

8

Imagining natural divisions of global power

Map me no maps, sir, my head is a map, a map of the whole world.
(Henry Fielding, *Rape upon Rape*, 1730, Act II, Scene v)

The vision and logic of empire

Geopolitics is a branch of political geography which argues that understanding the dynamics of space is essential for a proper understanding of international relations (Heffernan, 1998). Certainly, manoeuvrings over access to territory have always been an essential backdrop to political strategy and, as Henry Fielding commented, admittedly in a rather different context, grand designs have an enduring fascination. The theme is a universal one and has been a driving force for all the great empire-builders over the millennia. The list of ambitious men – and women are notable by their absence – who have sought to forge empires across what they saw as the known world is almost endless, but a few examples will serve to illustrate the scale and scope of their ambitions.

Alexander the Great, in the third century BC, extended the Greek Hellenic Empire across the whole of the eastern Mediterranean and into Asia Minor and north Africa, thus providing a rich trading hinterland for the Greek city states, which were relatively poor in terms of natural resources. In the third century AD, the Roman Empire, again supporting a massive trading network, stretched from its north Italian core to Britain in the north, across the bulk of what is now known as Western Europe and north Africa, and eastwards into Asia Minor, including the city of Constantinople on the Bosphorus, the modern-day Istanbul. Some four centuries later, in the seventh century AD, the Emperor Charlemagne united the fractious, warring parties in Europe to create an empire that

brought together a vast territory, extending west to east from the Atlantic to the Danube, and north to south from the Netherlands to Provence in what is now Mediterranean France. After Charlemagne's death, the eastern part of the empire became the core of the Holy Roman Empire, a loose European confederation with Christianity as its common denominator, that lasted, at least in name, until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In more modern times, the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte forged an empire embracing over 40 million people, based on his republican administrative system and centred on France. By 1812, if his allies and members of his family acting as puppet rulers are included, it reached from Spain, across France, to Denmark in the north, to present-day Italy in the south, and eastwards to what is now Germany, western Poland, and Austria. Famously, of course, Napoleon wanted more and he launched an invasion into neighbouring Russia, which ended in a humiliating defeat and ignominious retreat from a point 150 km west of Moscow. The Empire then went into a terminal decline, though its administrative and legal systems proved more durable, surviving essentially little changed to the present day in the independent states that subsequently emerged. The political vision, however, did not entirely die with Napoleon. It was revived in the middle of the twentieth century by the then French President, Charles de Gaulle, who mused about the aim of the European Union being ultimately to create an integrated Europe stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals. Ironically, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the extension of the European Union in 2004 to include most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has gone some considerable way towards seeing the quasi-Napoleonic vision of de Gaulle become a reality.

By modern-day standards, the extent and ambition of the empires described above are relatively modest, regional rather than global, but the past two hundred years have seen a marked change of scale with empires conceived as part of truly global strategies (Godlewska and Smith, 1994). The legacy of European economic, technological, and military domination was huge empires, some stretching over several continents, dominating great swathes of the world map as described in Chapter 3.

The strategies underpinning the vast majority of these empires were crude and opportunistic, consolidating national control over economic interests worldwide, wherever these happened to lie. They were not thought of in terms of the wider capacity of the imperial home countries

to manage and defend the territory claimed. Rather the aim was to achieve as much territorial and economic hegemony as possible and to worry about the detail of what was being claimed once the interior lands had been explored and mapped. The high seas gave free and almost unconstrained access, so that as long as any competing claimants could be kept at bay, there was ample time for leisurely, and profitable, economic exploitation and development.

Geography as an academic discipline, of course, played little part at the time in developing an understanding of the processes at work, other than to spearhead the nineteenth-century exploration of lands previously unknown in Europe (Bell *et al.*, 1994). Nevertheless, the end of the nineteenth century saw growing critical attention being paid to the whole question of imperialism, not least from Marxist theorists such as Lenin, who argued that it was just another phase in the march of capitalism and that either it would bring capitalism to its knees through popular revolution or states would realise just in time that wealth must be redistributed more equitably and take the steps necessary to ensure that this happened. At the time, Geography was just beginning to emerge as a serious and separate academic subject and its distinctive contribution to understanding imperialism was to come on two fronts: first, by seeking to understand better the strategic limitations that would ultimately restrict the scope of global power, and second, by linking competition for power between states to natural laws, in particular those associated with environmental determinism and social Darwinism that were so much in vogue at the time (Peet, 1985) (Box 8.1).

Sir Halford Mackinder and the geographical pivot of history

At the beginning of the twentieth century, geographers across Europe became embroiled in the ferment of ideas about the relative importance of the various factors influencing the distribution of global political power. As mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, the foremost amongst them was the British geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder, who suggested that the pre-eminence of sea power, which had been almost taken for granted for nearly four centuries, since the beginning of the Columbian era, was coming to an end (Mackinder, 1904; Blouet, 1987 and 2004) and being replaced by land power. Central to understanding the new order was the geographical pivot of history, a concept that Mackinder subsequently

Box 8.1

Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism is a loosely defined term, used to describe the application of the evolutionary theory and principles developed by Charles Darwin in the late nineteenth century to socio-economic and political affairs. It has been widely adopted by geographers in their writings, but has come to have largely negative connotations, reflecting the crude competitive values of Victorian capitalism. Descriptive phrases, such as ‘the survival of the fittest’, have been taken to justify a world where success in the struggle to reach the top of life’s greasy pole is the ultimate achievement. At

the turn of the twentieth century, however, social Darwinism was for many a liberating philosophy. Much of European society was dominated by class-based hierarchies, that denied many people access to key areas of power and influence. Social Darwinism offered the prospect of access based on achievement and, thus, could be seen as a liberating influence. Nevertheless, it remains a problematic concept, encompassing a wide range of rather simplistic and poorly defined notions about the links between physical evolution and social change.

fleshed out and renamed the Heartland of Eurasia (Mackinder, 1919; Parker, 1982). The Heartland, the core of which was Eastern Europe, roughly coincided with the boundaries of Tsarist Russia and Mackinder confidently claimed that military and political control of this region would assure control of the whole of Eurasia, what he termed the World Island, and that this would make possible global domination (Figure 8.1). He summed up his ideas in what has become a very hackneyed jingle, though none the less powerful for that:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island;
Who rules the World Island commands the World.

(Mackinder, 1919)

It was a very deterministic view of the world and Mackinder was no doubt influenced by the vogue for environmental determinism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as by the fascination amongst geographers at the time with the identification of so-called natural regions (Box 8.2). This enthusiasm was particularly marked in the School of Geography at Oxford University under the influence of A. J. Herbertson, where Mackinder also taught at the time (Herbertson

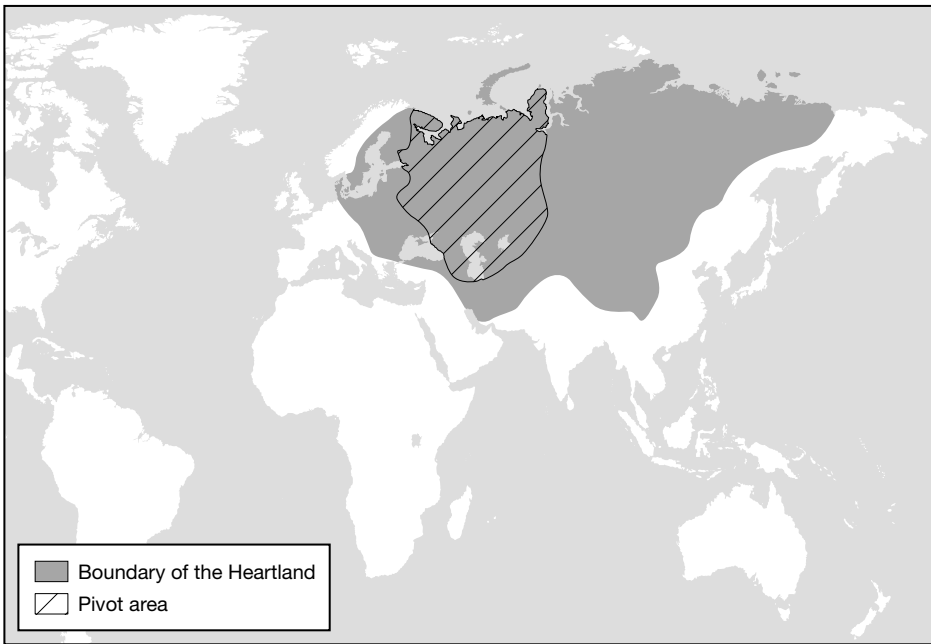


Figure 8.1 *Heartland/World Island*

and Herbertson, 1899). With the gift of hindsight, it now seems a somewhat absurdly simplistic model for explaining something as complex as the emerging world order at the height of the industrial revolution, but it was a time when the major industrial nations were still engaged in a period of rampant imperial expansion and it very much caught the mood of the times. The concept was also actually extremely vague, as is only too evident from the crude published sketch maps, but it was to prove extremely politically influential in the period between the two world wars, something that will be analysed in more detail in Chapter 9.

By no means everyone was convinced by Mackinder's thesis, especially in the USA, the emerging power of which, it can now be seen from the pre-eminent position of the USA in world affairs, was chronically underestimated in the analysis. The American naval historian, Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, who had already written extensively on the role of sea power, was immediately very sceptical of the way Mackinder sought to downgrade its importance, a view subsequently developed in more detail by the American Nicholas Spykman (1938 and 1942).

Box 8.2

Environmental determinism

Proponents of environmental determinism argue that human activities are ultimately controlled by the environment and that it is the variety of environmental conditions across the world that accounts for the variety of peoples and societies. In many different guises, it is a philosophy that has repeatedly resurfaced since at least the time of classical Greece. Environmental determinism was widely adopted by geographers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as part of their extensive flirtation with the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin, which he set out most notably in the *Origin of Species*. They attempted to use the concept to explain the

differential development of societies across the world, though in Europe it was never the completely dominant paradigm, nor was it uncontested. For many, determinism, environmental or any other variant, was simply too dogmatic a stance and it had to vie with the more liberal philosophies of possibilism and probabilism for intellectual dominance. For a time in North America, in the first half of the twentieth century, environmental determinism held greater sway, largely through the writings of Ellen Semple and Ellsworth Huntington, but its intellectual dominance there was short-lived, not least because of the racist conclusions the philosophy frequently spawned.

Spykman proposed an alternative vision, based around what he termed the Rimland, a buffer zone between land and sea, especially in the Indian and western Pacific Oceans (Figure 8.2). The effect of the Rimland buffer zone would be to contain the rampant land power that Mackinder believed would become so dominant and all-pervasive. Although both visions were extremely speculative, Spykman is no less important than Mackinder, not least because US foreign policy strategists enthusiastically adapted his ideas to help realise their goal of containing the global Communist threat in the Cold War era after the Second World War.

By the middle of the twentieth century, global hypothesising about power relations had become largely discredited and fallen out of fashion in geography, but nevertheless refused to die and disappear completely. In the context of the Cold War, Saul B. Cohen proposed a system of geostrategic regions, a two-fold division into what he termed the Trade-Dependent Maritime World and the Eurasian Continental World (Cohen, 1964 and 1982). The former included Western Europe, the

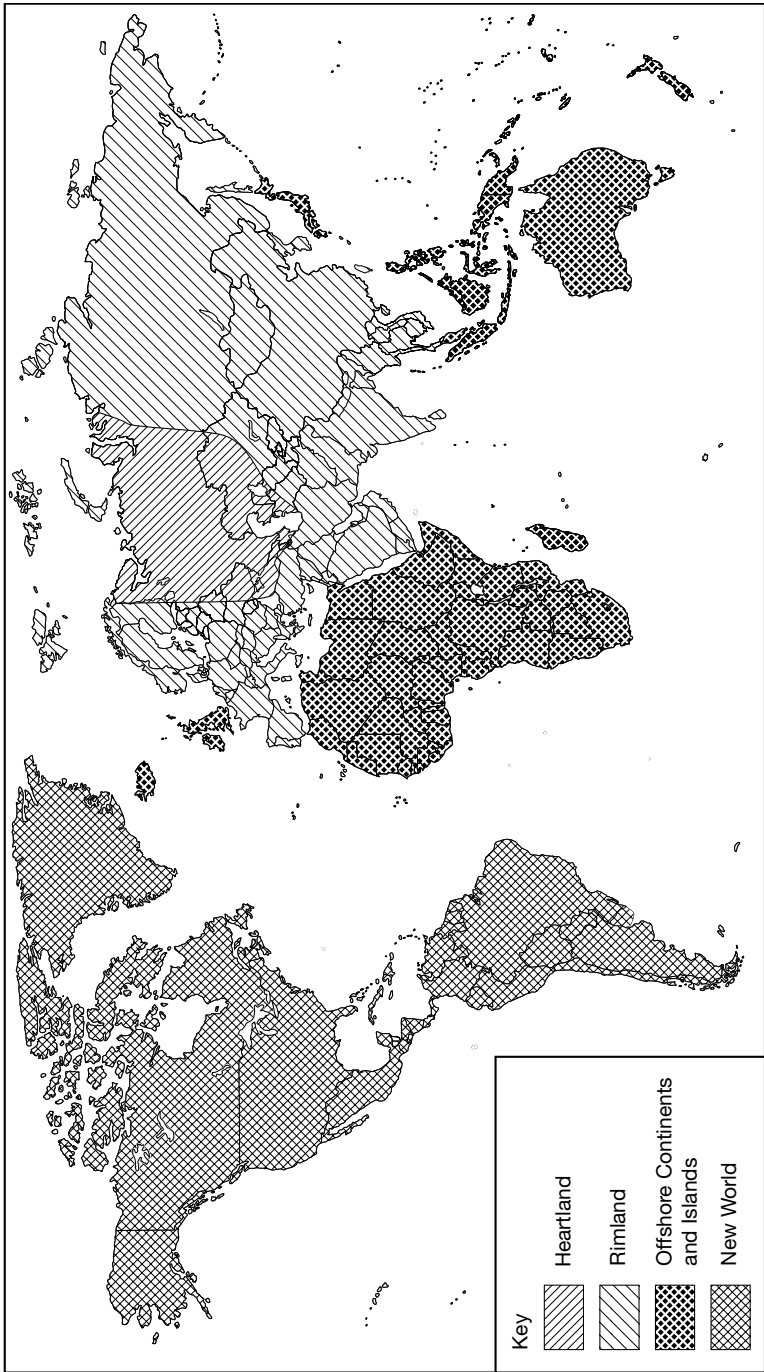


Figure 8.2 *Rimland*

Americas, most of Africa, and Australasia and was bound together by its commitment to free trade through a complex system of maritime trading links. The latter included the Communist World centred on the huge land-based block of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and was held together by Communist ideology. The model was a restatement of the Cold War divide in geographical parlance and has had to be completely rethought since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the subsequent rapid expansion of trade between China and the rest of the world (Cohen, 1992).

The current preference for trying to make sense of the spatial structure of the world order is through the emergent trading blocs. The most successful thus far have been the EU and NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Association, but similar, though less ambitious and successful, experiments have been undertaken in Asia, Africa, and South America (Michalak and Gibb, 1997). It is a decisive departure, being rooted much more in the analysis of actual economic flows, rather than being a means of achieving a particular political view of the world.

Environmental determinism and the state

The influence of environmental determinism and social Darwinism on intellectual life in Europe, North America, and the English-speaking world generally at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries was profound and widespread. Many geographers at the time absorbed its messages and the impact on their subsequent writings was clearly evident. One of the most important of these people was Friedrich Ratzel, whose book, *Politische Geographie* (1897), for the first time identified political geography as a distinct subdiscipline and also laid it firmly within the context of the debates about environmental determinism that were current at the time.

The most important of his arguments were those relating to the nature of nations. He compared their growth to that of living organisms, which evolved and grew over time, making the fairly obvious point that as nations grew, they would inevitably outgrow their state boundaries and require more resources, leading to competition and conflict. Amongst these resources, space was identified as the most important, and it was at this point that the concept of *Lebensraum* – living space – was born. Ratzel depicted nations as being in an endless struggle to dominate space and to acquire enough of it to be able to live and breathe, a struggle in

which there were inevitably winners and losers. It was certainly far removed from the ordered mosaic of states, fixed in time, that the static picture in atlases portrayed. However, it is important to note that Ratzel himself recognised the limits of the biological analogy he had used, freely admitting that political and cultural constraints would inevitably influence how and when boundaries changed (Bassin, 1987b).

One of the most intriguing aspects of Ratzel's work is the extent to which he was influenced by the American historian Frederic Jackson Turner. Writing just three years before *Politische Geographie* was published, Turner (1894) propounded the frontier thesis, which saw the settlement of the United States as a dynamic process with a series of waves moving inexorably across the North American continent from east to west, but with each temporarily checked by a marked boundary – the Appalachian Mountains, the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, and the Rocky Mountains – and a series of Indian wars, before settlement finally reached the Pacific west coast (Block, 1980).

Turner's thesis was widely debated at the time and its impact was certainly not confined to the United States (Kearns, 1984). Indeed, it spawned a number of disciples, such as W. P. Webb, who used it to explain the course of European settlement across southern Africa and Australia and other parts of the world allegedly being civilised and brought into the purview of the modern world. Whatever the extent of its influence, Turner's thesis has been roundly criticised and dismissed in recent years (Limerick, 1987). Not only did it not fit the facts of the history of settlement across the United States, which was much more fractured and irregular than Turner had described, but the idea that the West consisted entirely of free land, there to be exploited by the European settlers, buried the legacy of thousands of years of a quite different form of settlement by native peoples which was culturally highly sophisticated, though pre-industrial.

Ratzel was undoubtedly aware of the frontier thesis, though he does not make any explicit reference to it. However, whereas Turner clearly misinterpreted the facts of North American European settlement history, Ratzel himself was in all probability misrepresented by many of those who subsequently used his work to try to justify conquest under a cloak of seeking adequate *Lebensraum* for rapacious nations. His work must always be viewed in the context of when it was written, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a period when determinism, including environmental determinism, was the dominant paradigm. In the

subsequent century there have been several important paradigm shifts and the development of society is now seen in a much more varied and flexible light (Kuhn, 1970; Johnston, 1991).

Frontiers and boundaries and the science of geopolitics

One of the main consequences of so much of European and American intellectual life being dominated by environmental determinism in the early years of the twentieth century was what amounted to an obsession with frontiers and boundaries (Prescott, 1987). Peter Taylor concluded that: 'Frontiers and boundaries have probably been the most popular topic in political geography' (1985, p. 104) and it is important to understand the reasons behind their enduring popularity (Box 8.3). The key lies in the general preoccupation amongst geographers with the search for natural regions in the early part of the twentieth century, especially in the Anglo-American literature (Fleure, 1919; Hartshorne, 1939 and 1958). The idea that there were such spaces as natural regions led logically to a belief in natural boundaries, which once identified could be turned into political realities and defended. From this position, it was but a small step to arguing the case for changes to existing political boundaries that failed to meet the criteria of natural regions. Nor was it

Box 8.3

Frontiers and boundaries

The terms 'frontier' and 'boundary' have been widely used, often interchangeably, by geographers and others to describe political divisions, especially at national level (Prescott, 1987). Given this background, it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between them. At the height of the European imperial expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, frontiers were a common part of the political parlance, representing either the political

division between two states, or the limit of permanent settlement. Today, frontiers in that latter sense have all but disappeared under the global tide of human settlement and economic development, to be replaced by boundaries, which are more unequivocally lines of demarcation. Although both terms are still used in geography, the word 'boundary' is clearly the accepted generic term for describing political divisions.

illogical to claim that as these were partly human constructs, as demographic and other social constraints changed, so should frontier and boundary lines.

Politically, the timing was opportune. At the beginning of the twentieth century, imperialism was at its height and there was a pressing need amongst the European colonial powers to devise defensible systems for defining politically the huge tracts of territory, particularly in Africa and Asia, to which they had laid claim. The best known and most influential of the exponents of the science of boundaries in the UK was Lord Curzon, a politician and polymath who was appointed Viceroy of India in 1899 and Foreign Secretary in 1919, as well as serving as President of the Royal Geographical Society. In 1907 he delivered the Romanes Lectures in Oxford on the subject of frontiers, in which he made a strong plea for frontiers and boundaries to be scientifically determined, even allowing for the fact that it was unlikely that any single set of principles for doing so would ever be agreed (Curzon, 1907). His enthusiasm for such general principles was highly empirical. There was evidence all around him that existing frontiers and boundaries had failed to bring political stability and he believed that a better organised political map would allow for much greater success. Interestingly, the horrors of the First World War subsequently made him much more cautious and, once he was involved as the British Foreign Secretary in devising a post-war settlement, he clearly understood that political horse-trading would be as important as any set of scientific principles.

Elsewhere in Europe the fascination with boundaries was equally great. In Germany, Albrecht Penk, best known now for his contributions to physical geography, gave his inaugural address as Rektor of the Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität in Berlin on the subject of political boundaries (Penk, 1917). In it he extolled the sacrifices being made by Germany's youth to defend the borders of the German Empire, but stressed that he viewed Germany's colonial boundaries more as areas of contact than friction, facilitating peaceful interchange between neighbouring peoples.

Others in Germany took a more robust approach and, after the First World War, developed a school of political geography, known as *Geopolitik*, which was explicitly influenced by the earlier writing of Friedrich Ratzel on the organic theory of the state. In fact, some of those who initially took up Ratzel's ideas, in particular the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen, the first person to coin the word *Geopolitik*,

probably exerted even greater sway. The leader of the German school was Karl Haushofer. Largely through the academic journal, *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, of which he was the editor, he and his collaborators generated a large literature, geared primarily towards rehabilitating Germany as a major European power in the wake of the defeat of the Kaiser's Second Empire in 1919 (Sander and Rossler, 1994). Haushofer's massive three-volume work, *Macht und Erde* (Power and Land), set out a detailed case for a radical redrawing of political boundaries across the globe to bring them more into line with what he saw as geopolitical reality (Haushofer, 1931–4). It evoked an immediate reaction in the English-speaking world, notably from the American geographer Derwent Whittlesey, who argued for a much more subtle interpretation of the relationship between society and the land. Rather than the natural environment being automatically the dominant influence in determining the most appropriate political boundaries, Whittlesey argued that they should emerge as the result of the long-term influence of human activity on the land (Whittlesey, 1939; Cohen, 2002).

Much of what was written in the name of *Geopolitik* was crude and self-serving, such as the tract *Spaniens Tor zum Mittelmeer* (Spain's gateway to the Mediterranean), which supported and justified Spain having exclusive control over the land either side of the Straits of Gibraltar (Pauser, 1938). It and other publications in similar vein were widely vilified at the time outside Germany, but nonetheless had the effect of discrediting worldwide the whole tradition of geopolitical analysis and writing for much of the second half of the twentieth century, including any suggestion that boundaries and frontiers could legitimately be seen as dynamic and changing elements in the landscape.

Geopolitics and the scientific study of boundaries was a tradition by no means confined to Germany and many of its exponents in other countries in Europe argued strongly against using boundary issues in any way as a justification for war, as opposed to the promotion of peace and harmony between nations. Geographers, such as Elisée Reclus in France and the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin writing in exile in the USA, provided substantial counter-arguments to those of *Geopolitik*, but their arguments did not attract the same level of public interest at the time (O'Loughlin and Heske, 1991).

The most effective counter to what he himself described as 'the geopolitics of domination' has come only relatively recently in the writings of Geoffrey Parker (1988). He suggests that this is only

one of two main traditions in geopolitics, the other being the geopolitics of cooperation. Although the latter has attracted much less serious academic study by political geographers, its achievements in practice throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries have been considerable. The peace initiatives throughout the period between the two world wars, as well as the doomed attempts to create an international political forum in the League of Nations, were not the end of the process of creating a world order based on peaceful coexistence. Quite the reverse, they marked the beginning of a major shift in geopolitical practice that, though interrupted between 1939 and 1945 by the Second World War, has continued to gather momentum through bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union.

Despite the now virtually universal rejection of the rather crude environmental determinism associated with the search for natural boundaries, boundaries and their delimitation continue to exert a powerful fascination for geographers, not to mention politicians. There are several major academic research institutes in the world devoted entirely to the study of frontiers and boundaries, including two in the UK (International Boundaries Research Unit at the University of Durham and the Centre for International Boundaries Research at the Queen's University Belfast), an indication of the continuing level of activity and its importance to political geography.

Critical geopolitics

The dogmatism and prescription associated with the study of geopolitics, and the way in which it had been used to promote particular national territorial agendas, particularly in Germany during the Third Reich (1933–45), not only brought this aspect of political geography into disrepute, it also meant that it was ignored by many political geographers. Geopolitics desperately needed to be reassessed and reinvigorated, but it was not until the concepts of postmodernism and post-colonialism began to interest geographers that there was sufficient impetus to move the subject forward (Dalby, 1990; Driver, 1992).

Many of the ideas for this reappraisal originated from outside geography, a notable source being the writings of the Palestinian cultural historian Edward Said, who argued forcefully in his book *Orientalism* that moral right in the world was rarely if ever vested in one side only. The views of what he termed 'the Other' were always relevant and that by looking

at political issues from more than one side, and especially from a multicultural perspective, was likely in the long run to lead to more enduring solutions (Said, 1995).

The lessons were embraced enthusiastically by political geographers, eager to break out of the philosophical straitjacket they had been struggling with for so long (Ó'Tuathail, 1996). The main contribution of critical geopolitics has been to broaden greatly the focus of debate within geography about relationships between states and other political entities. A seminal study examines the changing nature of relationships along the border between Finland and Russia, which have been subjected to a fundamental process of 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation' (Paasi, 1996). What is implied by this rather abstruse formulation is that political relationships rarely remain stable for long; there is always an ongoing process of questioning and reassessment that results in the old order changing and new ones replacing it. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, this process was particularly active along the Finnish–Russian border, leading politicians and peoples on each side to reassess each other's motives and aspirations. In practical terms, what had been viewed as a virtually impermeable front line, became almost overnight a zone of fruitful and mutually beneficial contact. The intellectual energy generated by critical geopolitics is undeniable, but is more difficult to categorise and summarise within a neat framework. Very broadly, however, there are three basic organising concepts. First, there is politics associated with all types of geographical knowledge; second, there is a geography to all political practice; and third, the first two ideas can only be uncovered by challenging the taken-for-granted (Taylor, 2000, p. 126). In other words, there is no such thing as a value-free political decision and all political decisions have spatial consequences. One of the most important roles of political geography is to challenge the authority of decisions about territory and boundaries, so as to uncover their total impact on all those affected and, thus, help counter a one-sided and partial interpretation of events. It is a very different role from that envisaged by Mackinder and Ratzel.

Key themes and further reading

This chapter is about geopolitics and its ramifications for geography. An appreciation of the nature, historical extent, and human ambition behind some major past empires provides an essential background to the

concept. The enduring importance of the vision and world view of Sir Halford Mackinder must be understood, in particular the thinking underpinning the geographical pivot of history and the idea of the Heartland. Other, alternative world views, notably those of Mahan, Spykman, and Cohen, should also be included. The influence of environmental determinism and social Darwinism on the way in which many of these ideas evolved, as well as their impact on the dynamics of states, should be clear. The contribution of Friedrich Ratzel and the concepts of *Lebensraum* and the organic theory of the state are important in this context, as is the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. The consequences of the heavy criticism heaped upon the whole study of geopolitics, as a result of its self-serving application in Germany through the *Geopolitik* movement, must be appreciated. At this stage the reader should be able to explain why frontiers and boundaries have been so important in the development of political geography, and why critical geopolitics has had such a transformative impact.

There is no better starting point for finding out more about the mindset behind early geostrategic thinking than Brian Blouet's (1987) biography of Sir Halford Mackinder. The tumultuous political upheavals of the twentieth century have meant that geostrategy and geopolitics have exerted a continuing fascination for geographers and Peter Taylor (1993) has edited an excellent collection of essays on the changes over the past century in *Political Geography of the Twentieth Century: a global analysis*. The recent emergence of a more critical approach to geopolitics, which has exposed the limitations of many of the earlier, more dogmatic, approaches, is well outlined by Gerard Ó Tuathail (1996) in *Critical Geopolitics*.