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Overwriting Geography: Mackinder's Presences, a Dialogue with David Hooson

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Coinciding with the centenary of Halford Mackinder's 1904 'Geographical Pivot of History' paper¹, a new flush of critical evaluation of his work and legacy has appeared. This has been informed by the last twenty-plus years of critical geopolitics (and allied critical evaluations of geopolitical traditions). At the same time, there has been a proliferation of mainstream foreign policy and related political interest in Mackinder's geopolitical work in some of the sites that it addressed, most notably in Russia, Ukraine and (former Soviet) Central Asia.² It has been read and adapted within many other contexts, from Brazil, through Portugal to Germany, Turkey and Japan. The malleability of Mackinder's ideas renders them frequently (and repeatedly) a point of departure in formal geopolitical writing.

It is against these backdrops that, in April 2007, I met David Hooson in San Francisco, with the aim of discussing the theme of how his life and work became entangled with the legacy of Mackinder. David was then Emeritus Professor at the University of California Berkeley, where he had been based since 1966. Born in Wales, a few days before the UK's General Strike of May 1926, David went to Oxford in 1943. His degree was interrupted by service in the British navy (he ended up in Malaya as the Pacific war ended, but his war service began as a meteorologist in Ceylon), so his graduation came in 1948. He then did a PhD at the LSE (awarded in 1955). For the PhD he worked on the historical and population geography of Hertfordshire, southern England, advised by Michael Wise.

When writing up his doctoral thesis, David applied for a position to teach the geography of the USSR at the University of Glasgow.³ He had already started learning Russian whilst in London. Indeed his doctoral thesis advisor⁴ recalls writing a letter explaining his shift of geographical focus, to the effect that:

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Even at the time he was writing his PhD he was preparing for what was to become his major interest in the changing human geography of the Soviet Union.

Thematically however, David Hooson's early interests in population and regional change were carried through into his work on the Soviet Union; registered in books such as *A New Soviet Heartland?* (1964), and *The Soviet Union: People and Regions* (1966), and in dozens of papers published over five decades. Amongst the papers there was nuanced scrutiny of trends in Russian geographical thought⁵, reflecting both his wide reading of the Russian geographical literature and his personal familiarity with many of the protagonists derived from frequent visits to the Soviet Union.

After two years at the University of Glasgow, David took up a position at the University of Maryland. Arriving in Washington DC in 1956, David stepped into the high Cold War. As a Russian specialist, he was able to find eager audiences. Within a year of his arrival, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik: a new phase of Cold War (and what Fraser MacDonald⁶ has recently called *Astropolitik*) began. In 1960, he moved to UBC, Vancouver, where he stayed six years before the move to Berkeley.

David was interviewed 1980 as part of a series of *Geographers on Film*⁷. In the transcript of that interview he notes that his contact with Mackinder was not direct, but via his Oxford tutor, who

was spending a great deal of time with H J Mackinder, [then] in his 80s So by some kind of second remove I got contact with Mackinder although I never met him personally.

David Hooson also wrote a short account of this and subsequent 'encounters with Mackinder'⁸, noting how, as a finishing undergraduate in Oxford, those undergraduate tutorials (led by E. W. Gilbert⁹) became dominated by reports of Mackinder's health (who was then in what turned out to be the last year of his long life). The discussion below is best read in tandem with that short essay which appeared in a special issue of *The Geographical Journal* a century on from Mackinder's paper on the geographical pivot of history. Our face-to-face discussion was conducted in April 2007, during the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco. The transcription below has been lightly edited (with David's approval) for clarity.

Mackinder, who was largely taboo in Soviet times, is now being widely read in Russia. The influence his work wielded in Cold War Washington DC is testimony to the ways that his writings have a capacity to be reworked and redeployed. Remarkable on how classical geopolitics (with Mackinder's 1904 paper a key reference point), combines 'conceptual and ideological plasticity with an explanatory authority that is globally

acknowledged,' Mark Bassin and Konstantin Aksenov¹⁰ have recently described this as the underpinning of the reoccurring appeal of geopolitics, which:

Rests significantly on its ability to generate what it calls "objective" geographical models of political relations which in fact are open to reinterpretation and even realignment, in response precisely to those shifts in historical, political, and ideological context which it claims categorically to transcend.

The tendency for such geopolitics to overwrite contextual knowledge of places and societies emerges through David's account of the ignorance about Russia amongst the Pentagon staff he came into contact with in the 1950s. There may be parallels here with the mixture of official and popular naivety, fear, fascination and ignorance concerning America's 'enemies' fifty years on. In this respect, it is also instructive to read David Hooson's recollections in the light of Gerard Toal's observations on the role of geopolitics in the present day. According to Toal¹¹:

9/11 has resuscitated the rhetoric of imperial hubris in American geopolitical culture. America is back again acting like the 'world's policeman' and now proclaims its right to act preemptively to crush perceived threats to its national security. There are strong reasons to conclude that this will lead to an inevitable imperial overreaching by the US as it bumps into regional cultures and dynamics that it does not understand and cannot control. The consequences could be painful and even catastrophic. All these features of the contemporary geopolitical moment constitute strong arguments for political geographers to re-assert the importance of 'thick' regional geographical knowledge in the face of 'thin' universal theorizing about world affairs. This educational re-emphasis is not simply a call for geography to respond to the immediate needs of the threatened state but more broadly to create a public political culture that demands, requires and values grounded geographical knowledge over abstract geopolitical sloganizing.

JDS: How did Mackinder figure and seem to you when you were at Oxford in the 1940s?

DH: When I was at Oxford he of course he was the father figure, the founder. And he was in his 80s and so there was a sort of reverential image of him that people didn't elaborate on. It was just there. He was not a presence physically because he was deaf and old at that time in his 80s and didn't seem to participate in anything to do with the department he founded about 50 or 60 years earlier. But nevertheless his emphasis say on regional and political geography was still quite strong. . . . he was referred to – no doubt about it – as a founder

figure. And I found the same thing when I went to do a PhD later on at LSE, because he had been a Director (Head) of the LSE as well. [The LSE] was a rather radical institution in those days . . . which Oxford actually wasn't, so I got two sides of the [Mackinder] legacy in England.

As soon as I got to Oxford when I was just 17, I saw a right-off-the-press article that he had written in *Foreign Affairs* called 'The Round World and the Winning of the Peace' [published in] 1943.¹² In the depths of the war people were wondering what was going to come out of it. The Russians were on their last legs and so were the Germans – so everything was in flux. So Mackinder comes in, he could write very well still . . . I found it just fascinating.

JDS: And the specific reception of ideas of heartland and his geographical pivot of history?

DH: Well it was coming back in a big way really because it seemed – especially when the tide was turning and Russia seemed to be in charge of this heartland – that Mackinder was back on track, it was sort of quoted very much. And then I got to Washington, it was picked up again dramatically.

JDS: So when did you come to the United States?

DH: 1956

JDS: Why?

DH: Why? Well I was teaching at the University of Glasgow. And it's banal really, because an American professor came visiting and after a chat with me he said how much are you earning and I told him and he said 'would you like to earn ten times that amount' (laughing)? I thought he was joking but he wasn't and he gave me the address of a couple of departments and I accepted one of them which is in Washington; the University of Maryland. And I did in fact earn about 10 times what I was getting in Glasgow. Anyway, as soon as I got there, the Soviet Union was the topic of the hour. I hadn't really been any kind of expert on it, but I made myself learn Russian, so very soon I was put to lecture at the Pentagon of all things as a young immigrant of a few months to lecture on the Soviet Union. It was then that I found that Mackinder was well known among some of the generals and admirals I had in my class there. I could hardly keep a straight face at all this really then. But it was quite clear that the whole notion of containment and confronting [was set]. By that time . . . Russia . . . China . . . [and] Eastern Europe under Russia [could be interpreted as] a huge extension of Mackinder's original heartland . . . [since this went] through to the China Sea and central Europe, so it put shivers down the spines of the Pentagon people.

JDS: So it wasn't that you taught them about Mackinder or brought Mackinder's papers to their attentions? The military figures in your class were already aware?

DH: Some of them, and so we picked it up and they were impressed that I was from Mackinder's school when this was coming up so I had everything going for me then; they paid me very well for giving this class! The point is that the world situation was absolutely tailor made for Mackinder, who of course was dead 10 years before, to be applied. . . . Containment policy, which George Kennan [formulated] . . . was more prominent . . . [but it] matched Mackinder's heartland notion that Moscow seemed to dominate the whole of Eurasia.

JDS: And who were the people in your classes?

DH: Well they were actually Pentagon generals and admirals and a few others of course, but there was an amazing preponderance [of high military command] and I'd been in the [British] navy as just a leading seaman, so I again found it rather odd to be lecturing to admirals and generals. But . . . the ignorance was intense, they didn't know much, they were suddenly scared of the Soviet Union which they had more or less written off earlier because it had been devastated in the war . . . but it came back and with . . . the comeback was Mackinder. Here [in the USA] the [Heartland] theme came back right again, 10 years after his death and he was treated with great respect . . . they weren't geographers of course, but they were completely connected with his ideas.

JDS: Did this interest in or awareness of Mackinder amongst such circles in Washington persist for long? And . . . did you just teach this course the once?

DH: No several times actually, I mean I was at that university, which is right on the edge of Washington for four years and I think I may have done two or three courses. The Pentagon was 20 minutes away and they provided very nice food at the Pentagon. Coming from still rationed Britain [that] was another incentive, but it was kind of odd.

JDS: Odd?

DH: Odd in the sense I could hardly keep a straight face there with these people! I regarded the Pentagon with a fishy eye really being left-wing in Britain. But nevertheless because the Soviet Union was now so central in controlling the whole heartland plus China: it was almost more than Mackinder dreamt of in a way.

JDS: Did these figures [also] read Mahan?

DH: Yes he was mentioned, but you see it was after . . . the sea power theory of Mahan had given way, because of the situation with this Heartland power controlling the whole of Eurasia. Somehow Mahan was put on the back burner.

JDS: And you describe a strange mixture of alarm . . . and ignorance [at the Pentagon]. . . .

DH: Well there was ignorance about the nature of the Soviet Union you see. For one thing, I think especially after sputnik . . . because this seemed to demonstrate a superior scientific ability to the United States,

which hadn't done anything like that. And the combination of that with the strategic geopolitical strategic situation was such that scared them and one of my roles turned out to be to rather downplay the scientific prowess of the Soviet Union. You know . . . it may put something up in space but in fact the elevators don't work and the people are poor. Suddenly, they [the American strategists] had elevated the Russians from being a bunch of peasants to being ten feet tall. And both [perceptions] were wrong and so I was just trying to bring some reality there because I had been to the Soviet Union. Luckily I was supported by a quite reputable grants committee and so on. One of the generals said would you like some money from us from the army just go over there and just keep your eyes open, but I said no thank you (laughing). That would have been dangerous.

JDS: How were you received and perceived by your Pentagon students?

DH: Very well really because there was general ignorance and as they say, 'In the kingdom of the blind the one eyed man is king'. And because I had learnt Russian by then and was getting [material] out of Russia that was beginning to reflect on this whole question . . . I was one up on them. They were really quite modest not bombastic actually, but wanted to learn about Russia. So it was straightforward: what is Russia, what is the geography of it, what are the natural resource endowments, population, all those things that geographers normally deal with and [that] it had come out of the war but it was reconstructing and so on. [There were] still many question marks – which I wanted to discuss with them – about whether it would really become a dominant power over the long run in Eurasia . . . we had no idea it would collapse a few decades later of course.

JDS: And as a British scholar, fresh off the boat with these Oxford connections, how did that figure in the perception and reception of you?

DH: Well it seemed to be fine, again because of Mackinder I think, who had become quite well respected then. And Oxford you know has got a name in America. But the fact is they were receptive because they were hungry for information that's the thing and I loved the maps and so on and had them up there and they were learning. I was quite impressed by their non bombastic attitude and wish to learn what the reality was behind the strategic picture. Mackinder was just one of those people by that time [who] was well known and had respect and I got a bit of reflected glory coming from his school. They didn't know anything about geography, let alone the Soviet Union, so I filled them in as best I could.

JDS: Final question; your reflections on comparisons with then and now around the issues we have talked about.

DH: Well of course it's now so utterly different since the collapse of the Soviet Union even though Russia it has to be said is still attempting to

get its empire back, but it's not on. Therefore it is hard to remember how strong that image was of the all powerful Moscow centred empire going right through to China. . . . And then obviously the Cold War [was underway], even though Russia was going through "co-existence" then and Khrushchev in power, it seemed like a golden age in Russia because people were talking all the time (which they had not done before and they have not done so much since), so there was a great chance to get stuff out of Russia: information. And I made the most of it. I wouldn't have been given the job in Berkeley had I not written up some articles on the basis of that and books and so on. So it was a heaven sent thing on me personally because I was very interested in Russia from a semi-Marxist background, but I was cured of the worst excesses of those illusions by travelling there. I had many friends in Russia and got into their literature and arguments about geography including geopolitics. . . . so the timing was terrific as far as I was concerned and I rose to it and the Library of Congress brought me all the books I wanted. I was just lucky and the Pentagon fed me very well!

JDS: The Russians didn't read Mackinder did they?

DH: Well at that time they didn't, now they are. . . .

NOTES

1. Mackinder's 1904 paper, together with a set of evaluations is reprinted in *Geographical Journal* 170 (2004). This is a century on from H. J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History,' *Geographical Journal* 23 (1904) pp. 421–442.

2. On contemporary Uzbek (and some other) readings of Mackinder, see N. S. Megoran, 'Revisiting the 'Pivot': The Influence of Halford Mackinder on Analysis of Uzbekistan's International Relations', *Geographical Journal* 170/4 (2004) pp. 347–358. On Russian and Ukrainian readings, see A. Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2002).

3. Slavonic and East European Studies in British Universities expanded after 1945, bolstered by the Cold War. The relationship with Cold War imperatives seems however to have been looser in the UK than in the USA at the same time. On the making and role of British geographies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, see the valuable oral histories and context marshalled by D. Matless, J. Oldfield, and A. Swain, 'Encountering Soviet Geography: Oral Histories of British Geographical Studies of the USSR and Eastern Europe 1945–1991', *Social and Cultural Geography* 8 (2007) pp. 353–372.

4. E-mail correspondence with M. Wise, 10 Jan. 2008.

5. First documented in D. Hooson, 'Some Recent Developments in the Content and Theory of Soviet Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 49 (1959) pp. 73–82.

6. F. MacDonald, 'Anti-Astropolitik – Outer Space and the Orbit of Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007) pp. 592–615.

7. Geographer on Film, David J. M. Hooson (1926–), University of California at Berkeley. Interviewed by Geoffrey J Martin, 15 April 1980, available at <<http://oz.plymouth.edu/~mwd/>>.

8. D. Hooson, 'Afterword. Encounters with Mackinder: A Personal Memoir', *Geographical Journal* 170 (2004) pp. 377–379.

9. Whose obituary reports that, 'he maintained the traditions of Mackinder and Herbertson', emphasising geography as 'an humane study' with its focus being 'the analysis, description and interpretation of regions'. Obituary: Edmund William Gilbert, *The Geographical Journal* 140 (1974) p. 177.

10. M. Bassin and K. E. Aksenov, 'Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse', *Geopolitics* 11 (2006) p. 116.

11. G. Toal, 'Re-asserting the Regional: Political Geography and Geopolitics in a World Thinly Known', *Political Geography* 22 (2003) p. 655.

12. As Sara O'Hara and Michael Heffernan note, 'In 1943, nearly two years after the American entry into the war in Europe, Mackinder was invited to re-visit his original ideas by the editors of the American journal *Foreign Affairs*. . . . This essay was intended as a commentary on the importance of the heartland. . . . Although the original ideas evolved between 1904 and 1943, the main contours of this worldview remained remarkably consistent. . . . the Cold War brought home to the State Department in Washington the force of his original argument and effectively ensured the enduring significance of his 1904 paper.' S. O'Hara and M. Heffernan, 'The 'Heartland' and British Imperialism', *Geopolitics* 11 (2006) pp. 67–68.