

## Herr Ratzel Goes to Mexico: Colonialism, Race, and Travel Sketches from 1874-1875

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### Abstract

The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel visited Mexico between 1874 and 1875 and wrote journalistic travel sketches on Acapulco, Morelia, the Valley of Mexico, Oaxaca and Veracruz in a 400-page German language publication that is still awaiting a translation into English and further examination. This article is the first initiative to introduce Ratzel's Mexico work to the Anglophone world and aims to comment on his attitudes towards Latin America. His detailed descriptions of landscapes and cities, the meticulous observation of production processes (pulque, mescal, cochineals, tortillas, etc.) and the caustic comments on the Mexican population provide a portrait not only of Mexico, but also of nineteenth-century German colonial initiatives, racial prejudice and discourse on *civilization* and *Bildung*. Ratzel's travel sketches differ considerably from the more relativistic writings from earlier authors such as Alexander von Humboldt, Eduard Mühlentpfordt and Carl Sartorius and represent a valuable contribution to the understanding of Ratzel's complex personality and his academic trajectory as one of the most influential German geographers.

**Keywords:** Friedrich Ratzel, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico, travel accounts, Latin American culture, European colonialism.

Fifty years ago, scholarly attention directed at travelers and travel accounts from the nineteenth century was negligible and was accorded little importance or prestige. Starting in the late 1970s this began to change. By the 1980s, fueled by various "turns" and epistemological shifts in the social sciences and humanities, with resultant valorizations of place, space, and mobility among many other concerns, new fields of study such as post-colonialism emerged (Duncan & Gregory 1999). In these and other precincts, travel and its study went from marginal status to center stage. Amid the boom times for travel studies, the energy and industry of its practitioners, and its seemingly solid

stock, there are still vast sources out there that have scarcely been tapped. This is particularly true for Latin American materials, including geography and accounts by geographers.

In this context, Mexico stands out as a prominent example of a country that stimulated the imagination of a plethora of nineteenth-century writers from North America and Europe who studied the country's cultural, political and economic situation and did not shy away from expressing their personal opinion about land and life. In one of the earlier stock-takings of foreign travel literature on Mexico between 1810-1910, Harvey Gardiner (1952) compiled an impressive bibliography of almost 400 authors of diverse backgrounds and attitudes, ranging from soldiers, merchants, diplomats, noblemen, missionaries, doctors, nurses, artists, explorers, scientists to gold-diggers and adventurers, along with several geographers.

The list of writings included quite flamboyant accounts such as *Illustrated Notes of an Expedition through Mexico and California* by John Woodhouse Audubon (1852), the son of the famous painter and ornithologist John James Audubon, or the personal impressions of *Ten Years of My Life* by the exotic Princess zu Salm-Salm (1877), Agnes Elisabeth Winona Leclerc Joy, daughter of an Vermonter general and married to a Prussian soldier of fortune and aristocrat who served as a colonel in the Habsburger forces in Mexico between 1864 and 1867.

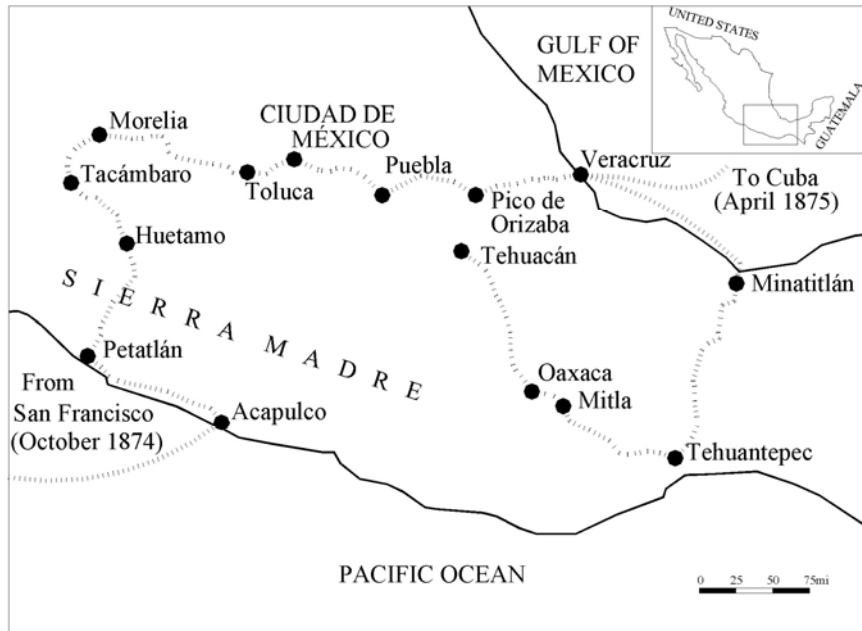
Many of these publications are still awaiting a closer analysis; some of them have never been translated from their original languages. Mexico not only has been a rich inspiration for travel accounts in past centuries, but also has provided a diverse database for mapping land and people, and for reflecting travelers' observations, be they mental, verbal or graphic. On the one hand, these travel accounts frequently reveal ordinary details of Mexican society, culture, politics, and everyday life that remained "invisible" to the Mexicans due to a lack of physical and psychological distance. On the other hand, these non-fictional writings on Mexico also serve as a window to the society of the foreign traveler since they "tell the reader as much about their authors as they do about the society they describe... a source for cultural and social history as well as a genre of literature" (Buchenau 2005, 4).

The writings of certain figures such as Alexander von Humboldt (1811a, 1811b), Eduard Mühlenpfordt (1844), and Carl Christian Sartorius (1859) have become staples of both anthologies and analyses and have been translated into several languages, while other prominent figures and their writings have largely escaped scrutiny. The aim of this paper is to focus on the account of one of these "forgotten" travel writers, the eminent geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1878a). In the following sections, we will present details of Ratzel's journey and comment on his observations of Mexican landscapes and cultures in order to open up a broader debate on the late-nineteenth-century German geographers in the context of colonial initiatives, racial prejudice and discourse on *Civilization* and *Bildung* (or educational formation). To our knowledge, these passages are the first English translations from the original German edition.

### Ratzel's forgotten Mexico work

It has been largely forgotten that Friedrich Ratzel traveled to Mexico in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. After completing his dissertation in zoology and his service in the Franco-Prussian War, Ratzel worked as a journalist for the *Kölnische Zeitung* reporting on German migration, first in Central Europe, then overseas (Wanklyn 1961; Buttmann 1977; Bassin 1987). Between 1873 and 1875 he traveled through the U.S. and Mexico, sending his travel impressions to the newspaper readers in regular intervals. Geographers such as Carl Sauer and André Sanguin feel that these “formative years” in journalism most likely turned Ratzel the zoologist into Ratzel the geographer (Sauer 1971; Sanguin 1990). Ratzel's New World travels resulted in the publication of two substantial volumes on the physical and cultural aspects of the U.S. with emphasis on the country's natural characteristics and economic conditions (Ratzel 1878b, 1880) and a slimmer volume (Ratzel 1876) containing “sketches of urban and cultural life in North America.” This latter book was translated into English in the late 1980s (Stehlin 1988). His travel sketches *Aus Mexico. Reiseskizzen aus den Jahren 1874 und 1875* comprised more than 400 pages and were published three years after his return to Germany (Ratzel 1878a). Ratzel wrote 12 chapters on his travel route and the places he visited and five more general essays on social conditions, education, history, potential for colonization, and the tropical characteristics of Mexico, followed by annotations, a comment on his cartographic material and an index from *Aasgeier* (scavenger vulture) to Zumpango.

The German geographer spent about six months in Mexico. He arrived in Acapulco on October 16, 1874 and departed the following spring from Veracruz, stopping off for a month in Cuba before returning to Europe in June, 1875. His travels in Mexico followed in Humboldt's footsteps along certain segments, but he also struck out on his own, traveling widely in Oaxaca and visiting the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to learn first-hand its potential as a transoceanic canal route (figure 1). Ratzel's travels in the United States were toward the end of the Reconstruction period, when the nation lurched abruptly from post-Civil War racial reform to a new regime of capitalist consolidation, modernization, and racial oppression. In many ways Mexico was undergoing a similar transition. By 1874 the racial and religious reforms initiated by the Zapotec Mexican President Benito Juárez, “the Abraham Lincoln of Mexico” had run their course, and his fellow Liberal Porfirio Díaz an apostle of Comtean Positivism, was positioning himself to become president for life and architect of Mexico's own forced modernization march. Richard Peet (1985, 310) has argued that these were watershed years not only for the formation of modern geography, but also a key moment in capitalism's transition to its monopoly phase. The conditions caused by the great Depression of 1873-1878 was simply the opening act in what would become industrial capitalism's chronic pattern of crises, but it no doubt tempered Ratzel's view of the scenes and situations that he encountered in North America. Peet (1985, 309) further argued that these



**Figure 1:** Map of Ratzel's travels

years saw a new imperialism burst forth as “the urgent moment of sociopolitical necessity,” that Social Darwinism served as a “compelling ideology of an [newly formed] imperial capitalism,” and that environmental determinism became a guiding light in the formation of the new geography. While it is beyond the immediate scope of this paper, Ratzel's Mexican sojourn might be profitably examined through the lens that Peet provides. We have concentrated primarily on Ratzel's national character and racist comments and generalizations. Ratzel's Mexican observations and sentiments as reflecting currents of Spencerian and errant Darwinian thought also deserve interrogation.

In his book, Ratzel presents a wide range of topics and themes, ranging from detailed descriptions of landscapes such as lush tropical forests and dry and desolate lands dominated by spiny cacti to meticulous sketches of Mexican towns and cities including México City, Puebla, Toluca, Morelia, Veracruz and Oaxaca to exhaustive observations of production processes (for example, the distillation of mescal) and caustic comments on the Mexican population. Ratzel's style is journalistic and aggressive: he wrote what his German newspaper readers wanted to read. Despite his lively and evocative style of writing, he did not include any drawings or engravings in his book, except a general map of Mexico (figure 2).

The map, at a 1 to 13.5 million scale, shows the main Mexican towns (abbreviated by initial letters) and their altitudes, the railway line from Mexico City to Veracruz, the main water courses, and, in Humboldtian fashion, a green



**Figure 2:** Map of Mexico from Ratzel's *Aus Mexiko*

line at the 1000 m contour, separating the *tierra caliente* from the *tierra templada* and *tierra fria* (figure 3).

Ratzel used the map in order to point out Mexico's land conditions "in a clear and neat way" (Ratzel 1878a, 420). However, the map looks somewhat incomplete. Besides these general aspects, no further details on the country are provided and Ratzel's travel route is not indicated. On the bottom of the map sheet, seven vertical cross-sections of different Mexican regions are added in order to illustrate the orographic conditions in Mexico.

In 1969 a new German edition of the book was published (Ratzel 1969). More recently, a reprint of the original text has appeared on amazon.com (Ratzel 2010). However, Ratzel's Mexico work has never been translated into English. Only two Anglophone geographers have even commented on Ratzel's Mexican text. Harriet Steers, one of Ratzel's biographers, reviewed the German re-edition in the early 1970s (Steers 1970). In her favorable review, she praised the book as "thought out and put together with the thoroughness and detail of German scholars of the period" and a careful study "of underdeveloped societies, a good half-century before the term 'underdevelopment' became part of political and economic terminology" (Steers 1970, 456). Some-



an observer, who, without the scientific and literary equipment, traveled through some of the most interesting and not so frequently visited parts of the country, with the conscience of the great importance of these conditions and with the desire to see independently and clearly, in order to work out descriptions that were to be published in the entertainment section [feuilleton] of the *Kölnische Zeitung* (Ratzel, 1878a, vi).

For Ratzel, making personal and “unbiased” observations would make his travel account “impartial” and “trustworthy,” but not rigorously scientific:

For this reason, these sketches do not file any other claim than the immediate impression because only personal observation were to be given; [it is also] the claim of impartiality, because without prejudices was I able to travel through a country that I could leave at a determined moment and that could only awake my interest as an object of observation; and [it is also] a claim of trustworthiness, because all that was not supposed to be observed and explored exactly, has been left out. In the same way as I had not been thinking about becoming a professor one day when I wrote these sketches, they do not convey anything of a scholarly work (Ratzel, 1878a, vi-vii).

Despite these justifications, Ratzel does not follow a straight line in his writing. On the one hand, his travel impressions are filled with images of nature, aesthetic prose, and poetical metaphors, but on the other hand, especially in the second part that deals with the social and natural aspects of Mexico in general terms, he quotes from commercial reports, scientific dissertations on vegetation and climate, and demographic data. In his book, Ratzel appears both as a philosophical traveler heavily influenced by Romanticism and an emerging nationalistic political geographer, reconnoitering foreign countries to provide concrete details on land and life and the conditions for emigration.

Until recently, only a single chapter of his Mexican sketches (on the region of Oaxaca) had been translated into Spanish (Ratzel 2001). In 2009 a complete translation of his book was published in Mexico (Ratzel 2009). To date, Ratzel’s impressions of Mexico have been absent from debates on the history of geographical thought and in Latin Americanist geography. One can only speculate about the reasons of this silence with regards to Ratzel’s observations on Mexico. While other *Ratzelian* ideas easily have found a good reception in Mexico and the U.S., the Mexican sketches show Ratzel as a conservative, nationalist, and Protestant in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism. He was active in the search for space for German emigrants, and considered them culturally “superior” to the Mexicans, who in the majority were the product of miscegenation of Spanish, Indian and African blood. Ratzel compared the Mexican conditions to the more “advanced” European cultures. Here he

juxtaposed Mexican “demi-culture” (*Halbcultur* - literally “half-culture”), the heritage from the ancient indigenous civilizations, to the German concept of *Bildung*, the cultural formation of a nation based on rigorous philosophical and educational principles. He was strongly swayed by what he had seen in the U.S. For him, the U.S. was a country whose wide and open spaces had been subdued through the power and determination of the settlers.

In order to illustrate Ratzel’s ideas on daily life, culture, and race in Mexico, we will comment on several translated text passages from *Aus Mexiko* (quotes will be indicated as AM with respective page numbers) in the remainder of this paper.

### **Ratzel’s view of Mexican land and life**

In the preface of his book Ratzel emphasized the peculiarity and uniqueness of Mexico’s physical landscapes compared to other parts of Latin America, while noting that the more moderate climates in the *altiplanos* are not so different from the European conditions. For Ratzel, the favorable climate and soil conditions and consequent cultural relations make these lands “appear highly worthy of European interest” (AM, iii). Probably it was in his travel writings on North America and Mexico that he mentioned for the first time the term *geographische Lage* that he would develop in detail in his *Political Geography* more than a decade later. Ratzel wrote that “[d]ue to the strong influence of its [geographic] position (*Lage*) and the character of its soils, its nature, owing to their tropical and subtropical climates, makes Mexico one of the most diversified places known on Earth” (AM, iii).

Like many other German travelers in the Humboldtian tradition, Ratzel provided detailed landscape descriptions that sounded like pieces of poetry and reflected his enthusiasm for hiking and his romanticist appreciation of nature in the Alps as can be seen in his books *Wandertage eines Naturforschers* (“Hiking days of a scientist of nature,” Ratzel 1873) and *Über Naturschilderung* (“About the description of nature,” Ratzel 1904).

During his trip through Mexico, Ratzel describes in detail the landscapes he traversed on horseback, in a coach or on a train, from tropical lowlands to desert plateau landscapes to lofty mountain ranges. In his writings, Ratzel switches easily between scientific descriptions of landforms and plant life to aesthetic, almost poetic musings. For example, when following the shoreline on the Pacific coast close to Acapulco, Ratzel first explains the physical aspects on the dune landscape and then directs his attention to botanic species and their colorfulness in the coastal setting:

From the slope of the hill the path leads directly down to the dunes, and on a tough one-and-a-half daytrip one continuously rides on the seashore. First the path goes through deep sand, but soon the coast gets higher and lingers on as a broad sandspit between the sea and the lagoon. It covers itself with short grass which, further inland, is mixed up with cacti that associate with bushes and palms. This way, the



sandspit gains a peculiar vegetation character. Very close to these sand hills, against which the waves hit, short grass appears in which red bindweeds and low-growing golden mimosas entangle their fluorescent colors (AM, 34).

However, in the following paragraphs, Ratzel seamlessly changes the topic and provides a detailed description of different cactus species and how they adapt to the soil.

Ratzel's ascent of the highest peak of Mexico, the Pico de Orizaba evokes Humboldt's frustrated attempt to climb the Chimborazo in 1802 (Humboldt 1837). Symbolically this trip to the top of the volcano stands for the conquest of nature. On the path to the peak, Ratzel and his companions stop at a cave and contemplate the "wild" mountain setting. The place offers a panoramic view of the mountain landscape:

The south front of the mountain, around which at about 2000 feet from the top a dense snow cover was laid out, pointed into our direction. Facing to the east, the profile of this gigantic pyramid was very steep and with few interruptions in the slope that according to our estimates had [an inclination of] 30 to 35 degrees. This [slope] was here and there broken by rock slides and short ridges. In the west, the mountain descends far gentler and shows us a soft profile line so that one can have the best hope for the success of our ascent (AM, 145)

In other passages, Ratzel openly demonstrates his interest in the vegetation and is unable to hide his training in botany. He is particularly fascinated by cacti which he describes meticulously:

In the landscape [the cacti] rarely appear as beautiful and sublime rather than as grotesque. Only the huge columnar cacti which frequently and without entanglement rise to a height of ten or twenty feet are beautiful. In first place I think about the six- and eight-sided ones whose columns gain a strong vertical structure that is not less appealing than the Ionian columns due to their sharp edges and the deep furrows.

[The traveler] who has traveled through the Mexican west coast around Acapulco will not forget how important those green columns appear where they rise unexpectedly and strangely with their simple, regular and almost crystalline beauty from the confused and confusing jungle shrubbery like remaining remnants of a quieter, simply more beautiful but also more static nature (AM, 259)

The description of landscapes is purposeful. Ratzel provides general aspects of landforms, delves into the "architecture" of cacti and then relates these topics to their use in everyday life. It is a short step from the detailed rendering

of agaves and prickly pears to the production of mescal and cochineal. As for the production of the red dye, Ratzel makes the following observations:

The opuntia (nopal in Mexican) on which the cochineal insect dwells, is planted in hedges that intersect in a right angle at a distance of 60 to 80 feet so that they form squares.... Within these [squares], about 400 opuntia cuttings are planted which one does not let grow above four feet so that both weeding and harvesting could be done without difficulties at any time. Also, in order to keep away the insects, all the blossoms are plucked as soon as they grow. As soon as the nopal is reasonably rooted and juicy, one can settle it with a colony of cochineal insects (AM, 265)

On his trip from Acapulco to Morelia, Ratzel passes a large number of small isolated properties, each with the facilities to distill mezcal so that Ratzel had the opportunity to observe all the steps of its production:

On the drier hill slopes where the mezcal plant, the maguey (*Agave Mexicana*) grows, I saw climbing men who carried knives on long sticks with which they chopped off the thorny agave leaves down to their hearts. The hearts of the plants, that are the size of large cabbage heads, are then cut off and are roasted in a pit that is walled up with rocks and heated up through previous firing; the heat is preserved by a thick layer of earth. These roasted parts of the plant will be crushed, mixed with water, and then left for fermentation in open vessels that usually are made of cow skins, finally [they] are submitted to the distillation in clay or wooden bladders that are partially coated with copper (AM, 53-54).

Ratzel does not mention if he tasted the mezcal or not. However, he brings up the regular, every-day food that Mexicans eat. As for the tortilla, he states that as the basis of a meal, tortillas are, without doubt, tasteful, since they satisfied his hunger in many occasions – different from the chili pepper and the dried meat that looked like “dark-brown pitch” and was cut into half-tough cakes or straps that tasted like wood (AM, 33). Ratzel lamented the slow and inefficient process of soaking the corn in water, squeezing out the mash and forming round pancakes that are heated up on a clay plate. This way the woman at work turned into a characteristic element in a typical Mexican home “like the man who cultivates his rest in a hammock” (AM, 33). The German geographer questioned the pre-industrial and time-consuming mode of production which prevented the women from doing other things and achieving “a more efficient order in housekeeping” (AM, 33). For Ratzel, “these tortillas can only augment the obnoxious frugality and lack of necessity of the population” (AM, 33).

### Ratzel's national pride and prejudice

Ratzel's accounts of landscapes and daily life could be considered as inter-cultural encounters from an ethnocentric perspective, taking into consideration the political, social and economic situation in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. However, Ratzel gets more aggressive and offensive when he deploys concepts such as culture, race and *Bildung*. Anticipating his later concerns with human-environment interactions, Ratzel establishes a link between land and people when he argues that the natural diversity not only in Mexico but in Latin America in general inevitably includes a wide range of different human beings:

Indians, European whites and Negroes are mingled under the most different conditions and this determines the highly diverging variations of their physical and mental traits and activities... Nowhere else can one observe so many different varieties of the human family in such a small area, nowhere else is there such a good opportunity to study the results of their physical and mental interrelations (AM, iv).

Ratzel, however, makes clear that the European influence is not homogeneous, but of different quality, ranking German, British and even American culture as the foremost civilizations, while the Spanish cultural influence is contemptuously seen as "barbaric" and of no benefit for the ancient Pre-Columbian "half cultures." Different from "vigorous" European cultures and "superior heritage" such as the German, French or English, Spain did not belong to the "healthiest branch" of European civilization. For Ratzel, the Spanish colonizers symbolized the cultural regression in Europe that was responsible for the development of *Halbculturen* in the New World. In other words, "[i]n reality, it is only a barbaric degeneration (*Entartung*) of these forms that grew here under conditions that are poor at stimulating work and rich in forces that nourish the lower and sensual passions" (AM, iv).

Ratzel admired Mexico for its Aztec and Maya past that "bestows dignity" to its *Cultur*, or better *Halbcultur*, for which other countries in Latin America, like Ecuador and Colombia, would strive in vain (AM, 1). Ratzel blames the Spanish culture for this "lack of civilization," since Spain possessed the largest number of barbaric-like elements or mentalities of all European peoples (AM, 12-13). As a result of this, they "amalgamate best with the colored into a mash of peoples whose signature is the *Halbcultur*, or if one wants, *Halbbarbarei*. Mental life stagnates in its productivity, through the mestizo's and Indian's effort to aspire to the European and North American examples" (AM, 13). The German geographer holds the creole population with their "lassitude and extravagance" for the lack of cultural development in Mexico and Latin America:

The lack of a true culture and of a pure mind and character hardly has taken more revenge upon a people like the branch of the Spanish that had been transplanted to America through a continuous emigration.

The children wasted what their parents had acquired, and adopted habits and mentalities that must have been an abhorrence to them, and stood up against them in arms, as soon as the flag of revolution had been raised (AM, 317).

Ratzel is not against miscegenation of races per se, but expresses his own moral concerns about the Mexican society whose “only problem is that the mestizos show a strong and general inclination to turn into debased whites” (AM, 315). Continuing his critique, Ratzel sees Mexico’s situation as a caricature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture (AM, 327) and condemns the behavior of the mulatto and mestizo

...who is lacking the salubrious sense of inferiority which turns the average negro and Indian into useful and tolerable humans. Rarely has he got the gifts of the whites, but almost always he adopts the whites’ racial pride in an elevated degree, the desire to be as he is and to do as he does. He is simply an upstart. In particular, like among all other lower races, he is not lacking intelligence, but just character (AM, 315).

Ratzel goes even further when he admits that he would prefer a dog to a human travel companion in Mexico, since “the servant (*mozo*) is annoying when chatty, and boring when stupid” (AM, 50). This remark is followed by a long paragraph describing the virtues of a dog: “Even when he is tired and trots behind with a drooping tail and his tongue hanging out, he is still entertaining with his expression of misery” (AM, 50).

In making these extreme characterizations, Ratzel had in mind his favorable impressions of the prosperous and dynamic U.S. that he visited before going to Mexico. In the beginning of his Mexican sketches, he praised the U.S. where “so many novelties and significant things” were happening and where the population showed “so much activity and industry so that it is impossible to overlook it” (AM, 2) – in opposition to the harsh and “underdeveloped” Mexican reality:

How different do we view Mexico! With all its history and all its treasures, it doesn’t have more weight on the balance... than a hundred years ago. It is probable that it appeared more promising, both economically as a part of the Spanish colonial power, and politically during the years of its battles for independence, than it does today. In our times it offers a strange example of stagnation, if not regression, amidst the high tide of progressing development that characterizes our century, whereas we view the United States of North America, with the interest that a sprightly man evokes who employs all of his rich strengths to reach certain aims. In the face of the Mexican confusion

and hopelessness, we sometimes feel the desire to turn away from such an unpleasant spectacle, like being in front of the bed of a delirious person who throws himself from one side to the other in purposeless desperation (AM, 2-3).

Mexico seems like a hopeless case or a patient with a terminal disease due to its “lack of growth and invigorating and enriching rejuvenation... a lower stage of life, in a vegetating state that conserves itself, but does not progress” (AM, 3). At times Ratzel is conscious that he uses his own cultural background as a yardstick to classify Mexico and the Mexicans and asserts that

We are pampered by the vigorous and fructiferous life of peoples that we see around us in Northern Europe. For this reason, one should ratchet down the criteria for Spanish and Portuguese conditions and not look at Mexico directly from Western and Central Europe or North America (AM, 3).

For his summary evaluation of Mexico as a destination for German immigrants, Ratzel’s final word is not favorable, although he knows that Germans, Americans and Chinese represent strong migratory groups that could have a considerable influence on the process of cultural development and the political and social entanglements and provoke conflicts with the native populations:

Still today it is boiling from El Paso to Patagonia as a result of the first isolated encounter of extremely different elements, and there will not be a lack of more violent reactions that could have negative consequence and be a lesson at the same time (AM, v).

Ironically Ratzel’s comments sound like harbingers of the future American political and economic exploits abroad. He concludes that the salvation (*das Heil*) for Mexico can only come from North America and that “a further trimming from the North can only be an advantage for the Republic of Mexico” (AM, 372). For Ratzel, the North Americans “are fitter than any European people to finish the conquest of Mexico for cultural reasons, partially through brute force, partially through liveliness and intelligence.” (AM, 373).

### **Reading Ratzel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Friedrich Ratzel’s travel sketches from Mexico may have been forgotten for a long time due to its nationalistic and one-sided contents. However, re-reading Ratzel’s statements after more than a century has become a fascinating study of racism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, and imperialism. With his derogatory comments on Mexican culture, politics and ethnic configurations, the belittling of the country’s battle for independence, and the portrait of the Mexicans as corrupt, incompetent and indolent, Ratzel gives a lively example of

jingo geography (Blaut 1969), outdoing “even the most strident of the North American visitors on our list, setting up a model of disparagement” (Siemens 1990, 32).

It would be interesting to compare Ratzel's Mexico experience to his observations about the U.S. For Ratzel, the favorable conditions for cultural assimilation and “feeling-at-home” are far more important and decisive than the existence of good agricultural lands. In the case of Mexico, the wealth of natural resources and fertile soils is not enough to recommend the country as a destination for German emigration due to the social peculiarities and the political situation of Mexico that would not let the German settlers feel “at home” (AM, 370). On the other hand, the U.S. offer a far more familiar base for emigrants, since “the German [citizen] who goes to the U.S. finds there a people related to his own Germanic origin” (AM, 418-419). Ratzel alludes to cultural traits that Germany and the U.S. have in common. Language, customs, habits, and ways of life are similar and reconcilable, and can easily be assimilated so that the German could “quickly amalgamate with the American and easily turn into a Brother Jonathan” (AM, 419). As for the Mexicans, the “pure indigenous or half-bred character of its people” (AM, 419), its customs, and language represent almost unbridgeable differences.

To date, the recent publication of the first translation of his book into Spanish has provoked rather mild reactions among Latin American historians and geographers (Busto Ibarra 2010; López 2010; Padilla 2010; Ulloa 2010) despite Ratzel's verbal (and viral) attacks on Latin American culture and race. The reading of his book is at the same time both attractive and repulsive (Bartra 2011). On the one hand, Ratzel's description of landscapes and cultural habits are of “a vivacity and mastery not devoid of ingeniousness” (Bartra 2011) in such a way that his writing has been compared to the visual language of picture postcards and art paintings (Padilla 2010). On the other hand, there is a “disturbing racist streak that as we know it can reach catastrophic extremes” (Bartra 2011).

Ratzel's travel impressions of Mexico and the U.S. reflect perhaps more than anything the *Zeitgeist* of a newly unified Germany and an empire in the making. Unlike an earlier generation of German geographers and travelers with both liberal sympathies and keen eyes for lifeways and landscapes, such as Humboldt and Sartorius, Ratzel was not at odds with German chauvinism or its imperialist ambitions. For today's post-colonial geographers, Ratzel's sketches reveal as much about Ratzel himself, as they do about Mexico.

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