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Prisoners of Geography? How contextualising a book can develop students' understandings of geography

Sarah describes how she used geographical and historical contexts to enable her students to critically evaluate Prisoners of Geography.

Accompanying online materials

Popular books that discuss geographical issues, like Hans Rosling's *Factfulness* (2018), Dharshini David's *The Almighty Dollar* (2018) and Tim Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography* (2015) are increasingly being used in geography lessons. Works such as these, although not written by geographers, enrich students' experiences of studying geography; they can reveal new layers of complexity and strengthen a student's 'sense of place'. The use of these texts in the classroom aligns with both school-wide 'literacy drives' as well as Dolan's (2019) call for developing students' 'geo-literacy'. Inspired by other geography teachers' use of these texts, I wanted to integrate them into my teaching. This article is an account of how I used Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography* when teaching year 13 students about 'Superpowers'. I wanted students to read and critically engage with Marshall's work (and the contested theories upon which some of its claims rest). I did this by situating Marshall's book and his sources in their wider intellectual and historical contexts. Through reading and critiquing Marshall's work, students' understandings of geography as a discipline (its history, methods and epistemology) seemed to improve.

Tim Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography*

Prisoners of Geography features on many sixth form geography reading lists; Marshall's work has also featured on the Royal Geographical Society's (RGS (with IBG)) 'Literacy Lowdown'. The book is a detailed commentary on many geopolitical issues, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. To support his thesis he draws upon both historical examples – 'Russia as a concept dates back to the ninth century' (p. 14) – and current affairs. Marshall's prose is provocative and punchy, and his main claim – that international relations have been and continue to be shaped by geography – is hard to dismiss. All of this makes *Prisoners of Geography* an excellent text to support students' studies. Nevertheless, as I finished reading it, I was left with an uneasy feeling. It struck me that some of the book's argument could be seen as environmentally deterministic; it seemed to suggest that people's hands are forced by the environments in which they find themselves. Marshall himself does acknowledge the contentious nature of his claims in the book's introduction (p. xv); even so, I was concerned that my students would think Marshall was presenting *facts*, not making an *argument*, about geopolitics. This concern led me to reconsider how I would present this text to my class. When I flicked to the back of the book, I noticed a reference to a particular paper from 1904 (Mackinder, 1904). This reference formed the starting point for my approach to teaching with this text.

Mackinder and his complex legacy

Sir Halford Mackinder is often considered to be the 'Father of Geopolitics', and after more than a century his works remain influential. Mackinder distilled the arguments of his 1904 paper into the following dictum: 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world' (Mackinder, 1919, p. 150).

The World-Island comprised the interlinked continents of Europe, Asia and Africa (Afro-Eurasia) – the largest, most populous, and richest of all possible land combinations. The offshore islands included the British Isles and the islands of Japan. The outlying islands included the continents of North America, South America, and Australia (Figure 1). The Heartland lay at the centre of the World-Island, stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic.

Mackinder's Heartland was the then Russian Empire, minus the Kamchatka Peninsula in the easternmost part of Russia. He claimed that the physical geography of 'the Heartland' made it a natural fortress, penetrable only via eastern Europe, and this made control of eastern Europe the key to world domination. Mackinder also suggested that, since the 'Columbian Epoch' (broadly, the era since the European 'discovery' of the Americas) had come to an end in the nineteenth century, the world's great powers would soon turn their attention to gaining control of strategically important territory (Kearns, 2010). Mackinder's theory undoubtedly reflects the era of its creation.

Scholars such as Kearns (2010) and Ó Tuathail (1992) have worked to situate Mackinder's writings in their original ideological and historical context. Mackinder was an imperialist; at the turn of the twentieth century, he – like many others – was concerned that the British Empire was in decline (Dodds and Sidaway, 2004). This fear was stoked by Britain's military setbacks in the Second Boer War (1899–1902) and nationalist challenges to colonial rule in Ireland, Egypt and India (Ó Tuathail, 1992) and exacerbated by reports that many working-age men in Britain were unfit to fight (Kearns, 2010), a continuation of an ongoing Victorian neurosis that became known as the 'Condition

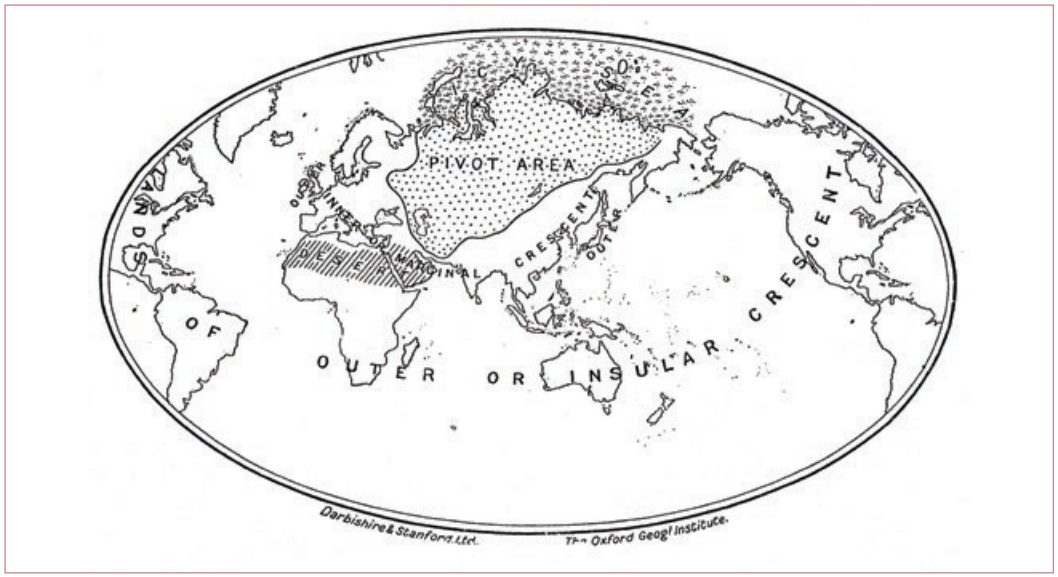

Figure 1: Mackinder's Heartland theory.
Source: Wikipedia

of England' question. Mackinder was particularly alarmed by developments in Russia, including the construction of railways with the capability to distribute fuel and food to the new Russian territories. Mackinder feared this could form the basis of a new land-power that Britain's empire was ill-equipped to withstand. Mackinder's theory can, therefore, be viewed as a warning to the British establishment (Kearns, 2010).

Mackinder's concerns were amplified by his belief that 'the English' were unique; through his work, he sought to protect their exceptionalism (Mackinder, 1925, p. 726). This view was bolstered by social Darwinism (races are biologically bound to compete for survival) and environmental determinism (people's environments determine their behaviour). These concepts were common currency in fin de siècle Britain. Mackinder thought that England's environment had facilitated the growth of justice, liberty and good government; moreover, he believed that the English should impart these characteristics to peoples whose own environments prevented them from 'naturally' developing similar institutions and customs (Kearns, 2004). Mackinder did acknowledge that people had some agency, but that 'in the long run nature reasserts her supremacy' (Mackinder, 1895, p. 375). This was not an unusual view at the time (although there were critics). Mackinder used his view of British exceptionalism to justify British imperialism.

Believing that there were no more 'blank spaces' to discover and describe, Mackinder called for a change in geography; he wanted the discipline to move away from description and towards 'geographical explanation' (Kearns, 2010). He linked his 'new geography' and the teaching of geography in British schools with securing the future of the British Empire (Kearns, 2004). He played an important role in the establishment of geography as a school subject and was a founding member of the Geographical Association. His theories were influential beyond his time and beyond the discipline of geography. Some of his ideas influenced the work of the German school of 'geopolitik', which in turn fed into the Nazi concept of 'lebensraum'. His work also shaped the United States' foreign policy during the Cold War; it helped form the 'domino theory' – the idea that if one country (e.g. Vietnam) fell to communism the surrounding countries would also fall – and the policy of containment. Debates about the origins and afterlife of Mackinder's theories are fascinating and fractious in equal measure.

Contextualising *Prisoners of Geography*

It was knowing about Mackinder's theories and the field of geopolitics that enabled me to question some of Marshall's claims. For example, because I was aware of the debate about environmental determinism and human agency, his remark that 'President Putin did not have much of a choice – he had to annex Crimea' jarred with me (Marshall, 2015, p. 16). Dombey (2015) contends that Marshall actually goes beyond Mackinder, setting out an even more deterministic version of geopolitics.

To enable my students to critique Marshall's work effectively, I had to ensure that they had secure knowledge about Mackinder and his world. I used a patchwork of different sources – extracts from the journal articles mentioned above, summaries of alternative views from Mackinder's time and brief biographies – to build my students' knowledge. To structure the layers of context that I wanted students to bring to their reading of *Prisoners of Geography*, I used a concentric circle diagram to allow students to 'place' Marshall and Mackinder into their different contexts (Figure 2). Without this knowledge, there was a risk that students would view Marshall's text as a 'silo of facts' about geopolitics, as opposed to a theory about geopolitics.

While teaching these lessons, I noticed that this knowledge enabled students to participate in an informed and meaningful manner in discussions about alternative 'futures' to the one offered by Marshall. Providing this context led to various other questions that students asked and answered: how have Marshall's arguments been shaped by Mackinder's theories? Does Marshall take Mackinder too far? Are Mackinder's theories still relevant today?

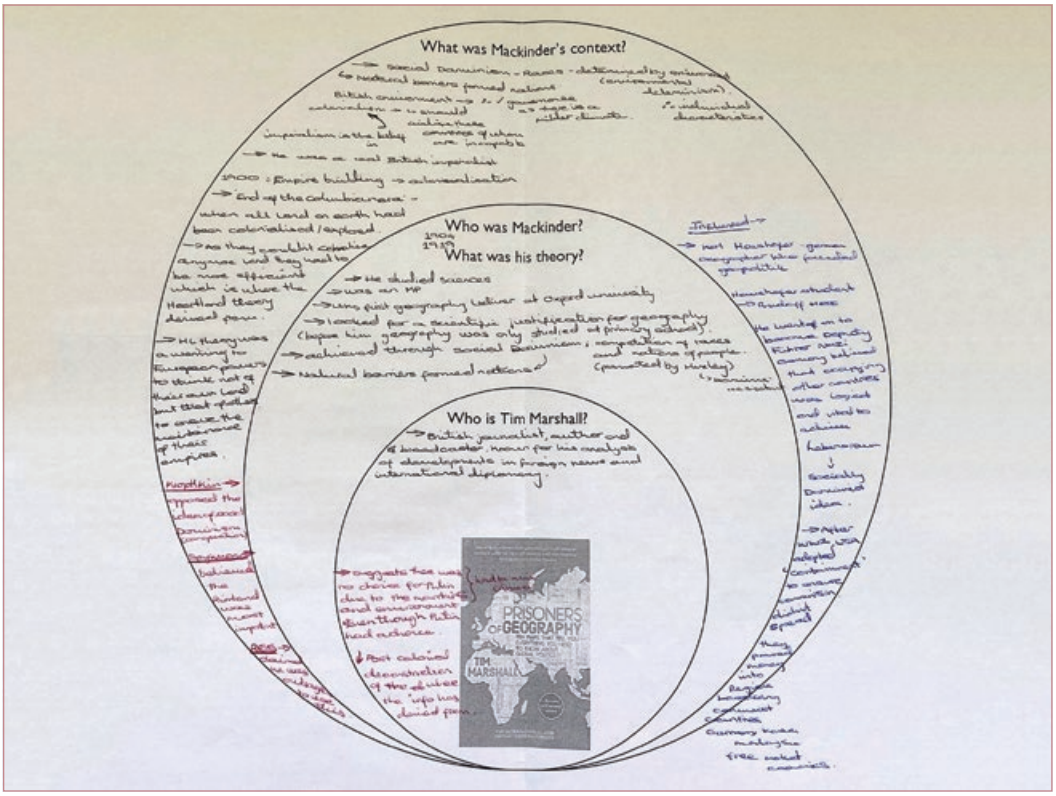

Figure 2: An example of student work using concentric rings to explore the context of *Prisoners of Geography*.

Disciplinary discussions

Initially, all I had aimed to do was equip students to approach *Prisoners of Geography* in a more informed manner. An unexpected consequence of this contextualisation was that it encouraged them to think about 'what' geography is and 'where' the discipline has come from. For example, Mackinder's assertion that the 'Columbian Epoch' had come to an end led students to discuss how geography's past is entwined with empire building. Another student noted that they had not previously thought 'that geography had a history'. Further to this, several students also said that they had previously thought of geography as 'neutral', but that this contextualisation had showed them how the discipline could be applied for political means, and that its purpose as a field of study has been and can be contested. Contextualising and critiquing *Prisoners of Geography*, then, had provided students with a way into complex debates about geography's epistemology.

The process of contextualising Marshall's work shaped the way students approached the rest of the 'Superpowers' topic. When they encountered world systems theory, dependency theory and Rostow's model, some students began asking who created these theories, when they were created and what agendas could have informed them. Equipping students with the contextual knowledge that I brought to my own reading of *Prisoners of Geography* enabled them to see that authors put forward theories as well as facts, and use facts and theories to make arguments about our world. Ultimately, this knowledge challenged students' ideas about the discipline, allowed them to explore the history of geography and gave them an insight into how geographical knowledge can be constructed and contested. | **TG**

Online resources
Figure 2 is available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching-geography and select Summer 2020.

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