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# THE VALUE OF SPACE: GEOPOLITICS, GEOGRAPHY AND THE AMERICAN SEARCH FOR INTERNATIONAL THEORY IN THE 1950S.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, the United States was coming to terms with its new international role after the Second World War. For the American Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the political changes following the global conflict required new theoretical foundations of the study of international relations, and for this purpose a group of multi-disciplinary scholars gathered in 1953 under the council's auspices. Unlike a similar group organized by the Rockefeller Foundation, the CFR group failed to come up with a coherent theory of international relations and its work was consigned into oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

The CFR group's research secretary, a relatively unknown scholar named George A. Lipsky, selected themes deemed relevant for the foundation of international theory. One of these themes was geography and geopolitics. The choice reflected the prominence of these subjects in mid-century American politics, when politicians and the general public alike started to pay greater attention to the role of the physical geographical environment in shaping world affairs and foreign policy strategy. President Roosevelt was one of the first promoters of cartographic and geographical knowledge in foreign policy making and communicating.<sup>2</sup> Geographer Isaiah Bowman enjoyed a considerable political influence and helped formulate the United States' vision of a post-war order.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the study group chose to discuss geopolitics and geography as a topical and popular approach to the analysis of international relations.

Nonetheless, the reception of geopolitics and geography at the study group was icy. The discussion was based on Lipsky's research paper, which reflected an unconcealed aversion towards spatial thinking: 'political geography is used strictly to refer to the genuine descriptive science, which avoids gigantic generalizations embodying long-range prophecies cloaking a kind of religious aspiration', while 'geopolitics is used to designate the pseudo-science of geography applied in the single cause explanation of human affairs'.<sup>4</sup> Political geography was helpful – if banal – tool to understand the relations between politics and the natural environment; Geopolitics was to be excluded from any scientific approach to international theory. Thus, in the final session, where

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nicolas Guilhot, (ed.) *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah Bowman, *The New World; Problems in Political Geography*, 4th ed. (Yonkers-on-Hudson, N.Y.: World Book Company, 1928); Neil Smith, "Bowman's New World and the Council on Foreign Relations," *Geographical Review* 76, 4 (1986): 438–60.

<sup>4</sup> References are to the new edition of the minutes, edited by David McCourt (Michigan University Press, 2019), 227.

members sought to conclude their works and consider the foundations of international theory, there was no reference to either geography or geopolitics.

Wariness towards spatial thinking in international theory outlasted the group's discussions. Recently, Harvey Starr, a leading International Relations (IR) scholar, proposed spatial theory as a means to revive the conceptual foundations of the discipline of IR. On April 4, 2013, in his Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association in San Francisco, Starr advocated for a serious consideration of space and place in IR.<sup>5</sup> He replicated the common repudiation of 'deterministic' and 'immutable' geopolitics, in favour of a *dynamic* version. The juxtaposition of time and space, the involuntary and universal temporality and the voluntary localised spatiality of politics, could provide, for him, a sustainable theoretical renewal for IR. Starr's public call for spatial thinking in IR suggests that space is *not* a commonly used theoretical lens in the field today. His address proved that key concepts, notably 'space', 'place', and 'geopolitics', are still in need of 'introduction' into international theory. Most IR scholars today – regardless of their theoretical and normative assumptions – still do not think seriously about space.

Why was space downplayed by the 1953 study group? As a heterogeneous group of scholars, their theoretical and normative assumptions were more diverse than the realist and behavioralist approaches that eventually predominated in IR. Their pluralistic and multi-disciplinary background suggests that they could have been willing to think about space seriously. Yet they analysed geopolitical and spatial thinking from a misguided moralistic viewpoint that missed their theoretical potential. They identified two main problems with geopolitics: it was too deterministic, and it was too 'ideological', or in other words too closely tied to a rigid and intolerant worldview advocating expansionism and imperialism. Natural determinism and ideological commitment thus limited, for them, the interpretative and analytical power of geopolitics. Rather than investigating the full scope of geopolitical and geographical scholarship in American international studies at the time, the study group reduced existing literature to a simplistic narrative and missed an opportunity to integrate it into the nascent discipline of IR.

In this article, I seek to address two key issues. First, I explore the study group's interpretation of spatial thinking and offer counter examples in the form of three American mid-century approaches to geopolitics. I suggest that by mischaracterising the spatial thought available at the time, the study group missed a wide range of geopolitical ideas that could have contributed to the formation of a pluralistic and diverse theoretical foundation for IR. These ideas, I suggest, can still serve IR scholars today. I discuss three 'modes' of geopolitical thinking, which I define as power-based, pluralistic and possibilist. The first two are represented, respectively, by the subjects of the CFR investigation, Nicholas John Spykman and Hans Weigert. In my analysis, I seek to show that their ideas were not, as the study group suggested, deterministic, but offered a more nuanced analysis of the interplay of nature and power. The third mode, proposed by Harold and Margaret Sprout, is offered as an example of one of many geopolitical approaches ignored by the study group.

Second, I propose to employ the marginalisation of spatial thinking in mid-century American IR as an intellectual springboard for thinking about the value of space in international theory. My

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey Starr, "On Geopolitics: Spaces and Places," *International Studies Quarterly*, 2013.

brief examination of three different modes of spatial thinking does not aim at providing a complete or exhaustive account of geopolitical ideas, but at drawing on mid-century geopolitical thinkers to outline a reflection on the analytical potential of spatial theory in IR today.

## Part 1: GEOPOLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE US

The quest for new theoretical foundation for the study of international relations encouraged many American scholars to seek inspiration in other disciplines, such as geopolitics and political geography. Nonetheless, American political geographers, or scholars who used geographic ideas to study international relations, were adamant to distance themselves from the German school of *Geopolitik*, that in the American public imaginary was associated with the Nazi new world order of exploitation and expansion.<sup>6</sup> Despite their efforts, the intellectual conversation between geopolitical thinkers in the two countries dated back at least half a century, and was important to the development of geopolitical concepts.

Geopolitical ideas gained interest in the United States at the turn of the century as Fredrick Jackson Turner and Alfred T. Mahan used geopolitical terms to explain the history and politics of the United States.<sup>7</sup> Turner's frontier theory and Mahan's sea power vision ignited the imagination of later geopolitical thinkers in the US and Germany alike. The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel developed the idea of *Lebensraum*, the living space of the German people, to counterbalance what Mahan described as American naval supremacy.<sup>8</sup> Ratzel found inspiration in biology and Darwinist evolutionary theories to describe politics in organic terms, and later his ideas influenced Karl Haushofer, who became a prominent geopolitical scholar in Nazi Germany. Ratzel's theories and made their way to the United States through one of his disciples, Ellen Churchill Semple, whose own followers included the young geographer Isaiah Bowman.<sup>9</sup> While Semple has often been associated with Ratzel's deterministic geopolitics, her earlier works embraced a more nuanced spatial analysis, attuned to the complex interplay of nature and power and similar to the notion of 'milieu', that, as we shall see, was embraced by the Sprouts.<sup>10</sup>

The interplay of natural environment and political power was also a main concern for the British geographer Halford Mackinder. In 1904, he spoke before the Royal Geographical Society to warn his British audience of the risks that a land-based empire in Russia might pose.<sup>11</sup> For the first time in the modern era, he argued, it was possible to reveal the 'geographical causations of universal history'.<sup>12</sup> He used maps to explicate his main theoretical contribution, the notion of the

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, *American Empire*, 274; Hans Werner Weigert, *Generals and Geographers; the Twilight of Geopolitics* (New York, 1942).

<sup>7</sup> A. T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (London, 1905); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1947).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, *Anthropo-Geographie* (Stuttgart, 1882).

<sup>9</sup> Lucian M. Ashworth, "Mapping a New World: Geography and the Interwar Study of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2013): 138–149.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Ellen Churchill Semple, *American History and its Geographical Conditions* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1903). Scholars still debate Semple's determinism. As Ashworth suggests, Semple's affirmation in 1911, that 'history tends to repeat itself largely owing to this steady, unchanging geographic element', indicates a commitment to geographic determinism. See Ashworth, 'Mapping a New World', 141.

<sup>11</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, 4 (1904): 421–37.

<sup>12</sup> Mackinder, 422.

‘Heartland’, or geographical ‘Pivot’, a land mass stretching from the Balkans through Russia to the Arctic Sea. This was the geographic basis of the land power, which was opposed by a technologically-savvy and industrially-advanced sea power. Mackinder’s geopolitical thought sought to help Britain formulate a new strategy in an interconnected closed system where European empires competed for political and military hegemony. While Mackinder elaborated more complex geographical theses in his lengthier works, notably *Britain and the British Seas* (1902) and *The Rhine* (1908), he remained mostly known for his Pivot article, which dealt with the world-spanning implications of geography for the quest of political power.<sup>13</sup> It is almost exclusively to this article that mid-century American readers of Mackinder referred to, and the study group members were no exception. The selective international reception of Mackinder thus contributed to the simplification of geopolitical theory and facilitated its association with a specific, rigid worldview, pejoratively described as an ‘ideology’.

It took almost two decades for the idea of the ‘Heartland’ to attain the attention of politicians and the general public. The question of territoriality that accompanied the Paris Treaty of 1919 gave new impetus to Mackinder’s geopolitical ideas.<sup>14</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, Mackinder’s ideas set the terms for geopolitical debate in the United States, but also in Nazi Germany.<sup>15</sup> To his indignation, Mackinder exerted a great influence on the German geographer Karl Haushofer who outlined *Geopolitik* as a scientific discipline and a national policy.<sup>16</sup> His *Geopolitik* blended political strategy and spatial theory to produce expansionist and racialised interpretations of *Lebensraum*, land and , autarky and the idea of pan-regionalism. Beyond Mackinder’s theory, he also found inspiration in other geographers, such as Ratzel, Mahan as well as Isaiah Bowman and his survey *The New World* (1921).<sup>17</sup> Presented as a scientific study of the geographic conditions of politics, Bowman’s book advanced a new interpretation of the relation between humanity and nature, which was received with enthusiasm by political and military leaders, as well as the American public.<sup>18</sup>

Bowman, one of the founders of the Council on Foreign Relations, was a keen promoter of the study of geography in the United States, and an enthusiast of American political and moral exceptionalism.<sup>19</sup> He was a close advisor for President Roosevelt and enjoyed significant influence on the State Department.<sup>20</sup> He was hardly satisfied of the intellectual connection between him and Haushofer’s geopolitical endeavours. He outlined what later became a common argument in the debate on geography and geopolitics: the study of political geography is a legitimate scientific practice, because untainted by ‘ideological’ concerns that, he argued, shaped geopolitical research. The implicit message was that geopolitics advanced a specific ideology, the imperial and expansionistic worldview of Nazi Germany. Haushofer’s ideas were often presented, somewhat

<sup>13</sup> Halford Mackinder, *Britain and the British Seas* (London: Heinemann, 1902); Halford Mackinder, *The Rhine, Its Valley and History* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1908).

<sup>14</sup> Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (London: Constable, 1919).

<sup>15</sup> Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik Der Pan-Ideen* (Berlin: Zentral-Verlag, 1931); Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire*, chap. 1; Luna Sabastian, “Spaces on the temporal move: Weimar Geopolitik and the vision of an Indian science of the state, 1924–1945”, *Global Intellectual History*, 3, 2 (2018), 231–253

<sup>17</sup> Bowman, *The New World; Problems in Political Geography*.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *American Empire*, 441.

<sup>19</sup> Ashworth, “Mapping a New World.”

<sup>20</sup> Smith, “Bowman’s New World and the Council on Foreign Relations.”

simplistically, as the ‘pseudoscientific’ foundation for Hitler’s foreign policy.<sup>21</sup> Despite Bowman’s claims, many saw him as the ‘American Haushofer’, who provided an intellectual connection between geographical studies in Germany and in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, historians have shown that Bowman’s geographical scholarship was not a neutral analysis: its implicit aim was to carve up a new geopolitical space for the United States as a leader of a new global economic and political system.<sup>23</sup>

Growing tensions between the German and American interpreters of geopolitical ideas did not deter Robert Strausz-Hupé, one of the study group members, from arguing that the study of geopolitics in America was still intellectually worthwhile. In his book *Geopolitics* he surveyed German scholarship in order to offer his American readership a new way of studying international relations, a ‘radical break from the European legal tradition of nineteenth century diplomacy’.<sup>24</sup> As his own work sought to show, there might still be value in spatial thinking, if distinguished from its German, expansionist version. Seemingly unaware of his own bias towards American exceptionalism, Strausz-Hupé argued that American geopolitics was a new – ‘scientific’ - version of *Geopolitik* in sharp contrast to Hitler’s expansionist and immoral ‘ideology’.<sup>25</sup>

Bowman, Mackinder, Strausz-Hupé and Weigert were part of a group of scholars who advanced the idea of geopolitics as the study of ‘dynamic phenomena’.<sup>26</sup> By emphasising change, mutability and instability in the interaction between politics and geography, they sought to undermine natural determinism. Geopolitics helped them conceptualize the main characteristic of states as, paradoxically, their instability, which resulted from the constant need to respond to natural, political and social challenges.<sup>27</sup> Yet their aversion towards ‘ideology’, seen as an inherently negative, rigid and oppressive worldview opposed to ‘American values’, did not render their own geopolitical visions value-neutral. Rather, as we shall see, the search for a scientific or value-free study of space was accompanied by an equally potent drive to position the United States as a global political leader.<sup>28</sup>

## 2: GEOGRAPHY AND GEOPOLITICS AT THE CFR STUDY GROUP

Understanding the ambivalent reaction to spatial thinking at the CFR study group, requires an examination of the research paper drafted by Lipsky, which sought to link geographical reflections to the problem of values in international theory. The problem was, he argued, one of methodology. Opening up the debate with a epistemological exposition, he underlined the limits of abstract

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<sup>21</sup> John H. Hallowell, “Review Article,” *The Journal of Politics* 5, 2 (1943): 187–89. In his recent biography, Holger H. Herwig challenges this view, arguing that Haushofer was Hitler’s ‘useful idiot’ rather than this inspiration or ideologue. Without assessing the veracity of Herwig’s interpretation, this was certainly not the way Haushofer was seen by his American contemporaries. See *The Demon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer “Educated” Hitler and Hess*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *American Empire*, 287.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, “Bowman’s New World and the Council on Foreign Relations.”

<sup>24</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics; the Struggle for Space and Power*. (New York: Arno Press, 1942).

<sup>25</sup> Hans W. Weigert and Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, *Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography* (London: Harrap, 1946); Hans Werner Weigert, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, and Richard Edes Harrison, eds., *New Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography* (London: Harrap, 1949).

<sup>26</sup> Charles B. Hagan, “Geopolitics,” *The Journal of Politics* 4, no. 04 (1942).

<sup>27</sup> Ashworth, ‘Mapping a New World’, 140-142.

<sup>28</sup> I. Bowman, ‘Geography vs. Geopolitics’ in Weigert and Stefánsson, *Compass of the World*, 40.

generalizations and single-cause explanations. He invited his colleagues to embrace a less ambitious approach to theory that 'demands a strict separation between knowledge and virtue' (221). Thus, he endorsed a nominalist-pluralistic approach that implies 'toleration of varieties of points of view' and rejects universalist, single-cause and 'long-range' explanations as 'highly questionable ventures'. Instead, 'trial and error adjustments' could generate partial theories which would contribute to advancing human descriptive knowledge (220-226). The nominalist position had political advantages as well: for Lipsky it was the only epistemological methodology capable of reducing 'national and international tensions and make change possible in the context of peace'.

When Lipsky turned to discuss the theme of the meeting, he started by defining geography as 'sound description and allowable short-range prophecy'. Geopolitics, however, was described in harsher terms as 'scientifically unwarranted, grandiose historical generalisations and long-range prophecy embodying [...] the wish fulfilments of either fanatics or those who accept the fiat of an external authority..' (227). Again, he argued that political geography is a 'genuine descriptive science', while geopolitics is a 'pseudo-science'. While the distinction between the two approaches seems clear to Lipsky, he accused others, including Hans Weigert, of confounding them: in this, he argues, Weigert is 'typical of the inadequate expositors' of geopolitics and political geography.

As an alternative, Lipsky suggested 'sounder definitions': political geography is 'the descriptive and largely observational science' that 'sees the state [...] in relation to geographical factors', which will be evaluated according to established criteria in part dependent on the observer's own values. Importantly, the political geographer would know how to distinguish the 'ought' from the 'is' and consider the necessary limitations of his own perspectives. He attacked the uses of biological and historical analogies in describing geopolitical environment as 'young' or 'old', as organically whole or dismembered. These metaphors relegate geopolitics, for Lipsky, to the sphere of political ideologies, such as Marxism, motivated by a deterministic and monocausal philosophy of history. Eventually, Lipsky put his finger on the aspect of geopolitics that disturbed him most: 'my values reject the violence they portend'. Thus, it seems that Lipsky's reflection on geopolitics was less interested in the theoretical potential of spatial thinking than in unravelling the value assumptions within contemporary geopolitical ideas and signalling out those which contradicted his own beliefs.

Lipsky's overview provided passing comments on the writings of Mackinder, Strausz-Hupe, Andrew Gyorgy, and Isaiah Bowman, which amounted to assessing to what extent they aligned with his own views on geopolitics and its perils. When discussing the ideas of Spykman and his Yale colleague Frederick S. Dunn, Lipsky limited his comments to judging if their ideas manifest a necessarily pejorative 'geopolitical type of thinking' or not (237). Throughout the text, Lipsky persisted in his attempt to denigrate geopolitics and salvage political geography, without assessing in any detail the potential conceptual contributions of spatial thinking to international theory.

At the conclusion of the research paper, Lipsky wrote that it 'has been written to provide a statement of a thesis. There has been no intention of surveying geopolitical thought or the conclusions of political geography'. Indeed, the paper became a vehicle for Lipsky's views, which in turn conditioned the group's debates. The discussion summed up to a collective response to his arguments, rather than a free exploration of geography or geopolitics. Strausz-Hupe oscillated between echoing Lipsky's criticism and accepting that spatial thinking could be



integrated profitably into IR. He reflected on his own venture into geopolitics and drew a more positive conclusion than Lipsky's: 'The introduction of geopolitical thinking into American academic circles had a healthy by-product in that it had helped to bring the teaching of international relations "down to earth"' (246). 'Geopoliticians have made a contribution to international relations theory by forcing theorists to study the obvious as well as the exoteric aspects of world politics, as for example recognition that small size makes for small power', he argued, embracing the same line of generalist argument that Lipsky sought to avoid. Still, he doubted that 'this body of thought can be elaborated into a discipline of the social sciences', and 'did not believe geopolitics has much to offer from a metaphysical point of view' (247-248).

Hajo Holborn, the German historian, was similarly undecided: he found 'intuition' as well as 'geographical soundness' in Mackinder's theories which had a 'high applicability to present day military geography' and could be useful 'in defining the boundaries of national security', but felt that 'political geography could not be considered a theory of international relations'. It was similarly a 'facet of the truism that man is conditioned by nature and that his survival depends upon his capacity shrewdly to exploit geographical configurations to his advantage' (251). Kenneth Thompson, then a young political scientist, voiced a minority opinion when he encouraged his colleagues to take account of geography as a 'conditioning factor in foreign policy'. Referring to Spykman and Harold Sprout, he argued that 'geographic influence is of an importance warranting the closest consideration; not just the Germans should be interested in its applicability to foreign policy' (252). He also questioned the 'usefulness of basing a critique of geopolitics on dichotomy of fact vs. value' (259).

Thompson's observations did not succeed in undermining the study group's general aversion to spatial thinking. Geopolitics, for them, concealed a philosophy of history grounded in a deterministic view of the relations between humanity and nature which, they argued, translated into a dangerously expansionist politics. Spatial conceptions were, for the study group, either too abstract and therefore banal or too closely embedded in a rigid and intolerant imperial worldview to be of use in international theory. In other words, they dismissed the idea that geopolitics could be an insightful interpretative framework for IR because it was not politically neutral. Today, IR scholars accept that the assumption of normative or value neutrality in social scientific enquiry is no longer sustainable.<sup>29</sup> But more importantly, the study group's discussion did not consider the possibility of a critical, democratic or progressive geopolitical theory, despite the fact that such ideas were outlined by American scholars at the time. It seems, therefore, that the CFR study group missed an opportunity to generate a valuable and accurate assessment of geopolitics at the time and to equip international thinkers with more complex and nuanced understanding of spatiality.

Why did the study group turn a cold shoulder to geopolitical thought in the quest for international theory? I suggest that this rejection was based on two false premises. First, they adopted a 'scientific' assumption, arguing that it was possible to distinguish between a descriptive (and scientific) political geography and a prescriptive (and ideological) geopolitics. The second, which I call the 'ideological' assumption, suggests that geopolitics was necessarily a platform of a specific

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<sup>29</sup> Chris Brown and Robyn Eckersley (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

political worldview, namely German expansionism. Both these assumptions were, as Kenneth Thompson sought to suggest, false. Both geopolitics and political geography embodied, as any other social theory, claims about normative values. American political thinkers in the mid-twentieth century generated innovative interpretations of political space which embodied a range of values and normative assumptions. For these thinkers, space provided an interpretative lens through which to analyse political structures and relations. Despite the study group's reductive and limited view of geopolitics, that led to the conclusion that spatial thinking could not have a meaningful part in the theoretical foundations of international relations, alternative views were available. In the next sections, I will briefly discuss three alternative visions of geographic space and politics, which emerged in mid-century United States and could have provided insights for the members of the CFR study group.

### 3: SPYKMAN'S POWER GEOPOLITICS

Nicholas John Spykman was born in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1893. He worked as a journalist in the Middle East and in the East Asia before moving to the United States in 1920, where he studied social sciences at the University of California, Berkeley, writing his thesis on the social theory of George Simmel. He later joined the academic staff at Yale and became chairman of the Yale Institute of International Studies, where, according to Ramos, he encountered Arnold Wolfers who introduced him to geopolitics.<sup>30</sup> He published two major works on this topic, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942) and *The Geography of Peace* (1944, posthumously).<sup>31</sup> Spykman's books sold well and found an audience among general readers as well as politicians, military professionals and academics. Bowman, then president of the Johns Hopkins University, wrote an enthusiastic review of Spykman's book, recommending every American household to read it.<sup>32</sup> Other reviews were colder, accusing Spykman of shedding morality for power politics.<sup>33</sup>

By the time of his death in 1943, Spykman had already acquired a reputation as a leading geopolitical thinker. It is easy to understand, therefore, why Lipsky and the rest of the study group chose to focus on his writings as the starting point for a reflection on the uses of spatial knowledge and concepts in international theory. Yet, the reception of his ideas at the study group was less than warm: 'Spykman took a kind of cathartic and grim delight in stressing the omnipresence of the power political struggle', Lipsky wrote in his paper (235), yet he later conceded to 'salvage' Spykman from the denigrating title of 'geopolitician'. 'Geopolitics', for Spykman, meant the organization of a state's foreign policy in accordance with its geographic factors, aimed at peace and political independence.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, he was attuned to the similarities between geopolitics and political geography, that the study group sought to downplay. By ignoring the conceptual

<sup>30</sup> Curiously, at the study group Wolfers did not comment on Spykman's work or on geopolitics as an intellectual project. On the Yale Institute of International Studies see Paulo Jorge Batista Ramos, *The role of the Yale Institute of international studies in the construction of the United States national security ideology, 1935-1951*. PhD thesis, University of Manchester. Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth W Thompson, *Masters of International Thought : Major Twentieth-Century Theorists and the World Crisis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 92.

<sup>32</sup> Isaiah Bowman, "Review: Political Geography of Power," *Geographical Review* 32, no. 2 (1942): 349–52.

<sup>33</sup> See quotes in Edgar S. Furniss, "The Contribution of Nicholas John Spykman to the Study of International Politics," *World Politics* 4, no. 3 (April 1, 1952): 382–401.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas J Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1944), 6.

message of Spykman's words – that values and facts cannot be completely separated – the study group proceeded to construct a false binary between the two fields of research, defined by a vague criterion of scientific objectivity.

Spykman had a more sophisticated view of geopolitics and its aims, than his critics at the CFR study group. In his review of Hans Weigert's 1942 book on geopolitics, Spykman distinguished between three meanings of geopolitics: geographic analysis, policy-oriented social science, or a theory about the nature of the state:

It is unfortunate that the term geopolitics is applied to at least three different intellectual processes that ought to be kept separate and distinct. It is sometimes used as a synonym for political geography, that is, the study of the relations between geographic and political phenomena and of the expansion and contraction of states. The word is also used to designate that type of analysis which must inevitably precede the formulation and execution of policies involving a choice of location for action and an awareness of the qualities of space relations. In this sense, geopolitics becomes a name for one of the most basic of intellectual activities. [...] Wise statesmen make it an integral part of their political strategy in peacetime as well as of their military strategy in wartime. Geopolitics has also a third meaning. It then refers neither to a social science nor to a form of geographic analysis, but to a political philosophy, a theory about the nature of the state and a doctrine about the need and the desirability of territorial expansion. It is in this third form and particularly as adopted by National Socialism that geopolitics has been brought most forcefully to the attention of the American people.<sup>35</sup>

This distinction sought to undermine the criticism that saw in geopolitics a prescriptive 'pseudo-science' motivated by an expansionist, imperial and racist worldview. Instead, for him it was a dynamic constellation of perspectives on the relations between human order and the natural environment, that could generate a better understanding of international politics.

Like Mackinder, Spykman argued that geopolitics provided the conceptual framework to take into consideration geographic factors when formulating a state's foreign policy in peacetime or war.<sup>36</sup> He recognized that geopolitics was necessarily oriented towards a political goal, and not just a neutral analytical perspective. His geopolitical thought evolved from a preliminary argument that seems to echo Semple's approach: 'geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent'.<sup>37</sup> Some criticized this claim, stating that natural conditions are in fact less permanent than they seem: geological shifts and climate change may impact a territory's geographical conditions even in a short time span.<sup>38</sup> Yet, Spykman was not a geographical determinist. Political power was conditioned, but not determined, by geopolitical attributes, which were changing rather than fixed. Spykman's fundamental claim is that the specific geopolitical conditions of the state's territory, and more specifically its location in the world's system, condition its relations with other political powers.

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<sup>35</sup> Nicholas John Spykman, review of *Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power*, by Robert Strausz-Hupé, in *Political Science Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (1942): 598-601. doi:10.2307/2144758.

<sup>36</sup> Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 41.

<sup>38</sup> Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), 50.

Spykman's geopolitical writings are centred around an abstract and sometimes vague notion of 'power', that generates his analytical framework of the relations between political order and nature. He recognized that political power may well be a means to an ethical end, but he nonetheless tried to divorce the 'realist' notion of 'power' from 'morality', which is a 'world of dreams'. In the introduction to *America's strategy in world politics* Spykman argued that 'power is not the only aspect of international relations. International as well as national affairs are influenced by love, hate, and charity, by moral indignation and the hope of material gain. [...] International society is, however, a society without a central authority to preserve its members in the enjoyment of their rights. The result is that individual states must make the preservation and improvement of their power position a primary objective of their foreign policy'.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the aim of IR from this perspective is not to encourage political agency among the oppressed or ensure the legitimacy of global political power, but to create a balanced system which no great power would want to destabilize by war. Uninterested in questions of agency or legitimacy, Spykman's world order was oriented to organizing and regulating the practices of state political power in order to create a well-calibrated international 'balance of powers'.

Spykman was part of an interwar American attempt to bridge between the national and international realms of policy through new conceptual structures.<sup>40</sup> While he might have given too great a weight to considerations of power and international 'balance' in his writings, he was certainly not alone. Rather, these concepts became key in later IR theory, guided by the 'realist' and 'neo-realist' schools of thought that thrived in the United States. In this sense, his contribution to the discussion of power does not seem outside of the realm of IR but rather directly relevant to the key debates that would take place in the years following his death.<sup>41</sup> Spykman's ability to conceptualise in a non-deterministic way the relations between material geographic knowledge and the notion of power made an important contribution to thinking about international relations, that the study group failed to consider seriously.

### 3: WEIGERT'S PLURALIST GEOPOLITICS

The research paper that Lipsky prepared for the CFR was supposed to be centred on Spykman's geopolitical writings, but he ended up discussing in some detail the writings of Hans Weigert as well. Given that Weigert's name is today all but forgotten, it may seem curious that Lipsky considered his views worthy of lengthy discussion. Weigert was born in Berlin, Germany in 1902. Trained as a lawyer, he emigrated to the United States in 1938, and took up teaching positions at Carlton and the University of Chicago. Later, he became professor of International Relations at

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<sup>39</sup> Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> William T. R. Fox. "Interwar International Relations Research: The American Experience." *World Politics* 2, no. 1 (1949): 67-79.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William Curti Wohlforth, *The Balance of Power in World History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (London: Latimer House, 1947); Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Georgetown University.<sup>42</sup> During the Second World War, he turned his attention to the intersection of geography and politics, and published *Generals and Geographers* in 1942.<sup>43</sup> It is at this book that Lipsky directed his criticism, which was only partially justified.

Weigert's first and only major publication on geopolitics is, as Lipsky noted, a confusing read. The book is a commentary on different national historiographies of geopolitical and geographical thought, which may not appear 'orderly' or coherent to some readers. It is at times unclear whether the author endorses a geopolitical reading of international relations, or attacks 'geopoliticians' for their politically flawed theses. Yet the author's introductory comments may offer a glimpse into his critical mind set: 'in a world made constantly smaller by technological advance, and convulsed by drastic social and political changes, our views of geography remain static.'<sup>44</sup> Instead, a more *dynamic* approach is necessary, and this is where 'geopolitics' comes in: 'political geography is only the investigation of conditions, geopolitics raises the dynamic questions for development'. Like many contemporary American thinkers, Weigert sought to draw a distinction between political geography and geopolitics by highlighting the descriptive qualities of the former and the prescriptive qualities of the latter: 'if we compare 'political geography' and 'geopolitics', it becomes obvious that political geography is a child of geography, while geopolitics belongs to the realm of political science'. These 'extremely different approaches' share similar concerns about the interplay of political order and geographical spaces.<sup>45</sup>

Weigert's main claim is that geopolitical ideas shape political phenomena on a global scale. Therefore, he proposes that geopolitics is not a German monopoly, but a way of looking at the world that exists also in British and American political cultures. Thus, his approach to geopolitics can be seen as pluralist, or characterised by a methodological and normative acceptance of a variety of possible meanings and forms of spatial thinking. What mattered, for Weigert, was to underline the dependency of geopolitics on political assumptions. 'Geopolitics, with its concepts of space, location, and size, is essentially a political idea. It is a political worldview – a political *weltanschauung*.'<sup>46</sup> Yet by claiming that geopolitical thought depends on the political views of its proponents, Weigert rendered his thesis vulnerable to the kind of criticism that Lipsky wanted to advance. He reinforced the false premise of the study group's discussions, that geopolitics was *nothing but* a form of 'ideology', and more specifically a rigid and intolerant worldview of expansionism and empire.

It seems, though, that another interpretation of Weigert's proposal is possible: geopolitical thought is not universal but local. By outlining a pluralistic view of geopolitics, that accepted multiple interpretations of the relations between territorial space and political order, Weigert suggested that geopolitics should not be seen as a general scientific theory, but as a perspective through which to reflect on international affairs, that can be delineated in different ways according to local values and traditions. In Germany geopolitics became a tool of war because the people wanted a weapon,

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<sup>42</sup> Obituary, *New York Times*, October 27, 1983, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Weigert, *Generals and Geographers; the Twilight of Geopolitics*.

<sup>44</sup> Weigert, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Weigert, 13–14.

<sup>46</sup> Weigert, 21.

but it can have other uses according to the people's wishes. Thus, Weigert suggested, a non-imperial geopolitics was possible.<sup>47</sup>

Weigert remained particularly fascinated by 'radical' formulations of geopolitical thought. 'The domain of geopolitics is concerned with conflict and change, evolution and revolution, attack and defence, the dynamics of the territorial spaces and of the political forces struggling on them for survival'. Geopolitics is also distinct 'by linking all historical development with the conditions of space and soil, and by regarding history itself as determined by these eternal forces, geopolitics attempts to *predict* the future'.<sup>48</sup> For Lipsky, these methodological attributions were unfounded and doubtful; it remains unclear how *all* phenomena could be connected to geopolitical thought and how geopolitics could predict the future. Yet it seems that Weigert's aim was not to construct geopolitics as a totalizing science, but rather to highlight its ability to offer a conceptual perspective that connects the local with the universal, and thus permits to think anew about the global dimension of politics and its impact on national politics.<sup>49</sup>

Weigert's book offered a historical account of the development of geopolitics, giving considerable space to the German tradition with which he was probably most familiar. After a discussion of Spengler and Haushofer, he turned his attention to the 'pioneers of geopolitics', or rather to examine how key German thinkers such as Herder and Ratzel contributed to shaping geopolitical thought. Undermining the 'artificial classifications' of East and West, he invited geopolitical thinkers to consider the world in its totality, leaving behind 'national prejudices' without nonetheless abandoning the local perspective.<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that, contrary to Lipsky's accusations, Weigert sought to warn against treating geopolitics as a science, or ignoring its purchase in the 'power politics' game: geopolitics could easily become a 'corrupting *weltanschauung*'.<sup>51</sup> Against the 'materialistic religion of German geopolitics', Weigert argued that 'we must learn our own geopolitics', a blending of strategy and geography on a world-wide scale, transfused with the values that characterise American politics.

The message that Weigert hoped to convey in his book was that the Germans did not have a monopoly on geopolitical thought. As Toal suggests, Weigert wanted to distinguish American geopolitics from the 'conspiratorial reasoning' found in popular accounts of this field of study; thus, he proposed a 'middle-brow' political narrative that disavowed German expansionism but embraced the power-potential of the geopolitical approach to policy-making.<sup>52</sup> If German *Geopolitik* was eyed with suspicion in the United States, it should not cast a shadow on the entire enterprise of spatial thinking in politics, which could provide useful guidelines to military strategists. Weigert was interested in forging an American geopolitical approach not through the 'careful' and descriptive geographical studies that Lipsky proposed, but through the infusion of geopolitics with democratic and liberal values (which, of course, could be no less rigidly

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<sup>47</sup> Compare with Owen Lattimore, in Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism*, chapter 3.

<sup>48</sup> Weigert, *Generals and Geographers; the Twilight of Geopolitics*, 14–15.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest (eds.) *The Politics of Globality since 1945: Assembling the Planet* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Weigert, *Generals and Geographers; the Twilight of Geopolitics*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Weigert, 246. Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), 122.

‘ideological’). This idea comes out more clearly in the two volumes that Weigert co-edited during and after the Second World War, titled *Compass of the World*.<sup>53</sup>

The introduction to *Compass of the World* sought to clarify the rejection of the political premises on which German geopolitical thought was supposedly based.<sup>54</sup> In doing so, it recognised that all geopolitical thinking cannot be divorced from political ideas. For Weigert and his fellow geopolitical thinkers, it was impossible to exclude ideational constructs from spatial thinking. Similarly, in an essay co-authored with the cartographer Richard Edes Harrison, he highlighted the false geopolitical premises of German geopoliticians and American ‘armchair strategists’ who had limited cartographic knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Yet maps were rarely – if ever – neutral; they were visual aids shaped by the political aims of their creators.<sup>56</sup> The new cartography that the authors recommended to the readers were drawn in opposition to the German totalitarian ‘pseudo-science’ of geopolitics. They emphasised the new global condition of the world, which, for them, implied a new global role for the United States as a great liberal power. They warned against the blind adoption of ‘imperialist’ assumptions ingrained in geopolitical ideas imported from Germany, yet did not specify where the line passed between undesirable empire and the desirable interventionist, pro-active role they ascribed to the United States. The real challenge would be not to outline an international theory that would take on board geographical knowledge without any value judgement, but rather to elaborate a geopolitical theory in line with the particular values of a given society: a new geopolitical vision based on American values of justice, liberty and democracy.

The close intertwine of politics and geography characterising spatial thought was, for Lipsky, a fundamental flaw that rendered geopolitics non-scientific and therefore inappropriate for international theory. Other members of the study group, such as Thompson and Holborn, seemed more appreciative of the contribution of geopolitics to international theory, yet considered geography as the basic material foundation for any theory, rather than a particular perspective on the relations between politics and space. In general the study group missed the more subtle message that Weigert and his co-editor Stefánsson proposed in *Compass of the World* about the omnipresence of spatial ideas in international thought. Ideas about space, and not just material geographic conditions influenced the formation of political order and its operation.<sup>57</sup> These thinkers considered important the ability to draw a clear line between desirable and non-desirable forms of geopolitical thought (from their own subjective, American perspective), but it seemed evident to them that the distinguishing factor was anchored in the sphere of ideas, morality and values. Thus, spatial thinking was never value-free; rather, geopolitics offered a plurality of ways to think spatially reflecting the multiple moral or political positions available at the time.

The American version of geopolitics would not necessarily follow the *Geopolitik* expansionism or Spykman’s military and materialistic imperialism. For Weigert, there could be a viable alternative:

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<sup>53</sup> Weigert, Stefánsson, and Harrison, *New Compass of the World*. Weigert and Stefánsson, *Compass of the World*.

<sup>54</sup> Weigert and Stefánsson, *Compass of the World*.

<sup>55</sup> Weigert and Harrison, “World View and Strategy,” in Weigert and Stefánsson.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Alan K. Henrikson (2013) ‘The Map as an “Idea”: The Role of Cartographic Imagery During the Second World War,’ *The American Cartographer*, 2:1, 19-53.

<sup>57</sup> Jo-Anne Pemberton, *Global Metaphors: Modernity and the Quest for One World* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).

One of the issues to be clarified is the ideological approach to a new geography. Convinced of the enemy's superior understanding of geography as a determining factor in world history, many of us have swallowed not only the tangibles of German Geopolitics, but also the intangibles of a materialistic power politics as an ultimate end. Thus we have seen the dangerous beginnings of an American geopolitics, with blueprints for American imperialism riding the waves of the future. It favours a disillusioned balance-of-power solution on the basis of regional groupings, in preparation for what the sponsors of such 'realistic' plans consider inevitable: The Third World War. The editors and writers of this book, [...] agree that acceptance of the ideology and creed of geopolitics would be a dangerous step towards international Fascism. They refuse to accept the ethics of a geopolitics 'Made in Germany' and imported to this country. This kind of geopolitics is poison in our system the more dangerous because it is not immediately recognizable as alien to our political ideals and to the war and peace aims of the United Nations.<sup>58</sup>

One should, perhaps, be wary about the possibility to outline a non-aggressive national geopolitical vision, an American outlook that would be distinctly different from the German Geopolitik.<sup>59</sup> Despite the promising ethos of democratic and liberal geopolitics that the authors outlined in their introduction, they did not in fact provide many details for the realisation of such a vision.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, they opened the door to the possibility of a pluralism of geopolitical theses to reflect the diversity of 'ideological' and value positions in the world.<sup>61</sup> Weigert's approach to geopolitics was therefore surprisingly closer to the theoretical assumptions that Lipsky wanted to promote at the study group.

#### 4: THE 'POSSIBILITY' GEOPOLITICS OF HAROLD AND MARGARET SPROUT

In the introduction to the Festschrift in honour of Margaret and Harold Sprout, James N Rosenau, Vincent Davis and Maurice A. East position the two scholars at a liminal point in the evolution of International Relations as a discipline. The Sprouts' work represented, for them, the disciplinary shift from 'normative exhortations to nonnormative behavioural science'. Alongside Nicholas Spykman and Harold Lasswell, the Sprouts were 'the earliest and most important of the revolutionaries' in the study of international affairs around the Second World War.<sup>62</sup> One of the most important contributions of the Sprouts was the emphasis on 'linkage politics', highlighting the close relations between the domestic and the international spheres of politics. The editors of the volume recognized, nonetheless, that the Sprouts did not have a decisive immediate influence on the field of IR – in fact it took the better part of three decades for their ideas to permeate the main stream of the discipline.

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<sup>58</sup> Weigert and Stefansson, *Compass of the World*, x.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, *American Empire*.

<sup>60</sup> Weigert did refer several times to Owen Lattimore as a proponent of a viable geopolitical alternative to German militarism, see Or Rosenboim, 'Geopolitics and Global Democracy in Owen Lattimore's political thought', *The International History Review* 36:4 (2014), 745-766.

<sup>61</sup> See chapter 7 in the McCourt edited volume.

<sup>62</sup> James N Rosenau, Vincent Davis and Maurice A. East, *The Analysis of International Politics: Essays in honor of Harold and Margaret Sprout*, (New York: Free Press, 1972) 1-2.



Harold Sprout (1901-1980) and Margaret Tuttle (1903-2004) married in 1924, and started a life of intellectual collaboration. Both were educated at the University of Wisconsin, and moved to Princeton in 1931, where Harold taught until his retirement in 1969. While Margaret did not hold a formal position at the university, she and Harold collaborated closely in teaching and research alike, and produced influential scholarship together.

The core of the international thought of the Sprouts at the mid-century focused on the interplay of geography and strategy in international affairs. The theme had interested them since the 1930s, when Harold Sprout taught a course on political geography in the department of political science at Stanford, but the Sprouts are rarely mentioned as part of the American geopolitical thinkers.<sup>63</sup> As Toal suggested, the Sprouts were wary of using the term 'geopolitics' in their writings,<sup>64</sup> yet the content of their scholarship interacted closely with the geopolitical tradition of thought as framed by authors such as Spykman, Mackinder, and of course Mahan. Their monographs, *The Rise of American Naval Power: 1776-1918*, and its sequel *Towards a New World Order* marked a clear interest in the role of geography in shaping international relations and foreign policy targets.<sup>65</sup> The interaction of natural conditions and technological innovations paved the way for their assessment of foreign policy goals for the United States. Unlike other geopolitical writers, they sought to theorise the relationship between policy and ideas in a more systematic manner. Thus, they rejected abstract generalisations about the formation of public policy and dismissed the idea of a 'national character'. Rather than focusing on 'states' as abstract actors in the chessboard-like international game of strategy, the Sprouts were interested in individual psychology, behavioural patterns and 'capabilities' as perspectives on the collective character of national political orders and their approaches to international affairs.

The Sprouts' engagement with problems of international affairs was evident in their research interests but also in Harold Sprout's work in the public sector during the war, and in the textbook that the couple published in 1945, titled *Foundations of National Power*.<sup>66</sup> The book was compiled at the request of the American Navy, but its authors sought to take stock of the discipline's key concepts and leading concerns of the new global post-war order. The interdisciplinary character of the textbook, which brought together readings from geography, sociology, political science and the natural sciences, marked it out as an exceptional teaching guide, and 'foreshadowed the growing conviction that [international studies] was a research field requiring significant and substantial contributions from many disciplines and areas of knowledge.'<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Harold Sprout wrote about geography and its contribution to international politics as early as 1931, advocating the teaching of political geography in departments of political science. See Political Geography as a Political Science Field, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May, 1931), pp. 439-442. In 1949, William T. R. Fox mentioned Sprout in one line with Spykman, as a key thinker about geography and politics, see Interwar International Relations Research: The American Experience, *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Oct., 1949), pp. 67-79.

<sup>64</sup> Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power: 1776-1918* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1939); Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a New Order of Sea Power: American Naval Policy and the World Scene, 1918-1922*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1943). Princeton University Press published a new edition of *The Rise of American Naval Power* in 2015, rendering evident its longevity.

<sup>66</sup> Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Foundations of National Power: Readings on World Politics and American Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946); The book was positively reviewed by Hans J. Morgenthau: "Foundations of National Power: Readings on World Politics and American Security. Harold Sprout, Margaret Sprout," *Journal of Political Economy* 55, no. 3 (Jun., 1947): 264-265.

<sup>67</sup> Rosenau, Davis and East, *The Analysis*, 4.

In his review of Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, Harold Sprout recognised the need for a systematic method for the study of international relations, that would deliver the field away from the 'sterile atmosphere' of international law and diplomatic history and reformulate it as a 'separate and important branch of social science'.<sup>68</sup> The first step, in this sense, is the formulation of a theory of international relations: 'one conspicuous need [...] was for a conceptual structure and methodology with which to explore and analyse the nature and role of power in the relations of nations states'. Citing E.H. Carr and Nicholas Spykman as important contributors in that respect, Sprout argued that there was a general agreement on what the study of international politics should embrace: the objectives of foreign policy, motivations of statesmen, tools of statecraft, state capabilities, interstate relationships, regulatory mechanisms and their efficacy. More attention should be given to the first four of the list, according to Sprout, namely the foundational aspects of international affairs, rather than to the actual functioning of interstate relations.

In the mid-1950s, as Lipsky was gathering his study group, the Sprouts were engaged in a research project at Princeton aimed at formulating a novel approach for the study of the relationship between humans and their natural environment.<sup>69</sup> The published outcome of the project included a short book on the notion of 'milieu', which they borrowed from the French school of geography to conceptualise the environment through the examination of the complex possible relationships it could generate. Instead of following the 'geopolitical' vocabulary of influence, conditions, sea and land powers and heartland, they adopted a new lexicon aimed at explaining and predicting the conceptual interplay of man and nature in the context of policy making.<sup>70</sup> This approach highlighted the mutual and two-way impact of humans on nature, and sought to address the multiple ways in which technology complicated this interaction. "Whereas earlier approaches, including their own, had emphasized foundations or elements of national power, such as geography, population, weapons, and the economy, the Sprouts now argued that these elements of national power had no political significance whatever unless they were set in the context of a framework of assumptions specifying who is trying to get whom to do what under what conditions."<sup>71</sup>

In 1957, the Sprouts published an article on 'environmental factors in the study of international politics' that elucidates their position vis-à-vis the geopolitical scholarship. The main objective of the article is to show that 'environmental factors become related to the attitudes and decisions which, in the aggregate, comprise a state's foreign policy *only* by being apperceived and taken into account by those who participate in the policy-forming process.'<sup>72</sup> Thus, they conclude that geographic factors cannot have an 'absolute', 'objective' or deterministic impact on foreign policy – and on political order in general – because their influence is filtered through the way in which geography is perceived by decision makers. Geopolitics is, therefore, not a rigid and intolerant ideology or a permanent constraint, but a way to perceive the relations between the natural and

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<sup>68</sup> Sprout, Harold. "In Defense of Diplomacy." *World Politics* 1, no. 3 (1949): 404-13.

<sup>69</sup> Harold Sprout, Margaret Sprout, *Man-Milieu Relationship Hypotheses in the Context of International Politics* by (Princeton, Centre for International Studies, 1956).

<sup>70</sup> See also Harold and Margaret Sprout, Environmental factors in the study of international politics, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol. 1, no. 4, 1957.

<sup>71</sup> Baldwin, David A. "Sprout, Harold (1901–1980)." In *Encyclopedia of Power*, edited by Keith Dowding, 627-628. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Sprout and Sprout, 'Environmental factors', 310. Emphasis in the original. On possibilism in Sprouts' thought compare to Starr, *On Geopolitics*.

the human spheres. In that way, they responded to critics such as Hans Morgenthau, who saw geopolitics as a limited perspective on politics: in *Politics Among Nations*, he declared geopolitics to be ‘a pseudoscience erecting the factor of geography into an absolute that is supposed to determine the power, and hence the fate, of nations’.<sup>73</sup> Geography, Morgenthau admitted, could give ‘one aspect of the reality of national power’ but amounted to a ‘distortion’ on its own, especially when fused with virulent nationalism.

The Sprouts addressed this criticism by arguing that geographic ‘conditions’ were cognitive possibilities, in the eyes of the beholder. The centrality of perception is highlighted by their use of the concept of ‘cognitive behaviourism’, which adapts conceptions from psychology and sociology to geopolitical thought: ‘what matters in decision-making is not how the milieu is but how the decision-maker imagines it to be’. They made two additional contributions to geopolitical thinking. First, the notion of ‘milieu’ served to highlight the unavoidable intertwine of human and non-human factors in shaping the ‘environment’. There is no purely ‘natural’ or purely ‘human’ element in the formation of the environment and its characteristics. Instead, they suggested that the ‘milieu’ should indicate ‘all phenomena to which the environed unit’s activities may be related’.<sup>74</sup> The ‘milieu’ is the context, therefore, which should be defined by the problem at hand; it is both human and non-human, both dynamic and stable, and generally characterised by complexity. Second, the Sprouts introduced the notion of ‘possibilism’ to suggest that diverse conditions may limit the operation of states, but the perceptions of these conditions and the impact that they may or may not have on state policy depend on the ‘creative imagination’ of policy makers. As such, conditions emerge as a mere ‘possibility’ rather than a rigid barrier or constraint on state behaviour.

The contribution of the Sprouts to scholarship on the interaction of nature and politics is embodied in a series of influential works, including *Ecological Perspectives on Human Affairs*, which introduced a novel approach to the study of international politics.<sup>75</sup> The Sprouts did not seek to undermine the importance of power relations, rational decision-making and state behaviour but to show that these key IR concepts should be seen in the context of the ‘ecological approach’, ‘a wider system of concepts and theory’ which bridges between international politics, geography, psychology, and sociology. Their nuanced and sophisticated vision of the interplay of nature and politics reflects a substantial departure from the notorious German *Geopolitik* that American thinkers discussed with alternating fascination and indignation. Instead, the Sprouts offered a way to embed geopolitical reflections in a general international theory that could avoid the pitfalls of teleology and determinism. By focusing on perception, possibility, and decision-making, the Sprouts showed that geopolitical analysis is, essentially, an act of spatial imagination which always – and explicitly – expresses a political wish.

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF SPACE.

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<sup>73</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 1985, [1948], 174.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>75</sup> Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965, republished in 2015).

In recent years, a growing attention has been given to the potential role of spatial thinking, after scholars flagged the limited impact of this theoretical approach on international theory within the academic discipline of IR.<sup>76</sup> In view of contemporary calls to take space, place and location seriously in international theory (within the discipline or IR and beyond) it seems surprising that this approach had not been integrated in a more meaningful way in the theoretical toolbox of IR.<sup>77</sup> In a previous study, I outlined some of the reasons for the demise of geopolitics after the Second World War.<sup>78</sup> In the mid-twentieth century as now, spatial thinking is relegated to the margins of the discipline of international relations.

The 1953 study group represents, therefore, another such missed opportunity to take space seriously and consider the contribution of spatial thinking – through geopolitics and political geography – to theorizing international relations. The turn away from spatiality at the study group is particularly striking in view of the evidence provided by its protocols, showing that in the mid-1950s geopolitics was a topical approach to human life, which engaged many scholars and policy advisors in the United States. The study group deemed geopolitics and geography to be one of the six most important approaches to international affairs, only to discard it as too ideologically rigid, banal or belligerent to be included in a novel theoretical structure.

While the study group can hardly represent the entirety of the discipline of IR at the time, its approach to spatiality presents us with an opportunity to consider the value of space in international theory. This article sought to highlight not only the deficiencies of the study group but also the interesting alternative spatial theories available in the United States at the time. Thus, by way of conclusion, I would like to open up paths for future discussion by drawing on mid-century ideas to reflect on the potential value of spatial thinking for international theory today.<sup>79</sup>

First, the picture that emerges from the writings of Spykman, Weigert and the Sprouts is of a multifaceted spatial thinking in mid-century United States. Rather than a homogenous approach to the social sciences, the study of the interplay of politics and geography was characterised by conceptual richness and complexity. Land, Sea and Air relations offered, for example, a theoretical perspective on international relations that the study group chose to ignore.<sup>80</sup> By demonising geopolitical thought as aggressive and militaristic, the study group missed out the more nuanced ideas of thinkers such as Spykman and Weigert, as well as a range of thinkers who proposed alternative visions, such as Margaret and Harold Sprout. The group's superficial and facile

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<sup>76</sup> Lucian M. Ashworth, "Mapping a New World: Geography and the Interwar Study of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2013): 138–149.

<sup>77</sup> John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics* (Routledge, 2003). John Agnew, "The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory," *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 53–80.

<sup>78</sup> Rosenboim, "Geopolitics and Empire".

<sup>79</sup> Evidence of similar discussions in policy-making circles today is reflected in documents such as the Chinese government study titled *The Rise of Great Powers* (2006), which offers a relatively nuanced and non-deterministic analysis of Sea Power in history and politics. See Andrew S. Erikson and Lyle J. Goldstein, 'China Studies the Rise of Great Powers' in Andrew S. Erikson, Lyle J. Goldstein and Carnes Lord (eds.), *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis MD, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> On land/sea/air spatiality and political order see for example Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); James C. Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009); Or Rosenboim, 'Geopolitics and Global Democracy in Owen Lattimore's political thought', *The International History Review* 36:4 (2014), 745–766.

understanding of spatial thinking was endemic of their limited willingness to engage in a deep and innovative reflection on international theory, which doomed their project from the start.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, the geopolitical thinkers in the United States have shown that space mattered as a lens on international relations. While the normative values behind the geopolitical visions of Spykman, Weigert and the Sprouts may not be universally shared (as any normative position, of course), their writings demonstrate the versatility of spatial thinking in international theory. In particular, the Sprouts emphasised subjectivity as a valuable aspect of conceptions of spatiality. The interaction of geography and politics depends on the *perception* of space by policy-makers. Space has no inherent political value; it is given value through political imagination. Thus, spatiality necessarily reflects subjective value judgements, ideologies, and political aspirations. Subjective spatial perceptions could be integrated into rational choice and realist international relations theory to generate a sophisticated account of political decision making. By embracing subjectivity, the Sprouts challenged the false dichotomy advanced at the study group between objective science and subjective worldview, underlining their complex interplay in the process of political decision-making through the psychological notion of spatial perception.

Third, mid-century geopolitical thinking anticipated the rise of current literature on the interplay of nature and human order. Geopolitical thinkers were attentive to the impact of humans on nature and vice versa; they engaged with spatial thinking through a variety of perspectives including the geological environment, climate, waterways, and natural resources. The Sprouts, for example, proposed the concept of the ‘milieu’ to highlight the complex interaction of natural and human environments, anticipating such ideas as currently explored by environmental historians and theorists of the ‘Anthropocene’.<sup>81</sup> In a similar vein, recent research on territoriality in international history and IR show that there is need to take seriously the ways in which the natural and political space intertwine, following conceptual notions that have their roots in mid-century American geopolitical thought.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the study group missed the conceptual value of thinking about international relations through a spatial analytical framework that encapsulates the variety of modes of interaction between humanity and the natural environment.

The history of the CFR study group on international theory embodies an undeniable inherent failure: the group members were unable to outline a coherent and meaningful theory of international relations. Nonetheless, a return to the discussions and debates within the group can help reflect on the challenges posed by missed opportunities in the discipline of IR. The turn away from spatial thinking has characterised not only the mid-century study group, but also the

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<sup>81</sup> Olaf Corry, ‘The ‘Nature’ of International Relations: From Geopolitics to the Anthropocene’, *E-IR*, 15 October, 2017 access in: <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/10/15/the-nature-of-international-relations-from-geopolitics-to-the-anthropocene>; for current scholarship on nature and human political life see Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability. Nature, Human Action, and Destiny, 1500-1870* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> Charles S. Maier, *Once Within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Yale H. Ferguson and R. J. Barry Jones, eds., *Political Space: Frontiers of Change and Governance in a Globalizing World* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002); Courtney J. Campbell, “Space, Place and Scale: Human Geography and Spatial History in Past and Present,” *Past & Present*, accessed May 2, 2017; Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Charles W. J. Withers, “Place and the ‘Spatial Turn’ in Geography and in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (October 28, 2009): 637–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.0.0054>.

discipline as a whole. Spatial thinking is still a marginal aspect of international theory. A reconsideration of the variety and scope of mid-century American geopolitical thought can help revive this mode of theoretical engagement with international relations and generate novel reflections on the political implications of the interplay of humans and their natural environment today.