



LEBENSRAUM AND RACE PRIDE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to outline a genealogy of the concept of Lebensraum and it will focus on the way that evolutionary thoughts of Darwin were translated into 19th century German philosophy, particularly in the political thinking of Friedrich Ratzel and his famous concept of “Lebensraum”. A Ratzelian philosophy aimed towards a synthesis between “aim” and “space”, national ideology character and nationalism and planning. The focus is not to argue for a revitalization of its usage or incorporation into contemporary discourse. Rather, its aim is to place the renewed interest and connection in geography concerning the co-relation between German Fascist Ideology with the identical inspiration of RSS & BJP in India.

“For those who seek in politics a substitute for religion, who make political loyalty a matter of faith, or try to direct the forces of men’s soul into the paths of their own political advancement”.¹

In contextual relation to the quote, it is fascinating to notice the similarities or, perhaps, more accurately elective affinities between the 19th century and contemporary concerns. The ways that these concerns resonate within political and social discourses are of course different. Of particular relevance here are the ways in which contemporary geography has undergone a semantic shift in recent years towards a reinvigorated vitalism or vital materialism.²

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¹ William Little, Introduction to Sociology, Religion, Chapter 15, 2nd edition, BC Open Textbook Project, at www.opentextbook.ca/introductiontosociology2ndedition.

² N. Thrift, Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affects (London: Routledge, 2007).

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Introduction

The role of ideas and attitudes in determining the behavior of nations is an indicative factor in every international situation. Among characteristic ideologies appearing as a growing determinant of national action is the German ideology “Lebensraum”. It is one of those words which have been in the German language for a very long time, but which has been popularized by the Nazi politics lebensraum embedded, the conviction of nationalist socialists that nothing can save Germany except a genuine expansion which led to the single underlying cause of the second world war.

In the mid-19th century German geography entered into a sustained dialogue with Darwinian thoughts and ideas. On the other hand, how during a later stage this involved a contextual shift. It is however, important to consider the question of how specific geographical imagination became international with specific political imagination gathered or drawn together under the holistic concept of Lebensraum.

Before we proceed to investigating the formation of the concept of Lebensraum (in Ratzel and Rudolf Kjellen), it is very important to trace the geographical and historical context in which Ratzel’s ideas nurtured and flourished. According to Gliboff, the publication of Darwin’s classical “On the Origin of Species” did not go unnoticed by German geographers at that time. Oscar Peschel developed the term Lebensraum in order to translate Darwin’s hypothesis into geographical terms.³

Lebensraum is probably the best known of all twentieth century German political terms. Lebensraum was therefore successful according to two criteria of efficacy for political concepts: It helped to aggregate support for its employers, and it was accepted by those as a basis for policymaking. That disastrous consequences followed from its success stemmed from the lack

³ S. Gliboff, H. G. Bronn, and Ernst Haeckel, *The Origin of German Darwinism: A Study in Translation and Transformation* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2008).

of correspondence between the concept and the social reality that it was supposed to explain.⁴

Ratzel's Lebensraum had an immediate impact after 1901 among geographers, political scientists and anthropologists. The concept was incorporated by the Rudolf Kjellen into his theory of geopolitics, and was accepted by the German political geographer Karl Haushofer after 1918. It became a catchword of conservative politics in the 1920s as it was used to attack the Versailles Treaty for stealing living-space from the German Volk.⁵

The major impetus from Darwinian philosophy in the late 19th century was the idea of evolutionary change. In the Ratzelian political geography the question of continuous expansion was crucial in the rise of the great powers and the vitality of individual states.

The traces of "Intellectual History" argues that differences that were earlier understood to be part of religion, region and culture and could be resolved through conversions or long-term assimilation received the tag of race as a scientific and therefore superior way of explaining differences. Differences thus became immutable, fixed and non-alterable. Both these categories deeply corroded the enlightenment principles of equality and freedom as basic human rights.⁶

The thoughts developed by political thinkers at certain point of time e.g. Darwin, Ratzel and Kjellen and many others are indicative of the fact that anti-Semitism, racism and eugenics were complemented and culminated them into state doctrines, and how nations invariably used them to justify their dominance over the "others".⁷

Keeping in context the statement above the racist doctrine in Germany was the most important feature of the Nazi party, when it came to the question of survival or extinction, it was race that mattered in Nazi Germany. The dynamics of the rise and growth of Nazism can be understood in the volatile

⁴ Woodruff D. Smith, Friedrich Ratzel and the Origin of Lebensraum, *German Studies Review* 3, No.1 (Baltimore, Maryland, USA: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 52.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Vandana Joshi, *Revisiting Modern European History: 1789-1945* (Parson India Education Services Pvt. Ltd., 2017).

⁷ Ibid.

politics of anxiety of the interwar period, Nazi world view had racism, anti-Semitism, eugenics and Lebensraum at its core.

Historian Doris Bergen writes that, for Hitler, “‘race’ and ‘space’ (Lebensraum) were intertwined. Any race that was not expanding, was doomed to disappear. Without living space – land to produce food and raise new generations of soldiers and mothers – a race could not grow”.⁸

Hitler believed that the quest for “living space” for the Aryan race would ultimately lead to war, a consequence he welcomed. He believed that war was inevitable until the racially fittest national achieved complete supremacy.

If you think about ‘race’ and ‘space’, in the Nazi notion you can see not only accepted the possibility of the war but in fact hinges on the necessity of war. So how is a racial group supposed to expand? It had to conquer and expand its neighbors through war. The notion of racial superiority is based on expansion, growth, conquest and destruction of others. It is a kind of dynamics of conquest. The ideas of conquest and racial superiority really intertwined. Another important aspect of Nazi socialistic propaganda was “struggle”. They tended to divide the world into two conflicting groups ‘Aryans’ and ‘Jews’. Anti-Semitism was overt and ideological for members of the party and it retained in a ritualistic way in Nazi political philosophy.

In retrospect, by 1914, German strategists planned Lebensraum, and one of the main aims of World War I was the plan for Mitteleuropa, to create a German dominated Europe, war was an opportunity to grab territories in Eastern Europe for German settlement. The Nazi ideology twisted the original Ratzelian concept of 1901, which was based on the exact geographical area need to support a living species. “Hitler in his book *Mein Kampf* wrote that ‘Lebensraum’ was not simply about getting land but also about exterminating inferior races and guaranteeing the rise of the German master race”.⁹

⁸ Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 52.

⁹ D. C. Watt, and Ralph Manheim, *Hitler’s Mein Kampf* (London: Century Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1969).

The German novelist, Hans Grimm in his one of the most popular novels of the interwar period *Volk Ohne Raum*, or *People without Space* in 1926, clearly expressed radical conservative political stance similar in many ways to that of the Nazis. Equally important, it was a conscious exposition of a particular ideology of colonialism – an ideology with a long history in German political and imperialist thought termed as ‘migrationist colonialism’.¹⁰

Systematic comparison

Through the lenses of history, the science of the late 18th and 19th centuries were inextricably linked to the progress and so was essentially positive. We observe the events since and can raise ethical questions. Science itself is ethically neutral but when it was joined to a destructive ideology, its application became negative. This is true for geopolitics which is the science of the state. Karl Haushofer, the man who popularized the term *Lebensraum* and who distilled the geopolitical rules for success gave the science of geopolitics an altogether different meaning to fit into the Nazi scheme for expansion.

The essence drive from the work of Friedrich Ratzel and Rudolf Kjellen indicate that “states are not static entities, bounded by a given geography. Instead, they are living organisms (Ratzelian organic state theory) that grew or contracted, depending how they wielded” the spatial dynamics of power. The truth is more complicated than exaggerated taglines. Haushofer did not view the world through the same racist lenses as the Nazis did.

For Adolf Hitler, words were the only weapon capable of engendering the mass passions on which he fed emotionally. He was consumed by his burning passion and made “the aim of his political activity like the mass agitations, marches and the shouting of slogans the effects of which was to provide him with audiences, half ‘brain washed’ and easily awakened by the nationalist, racist passions”. So, he developed his own chosen ground, before his own chosen audience, turning into one of the most effective demagogues of the last century.

Hitler meant to save and preserve German culture, national identity amidst the counter-pressures of hostile nationalism abroad and cosmopolitan

¹⁰ Woodruff Smith, *The Colonial Novel as Political Propaganda: Hans Grimm’s Volk Ohne Raum*, proceedings of the meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society, Vol.8 (1985): 79-81.

subversion at home. A minute assessment of the political discourse of Hitler emphasizes the need to make Germany *bündnisfähig* (worthy of being an ally) through building her strength.

The underlying thinking of this *modus operandi* seems at first sight to be economic but a closer view reveals that it is actually embedded or bound up with Hitler's biological interpretation of the 'Aryan race' and state.

Hitler's political ideology is mirrored in today's India though its roots can be traced back in history to the 3rd Century B.C to the era of Chandragupta Maurya. The principles of Chandragupta's governance were very effective based on *Dandaniti* – the science of punishment.

According to the Oxford History of India, Aryan ideas and institutions have shown marvelous power and vitality in all parts of what was then India. Whether we consult the *Arthashastra* or the Greek authors, we receive the same impression of ruthless severity.¹¹ Now the question arises, how did the cynical policy taught in *Arthashastra* originate and gain wide acceptance? The answer is that the set of practical advice has a Vedic foundation based on the 4th Veda, the *Atharva*, a store house of sorcery.¹²

The evidences from recorded history entail that Nazi philosophy was based on biological superiority under "Aryan" and granted them (the Germans) superiority, and the right and obligation to rule other races and people. Today, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) draws its inspiration from Nazi philosophy of racial superiority by considering "Hindus" to be the purest race.

The *Telegraph* published a report in 2003 stating that the Hindu Fascists were preparing for the implementation of a *Hindutva* agenda all over India.¹³ Now 17 years down the road India is clearly showing the signs under Narendra Modi, how extremism has a well-planned, orchestrated, and deep penetration in the Indian political and social fabric. India is one of the countries in which fascist governance mentality, fascist social policies and fascist organizations are on the rise. In the Indian polity, this fascist mentality

¹¹ Smith A. Vincent, *The Oxford History of India*, ed. Percival Spear (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), 108.

¹² *Ibid*, 115.

¹³ *The Telegraph*, March 14, 2003.

had never ever been truly eradicated despite the new ideology of a secular India given by the founder of Modern India, namely Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Now under Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with the surge of Hindutva, a situation has arisen where the co-existence of other religions and cultures is becoming impossible. They now have quite alarming characteristics with the full backing of the masses. They are bent upon eliminating large minorities (Muslims and Christians) as Hitler did in the Nazi regime against Jews. Modi and the BJP are imposing a racist version of the Hindu ideology. This ideology is undoubtedly chauvinistic and very violent in its very nature, following in the footprints of Hitler.

The RSS turned to military training soon after its formation, much like its Italians and German counterparts. Mussolini's quasi-military "Black Shirts" and Hitler's SA – Sturmabteilung – Storm units. These organizations provided the blueprint for the new extremist theological organization Shakhis which has sprung up across India.¹⁴

Mussolini's Social Darwinist statements combined with a fascist's twisted outlook is embedded in the psyche of the RSS which is on the violent verge of radical and aggressive nationalist indoctrination. Hitler used race while the RSS and BJP under Modi are using religion, for igniting hatred for the others and thus spreading false superiority ideas. Nazi Germany attempted to dominate Europe and wanted to establish a German centered order. India likewise wishes to dominate South Asia and Pakistan is the biggest hurdle in its designs. German violent aspirations brought about unprecedented devastation killing and destruction in World War II. Likewise, Indian designs are burning India, destroying its social fabric and can culminate into the crushing defeat of the Indian socio-political system. The wildfire of racism and a sense of superiority may engulf the region, as Dr. Priyamvada Gopal states that a dangerous supremacist ideology is now out on streets, in Delhi.¹⁵ India is being converted into a carnage and inferno under hyper-nationalism.

¹⁴ Harun Yahya, *A Fascist Interpretation of Hinduism: The Hindutva Movement*, in *Islam and Far Eastern Religions* (Global Publishing, 2018), 138. Available at <https://www.scribd.com/book/381844288/Islam-and-Far-Eastern-Religions>.

¹⁵ Dr. Priyamvada Gopal, Cambridge University Lecturer, Interviewed, *International Herald Tribune*, March 10, 2020.

Hitler was essentially a “Manichean”, his views always assumed that it is possible for the devil (Jews for Hitler and for Modi Muslims) to win and the ‘Aryans’ to lose. Hitler’s political beliefs revolved around certain fallacies which included his profound belief that the creator of culture is nearly always an individual, and the German people are creators of culture being above the other races, above them the Nazi party embodying the leadership of the people and above them Führer, at the apex of the pyramid, while at the bottom were the Jews.¹⁶ These thoughts are identical with Modi’s ideology under BJP for ruling under the Hindu pernicious ideology and dominance.

The world is witnessing the re-birth of Hitler and his extremist ideology under Modi regime, not in the gestures but in the decision taking approach. It is a fact beyond any shred of doubt that fascism’s firm footprints have appeared in India with steady infiltration of all the instruments of state power, the erosion of civil liberties, day to day injustices fueled by feelings of national supremacy disillusionment.¹⁷

Soon after Modi was re-elected as Prime Minister of India, in the five years of first term and second term in power, hate crime against Muslims soared, data shows that some 90% of religious hate crimes in the last decade have occurred since Modi came to power.¹⁸

The empirical evidence of geopolitics suggests that around the end of the 19th century geographers in Europe give geopolitics a different twist Friedrich Ratzel studied the “Growth of State and laid down the laws through which states became great by grabbing” Lebensraum living space’ from weaker states.

Ratzel and Karl Haushofer took political geography out of the study and turned it into a tool of national policy. The old style was replaced by this new kind of approach “How can these conditions (of Lebensraum) enable the state to achieve its ends? It was more of a philosophy than a plan of action. It was like economics before Adam Smith or natural science before Darwin. Mackinder explains the strength of Germany’s geopolitical position and

¹⁶ D. C. Watt, *Hitler’s Mein Kampf* (Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1943), xxxvii.

¹⁷ Arundhati Roy, *Fascism’s Firm Footprints in India*, *The Nation*, September 30, 2002.

¹⁸ What a Rising Tide of Violence against Muslims in India says about Modi’s Second Term, *The Time Magazine*, June 28, 2019.

showed how it could strive for world conquest. These are historical connections bearing a lot of similarities and the bases of Nazi and Hindutva philosophy.

The anti-Jews stance of Hitler and the bloodshed inflicted on them is repeated by Modi against Muslims. Hitler's "Greater Germany" and Modi's "Greater India" were the influence of the Karl Haushofer school of thought "Lebensraum" the concept of living space, and in the case of India space only for Hindu, their religions, politico-cultural and all other aspect of governance.

The legacies of the founders of the German central order Rudolf Kjellen and Haushofer was manifested in Hitler's political ideology as narrated in his political autobiography *Mein Kampf* and it still survives today in the shape and form of grand theory of India. In which displays of power have gained primacy and acquired a stranglehold on the national psyche. Political competition became aggressive and public discourse abusive. They (minorities) now recognized that a large section of the populace swayed by Modi's populism and Hindu nationalism do want an India in which "majoritarianism" replaces "secularism".

Conclusion

In today's context, 'majoritarian fundamentalism' is the biggest threat to a world polity. Majoritarian refers to the idea that pre-existing ethnic, racial or religious majorities have a natural right to dominate a certain political entity. In the 21st century, how this sentiment became acceptable and the ultimate arbiter of political right, might and legitimacy, is alarming.

The world needs to redefine secularism. The existing framework, political terminology, logic and propaganda have become rather ineffective to encounter the majoritarian fundamentalism and its onslaught. The new generation does not understand the outdated paradigm of secularism. The present framework of secularism sounds dubious. If we take into consideration Europe's secularism, it was defined with reference to religion and the church since that was a primary source of non-political power, an alternative power structure to the state. In India, it is not only religion but caste structures that exercise power at every level.¹⁹

¹⁹ Growing Far Right Intolerance in India and around the World, *The Guardian*, September 23, 2019.

The brand of politics exercised in Indian is very dangerous for a nation, especially a nation as vast, diverse and complex as India. Narendra Modi represents a particular kind of nationalism-cum-populism that clearly has the potential to fragment a country irreversibly and would take it back to place where rights and freedom are arbitrarily-not-universally applied. India has entrenched an insidious form of Hindu nationalism that has allowed anti-Muslim, anti-Christian and anti-Dalit (lower caste) sentiments to flourish.²⁰

Modi epitomizes the kind of neo-fascist right-wing leadership that is sweeping across some parts of Europe, the US, Asia and even Africa where the likes of Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, Benjamin Netanyahu, Rodrigo Duterte and Jair Bolsonaro are imposing intolerant, highly regressive policies that polarize populations and create false “them” versus “us” narratives.

Those writing about the just ended decade will wonder why videos and images of Hitler started circulating on social media during this period and why posters against fascism appeared on the streets. The Telegraph, prominent Indian daily, in an editorial commented that the year 2019 was the proverbial *annus horribilis* for democracy in India as it declined 10 places in the annual Democracy Index ranking.

Brexit and neo-Nazi groups in Europe and the US have further fueled the idea that outsiders are to blame for a nation’s woes. Likewise, Hindutva has emboldened Hindu Chauvinists who no longer feel they need to hide their hatred for others races and religions. This is a clear sign of weakening of democratic institutions. Fascism, the exaltation of ethnicity, race, nation or religion above the rights of individual has become the new normal.

²⁰ Ibid.