inform the continuous confrontation or struggle between land and sea powers (organisms). For example, spatial closure due to imperialism – the absence of new lands to be discovered – and technological innovations like the railroad, positively affected the capabilities of land-based powers, resulting in the ascendancy of these terrestrial states.

This is closely related to Schmitt, who narrated world history in terms of changes in other spatial parameters, especially conceptions of space (*Ortung*) and certain spatial practices, like the constitutive power of *Landnahme*, that form the basis of his conception of order (*Nomos*).¹¹¹ Schmitt’s periodization traces these act(s) of *Landnahme*, the spatial division it constituted, and the sense of orientation and order that resulted from it. Thus, Schmitt’s spatialized history is not informed by tracing the causal effect of the physical environment upon international politics, which Mackinder did, but it is based on a particular conception of politics and order as inherently spatial phenomena – having manifestations in space.

This similarity is thus overshadowed by divergent opinions on what this spatial foundation (in history) is. In Mackinder’s work, this conceptual foundation is based upon categories that describe situations in the physical environment (open versus closed spaces), that are relevant in conceiving space as a Darwinist ‘environment’, an *arena* for competition. In Schmitt’s work, space (and spatial orientation) is seen as a ground for order, but only as a result of a constitutive act of *Landnahme*. His spatialization of history is not neutral but based upon qualitative changes in spatial outlook. Therefore, this similarity is more superficial than it seems.

The third similarity has been described before by Mendieta. He states that Schmitt (in *Nomos*) proposes ‘a periodization of world history that eerily resembles Mackinder’s’.¹¹² Indeed, Schmitt’s periodization seems similar. Schmitt’s three major [historical] spatial orders of the earth can be cast in Mackinderian terms. The first *Nomos* – that is, before the spatial appropriation of the New World – fits Mackinder’s pre-Columbian era. Schmitt’s second *Nomos* arises from the discoveries and *Landnahme* of the New World, which in the work of both authors induces a situation in which intra-European conflicts can be ‘projected’ upon an extra-European *free space*. Here, in Schmitt’s work, Europe has a special juridical status, while in Mackinder’s work, the physical pressure upon Europe is less than in pre-Columbian era, because of the continents’ new seafaring capabilities and colonial enterprises, which also increases its strength.

An important difference in this respect is the disagreement about what the third (post-Columbian) era, brought about by a new ‘spatial revolution’, entailed. Mackinder observed changes in the physical environment leading to a ‘closed world’, with increased interlocal connectivity, resulting in the shifting balance between land and sea powers. Schmitt only observed the collapse of the old spatial distinction of the *jus publicum Europeum*. The nescience surrounding this last phase illustrates that there is quite a difference in how the two authors conceptualized their spatialized histories.

¹¹¹ In the terms of Minca & Rowan, “developed an understanding of human history as forged by radical shifts in the conception of space and related spatial practices which he described as spatial revolutions.” See Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 188-9.

¹¹² Eduardo Mendieta, “Imperial Geographies and Topographies of Nihilism: Theatres of War and Dead Cities,” *City* 8, no. 1 (2004), 9.

This brings us to the fourth and most essential similarity for this thesis, which is the fact that both authors argued that a ‘spatial revolution’ was taking place in the beginning of the twentieth century. Mackinder literally argued that there was a ‘closed’ world in which territorial competition would be ‘sharply re-echoed’, leading to ‘barbaric chaos’. Schmitt made similar comments about the rise of (nihilistic) warfare, resulted from the observed collapse of traditional spatial divisions between the Old World as a space of order and the New World as a *free space*, upon which the previous *Nomos* had been based.

Schmitt’s analysis comes closest to Mackinder’s when he describes how order, in the modern age, could no more be provided by scientific discoveries than by ‘men on their way to the moon discovering a new and hitherto unknown planet that could be exploited freely and utilized effectively to relieve their struggles on earth’.¹¹³ Here, the perceived absence of *free space* or the presence of physical geographical restraint – the principle of ‘closed world’ – is implicitly presented as a principal fundament for political disorder and vice versa. In conceptual terms, it seems that Mackinder’s concept of ‘open’ space seems to presume the availability of Schmittian ‘free’ space, without focusing on the spatial division or act of *Landnahme* that, according to Schmitt, underlies this concept of ‘free’ space.

Schmitt indeed seeks the causes for ‘spatial revolution’ outside the domain of physical geography itself. That another important cause for the decay of spatial division was a (‘spaceless’) spatial consciousness that universalized (Wilsonian) norms of sovereignty, is a very Schmittian argument. Schmitt’s concept of *free space* – as necessary for a ‘space of order’ – does not necessarily represent a need for physical geographical area, it rather represents a spatial division that had provided order and prevented ‘wars of annihilation’. From this we can conclude that the Schmittian conception of *free space* is unrelated to Mackinder’s Darwinist conception of ‘open space’. Their conceptions of spatial revolution are fundamentally different.

Therefore, we can conclude that their respective conceptualizations of spatial order are markedly different. Schmitt’s discourse relied on fundamentally different presumptions about the role of space in politics (spatial ontology) than Mackinder. Schmitt’s opposition to the ‘universalist’ understanding of international law seems to have been informed by his ‘strong’ conception of space – ‘more than mathematical’ – and his opposition to liberalism. Thus, the comparison between the primary work of Mackinder and Schmitt concerning the ‘spatial revolution’ of the twentieth century, does not show enough evidence to support the hypothesis that Mackinder actually influenced Schmitt.

Implications

Ontological similarities and dissimilarities tell only part of the story. This paragraph answers the second part of the research question and analyzes how existing similarities relate to theoretical debates surrounding the significance and value of Schmitt’s spatial thought. It is here that we turn to the topic of ‘aid of statecraft’. We must answer two questions; (1) what does Schmitt’s reference of Mackinder mean? And (2) what are the historiographical implications of existing similarities and dissimilarities between Mackinder and Schmitt?

¹¹³ Schmitt, *Nomos*, 39 in Minca & Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space*, 233.

The lack of evidence for a direct influence in the content of Schmitt's spatial thought, like the lack of explicit references to Mackinder, suggests that Schmitt's alleged 'indebtedness' to Mackinder was a rhetorical trick. Why would he do that? There are two hypotheses. One hypothesis is that the reference of Mackinder was an attempt to generally amplify the academic (or geographical) credibility of his arguments. Schmitt must have been aware of the fact that his analyses were spatial in nature, but that his text was radically detached from – and even ignorant of – geographical debates, and were therefore 'curiously free-floating'.¹¹⁴ This hypothesis fits Simons' argument that Schmitt's engagements with others who thought about space were 'not deep': 'his citations of their work are few and he disregarded the contexts of what they wrote.'¹¹⁵ It is thus likely that Schmitt mentioned Mackinder's name to put more analytical 'flesh on the bones' of his spatial theory.

The second hypothesis is that, by referencing Mackinder, Schmitt was attempting to actively mask that his spatial thought might be interpreted as an aid to Nazi statecraft.¹¹⁶ This hypothesis hinges on the assumption that Schmitt was unaware of Mackinder's kinship to *Geopolitik*. Hence, this narrative is also built upon the assumption of ignorance surrounding the geographical discipline and is supported by the lack of ontological similarities. It is ironic that Schmitt's very ignorance of Mackinder's network induced Schmitt to use him as a rhetorical device, while the association with Mackinder, in retrospect, far from neutralizes Schmitt's spatial thought. This means, therefore, that both hypotheses amount to the same set of conclusions: that Schmitt's reference of Mackinder is rhetorical in nature and that he was ignorant of the content of his work and of the geographical discipline in general.¹¹⁷

Now we turn to the second topic: the historiographical discussions about the significance and value of Schmitt's thought. This thesis finds similarities in these theories in their function as an aid to statecraft. I would argue that the 'problem' of Schmitt's spatial thought – what negatively affects its contemporary significance – is not Schmitt's spatial ontology in itself. It is the fact that *Nomos*, like the work of Mackinder, pretends to be a 'view from nowhere', dissociated from its contested elements. Attention needs to be paid to the ways in which Schmitt framed the Third Reich's horrific will to power as a 'question' of spatial ordering (*Raumordnungskrieg*) and a move to counter 'spaceless' conceptions of international law.¹¹⁸ These arguments are no 'natural' outcomes of his spatial ontology whatsoever – unlike the Darwinist conception of politics, whereby territorial competition is inevitable – but it is the inevitable conclusion of Schmitt's opposition to liberalism.

What is peculiar about critical geopolitics is that Mackinder's work has long been analysed and criticized, while analyses of Schmitt's work have not been placed in the centre of the discipline. Mackinder's works have not necessarily been 'disproven', but his academic

¹¹⁴ Heffernan, "Mapping Schmitt", 237.

¹¹⁵ Simons, "Carl Schmitt's Spatial Rhetoric," 788.

¹¹⁶ This is in line with the argument of Elden, who argues that "as much as he tries to obscure the explicit political context in which its ideas were forged, *The Nomos of the Earth* is a deeply reactionary text." See Elden, "Reading Schmitt Geopolitically".

¹¹⁷ This thesis subscribes to the narratives proposed by thinkers like Heffernan, Elden and Simons, that Schmitt did not profoundly engage with geographical ideas.

¹¹⁸ Such is also the argument of Elden: "But just as Mackinder, Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, Karl Haushofer and others need careful historical, contextual and political readings in such a project, in order to recognize the limits of their work and the reactionary politics that accompanies them, so too does Schmitt." See Elden, "Reading Schmitt Geopolitically".

stature has been toned down for its imperialist biases and flawed understanding of international politics. The ‘organicist understanding’ of international politics¹¹⁹ has long and rightly been discredited by critical geopolitics. However, it is remarkable that Schmitt’s spatial theory has not been subjected to the same critical scrutiny by this discipline, especially since Schmitt’s ‘aid to statecraft’ illustrates the more complex ways in which spatial ontology and rhetoric (!) relates to political practice. The fact that Schmitt’s actual influence on Nazi foreign policy was minimal should not hinder critical analyses, the theoretical relations are precisely the point here.

Moreover, the fact that Schmitt’s engagement with geography was likely rhetorical in nature, is no reason to neglect his spatial thought. We must acknowledge that space was fundamental to Schmitt’s conception of order, and of ‘the political’ in general. His opposition to universalism rested on a (reactionary) ‘strong’ understanding of space – ‘spaceless’ is indeed a pejorative term in his vocabulary. These facts alone make his work stimulating for anyone interested in the history of geographical ideas. Therefore, I do not argue, like Elden,¹²⁰ that Schmitt has nothing to offer. It is precisely the crossover of spatial and political ideas and reality that makes his work interesting.

The critical discussion of Mackinder’s work from the perspective of critical geopolitics has stimulated a critical awareness of the biases and problems present in Mackinder’s work. Such a critical awareness is relevant and necessary for Schmitt’s work as well, especially because his work is still being ‘used’ today. I would argue that it is the task for critical geopolitics to critically analyse all ways in which that space relates to political practice. The concept of ‘classical geopolitics’ as we know it, defined by an ‘organicist’ (or Darwinist) understanding of politics, is perhaps too narrowly defined and too analytically limited to grasp the ways in which Schmitt’s spatial work had legitimated Nazi expansionism. Every contemporary appropriation of Schmitt’s spatial thought must evoke the same critical scrutiny as Mackinder’s work.

¹¹⁹ Or, in the words of geographer Agnew, ‘naturalized geopolitics’, see note #26.

¹²⁰ Elden, “Reading Schmitt Geopolitically”.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis aimed at comparing two theories about spatial revolution, one of the British geographer Halford Mackinder and one of jurist Carl Schmitt. It analyzed the implications of existing similarities for the purpose of furthering the debate on the significance and value of Schmitt's spatial thought. It has shown that both conceptualizations of the 'spatial revolution' in the beginning of the twentieth century, and the spatialized history on which these conceptions are based, seem similar. These similarities are however quite superficial, because they are based on opposing spatial ontologies. This suggests that Schmitt was not influenced by Mackinder and that his reference to the British geographer is rhetorical.

However, this thesis has proven that both spatial theories are similar in their function as an 'aid to statecraft'. Schmitt's spatial thought is inherently related to Nazi realities. This political dimension, and the rhetorical nature of Schmitt's references to political geography, have implications for the (contemporary) value of his thought. Every account Schmitt's spatial thought must account for the interrelations between spatial theory and political practice and the value of his thought as a 'detached' piece of scholarship with relevance today, must therefore actively be problematized. We must approach his work with caution.

This research thus makes two key contributions to contemporary debates. Firstly, this thesis historicized the spatial thought of Carl Schmitt by relating it actively to the tradition of 'classical' geopolitics – at the intersection of spatial theorization and political practice. This relation is undertheorized in the academic discussion on Schmitt, but remains critical to understand and fully grasp the meaning of his use of spatial notions, especially where he explicitly references geographers.

The second contribution relates to the field of critical geopolitics. This thesis has shown Schmitt's kinship to classical geopolitics as an aid to statecraft. Despite the fact that Schmitt's spatial ontology is very different from the Darwinist assumptions, – and attention to physical geography of Mackinder's discourse – which are typically considered characteristic of 'classical geopolitical' reasoning, a comparison is thus justified. The similarities illustrate that the discipline must acknowledge the diversity of ways in which spatial thought can be applied as aid, or theoretical foundations, of statecraft. Moreover, they suggest that the scope of critical analysis could be widened. The crossover of spatial theory and political reality makes his work interesting, today.

The question remains, however, what Schmitt's reference to other geographers, like Friedrich Ratzel – the precursor to *Geopolitik* – means. The spatial thought of Schmitt must thus be contextualized and historicized further. Moreover, Schmitt's use of spatial concepts illustrates that 'geopolitical' ideas were commonplace outside academic geography as well. This presence needs to be analyzed further.

Limitations

This thesis has some inevitable limitations. Most limitations concern the representation and analysis of Schmitt's thought. Firstly, this thesis has, due to practical concerns, only taken account of English sources. This is insufficient because much valuable scholarship on the topic

has been written in German and Italian¹²¹. This limitation has been made up for by using secondary sources that fit in the continental European tradition. Moreover, the primary source *Nomos*, that was discussed in this thesis, is of course a translation. Some of the (conceptual) nuances could have been lost in the translation. This limitation was countered by using German expressions and explaining them thoroughly, where possible.

Thirdly, this thesis has, due to practical concerns, only taken account of Schmitt's work *Nomos der Erde*. Due to practical concerns, it was impossible to provide an integral analysis of Schmitt's spatial thought. This is unfortunate, because much of Schmitt's other works are full of spatial ideas.¹²² This limitation has been made up for by relating some of the themes discussed in these books to *Nomos* itself. Moreover, much attention was paid to the work of authors who have analyzed Schmitt's work comprehensively. The systematic work of Minca & Rowan was, for example, important in this respect.

Other limitations are methodological. This thesis has concentrated upon *Geistesgeschichte* (the spatial ideas themselves), which might be considered quite a limited way to analyze Schmitt's (political and personal) intentions in referencing certain authors like Mackinder. However, this was the most promising method to discuss content-related similarities and dissimilarities between the two authors.

¹²¹ German is Schmitt's native language. Italian scholarship can be explained by the interest in Schmitt's theory of the sovereign exception by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

¹²² Especially *Großraum* (1939) and *Land und Meer* (1942).

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Justification image front page: the image is an artistic representation of Schmitt's spatial revolution. Specifically, the collapse of the special status (spatial division of Europe), against the background of 'empty' spatial consciousness – without regard for the rich meaning of grounded space.