Central Place Theory After 1945 and the Production of Scientific Innocence

Laboratory of Military Ecotones

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Slide 1. Central Place Theory After 1945 and the Production of Scientific Innocence

00:00–00:56 / 56 seconds

I first encountered central place theory when I was about nineteen. I am now sixty-nine. For much of that half-century, I knew it through accounts of a beautiful theoretical construction: hexagons, settlement hierarchies and service areas. I also knew the familiar difficulty of connecting its ordered geometry with the development of real settlement systems. I learned about Christaller's work in National Socialist territorial planning much later. That changed the question. What had my education and the literature made visible, and what had they left outside the theory's scientific meaning? This presentation, under the authorship of the Laboratory of Military Ecotones, examines that separation. It addresses professional responsibility, the political purpose of wartime planning, and the post-war creation of an apparently innocent scientific classic.

Slide 2. A familiar theory and a missing history

00:56–01:55 / 59 seconds

My personal experience introduces the problem. It does not replace a history of the discipline. The literature through which I learned the theory foregrounded its elegance and discussed difficulties within its formal framework. The people who occupied the territories Christaller later planned did not enter that discussion as a constitutive part of the problem. A student could learn the model and its limitations while remaining ignorant of its author's institutional work. This is a powerful form of disciplinary selection. It teaches us which questions belong to the theory and which questions count merely as background. Once that distinction becomes routine, the model can circulate for decades without requiring its users to confront the practical project in which the author employed it. Our investigation concerns the production and reproduction of that distinction.

Slide 3. The research question

01:55–02:49 / 54 seconds

The question is how central place theory acquired a scientific identity detached from Christaller's wartime work. We examine the original publications alongside institutional history and post-war representations. The conference paper supplies the interpretation. The critical bibliography supplies a route back to texts that diagrammatic summaries usually omit. The analysis proceeds calmly. A planning office, a commission and a publication can be investigated without sympathetic speculation about the expert's predicament. We ask what

work the expert performed and what territorial programme that work served. We also ask what the receiving discipline chose to preserve. The claim concerns a transformation in the meaning of knowledge: professional recognition retained the useful model while accounts of the model made its political function dispensable.

Slide 4. The chronology that the analysis must retain

02:49–03:45 / 56 seconds

The chronology matters. Christaller completed the dissertation in 1932 and published the book in 1933. His later work in National Socialist planning cannot be projected backwards as proof that every initial proposition originated in a wartime commission. That would weaken the historical argument. The record establishes something substantial without that shortcut: the author subsequently developed and used his spatial expertise within a programme of conquest and German settlement. His wartime texts belong to the history of the theory. They are not an accidental encounter between an untouched abstraction and an unrelated user. The critical task is to reconstruct the transition from an explanatory model to a normative planning instrument, and then to examine how post-war geography separated the model from that documented transition.

Slide 5. Professional work inside Himmler's apparatus

03:45–04:44 / 59 seconds

Christaller worked in the Planning and Soil Department under Konrad Meyer within Himmler's apparatus. His contribution concerned the organization of settlements and administration in conquered territories. That institutional position defines the relevant responsibility. He supplied expertise to a programme that assigned a future to territory while denying its existing inhabitants the right to determine that future. Planning expertise helped turn political objectives into workable spatial proposals. The usual defence, that a scholar was simply continuing his professional work, removes the purpose of the commission from the assessment of the work. We reject that removal. Professional continuity describes how participation became possible. It cannot establish innocence. The question is concrete: which decisions and arrangements did the expert help the institution formulate, and which populations did those arrangements accommodate or exclude?

Slide 6. The territory was inhabited

04:44–05:43 / 59 seconds

The planning surface was inhabited. Jewish communities and Polish and other non-German populations lived there before conquest. Nazi policy subjected them to dispossession, deportation, forced displacement and mass murder. Those processes differed across places and groups. Together they belong to the history of the territorial project. German settlement was planned within that machinery of domination. We do not attribute the entire apparatus of extermination to a settlement model. We establish the functional relation between expert planning and a state programme that destroyed existing communities. A geometrical representation can remove those communities twice: first the political project removes their entitlement to remain, and then the scientific account removes the process from what the reader needs to understand. The clean surface is an achieved representation. It was never a naturally vacant territory.

Slide 7. An imposed hierarchy

05:43–06:41 / 58 seconds

This schematic shows the familiar hexagonal service areas, with higher- and lower-order centres. In wartime planning, central places provided a framework for an imposed hierarchy. Centres received functions, service territories and administrative roles. Existing settlement patterns could be altered to fit the proposed order. The scientific problem was therefore different from explaining how a living settlement system developed through its own history. The planner was helping specify the system that should exist after conquest and demographic transformation. Formal coherence made the proposal easier to communicate and administer. It did not determine who had the right to occupy the territory. That decision came from political power. The geometry operated within it. Restoring that relationship changes how we read the diagram: we see a proposed arrangement with conditions of implementation, including the treatment of the people whom the abstract surface leaves unrepresented.

Slide 8. The planned endpoint: a final stop

06:41–07:50 / 69 seconds

This brings us to the apparent absence of development. Our interpretation concerns the political horizon of the wartime application. The objective was to install an intended order after conquest, removal and resettlement. That is the sense in which I call it a final stop. The model's orderly endpoint matters more than the historical trajectories of the communities displaced by its implementation. We should state the argument accurately. A static model alone cannot prove a Nazi intention. Nor did the original book literally omit every discussion of development. Even its subtitle refers to development. The critical point is the difference between explaining open historical change and prescribing the arrangement toward which a coercive programme should move. There could be years of construction and settlement on the route to that endpoint. The endpoint remained politically assigned. This interpretation makes the model's role in the wartime project intelligible without inventing a claim that history physically ceased.

Slide 9. The debate about settlement development

07:50–08:54 / 64 seconds

For years, researchers have tried to reconcile central place theory with the development of settlement systems. That can be a legitimate theoretical task. It becomes historically misleading when the canonical model carries the authority of a general account while the purpose of its wartime use disappears. A theory used to prescribe a replacement geography does not automatically explain the development of the geography it proposes to replace. Later additions can supply mechanisms of change, but those additions require explicit justification. My criticism concerns the level of reflection in a community that repeatedly discusses formal difficulties while leaving the institutional project outside the discussion. The historical question is indispensable: what kind of settlement process was the author trying to describe, direct or terminate? We cannot answer it by reproducing a hexagon. We have to read the relevant work and identify its task.

Slide 10. Post-war geography needed a usable predecessor

08:54–09:57 / 63 seconds

The post-war reconstruction had a disciplinary function. The new geography needed a history in which formal theory appeared as the discipline's path forward. Christaller offered a recognizable predecessor. An elegant diagram could stand for an entire intellectual contribution. Von Thünen's rings and Christaller's hexagons became familiar representations of theoretical geography. Our paper interprets this selection as the production of a usable past. The useful abstraction received emphasis. The inconvenient institutional work became optional context. This operation did not require every geographer to participate in a coordinated concealment. Teaching routines and repeated summaries could reproduce the separation. Critical historical scholarship also existed, which rules out the claim that the context disappeared from all publications. The problem is its exclusion from the canonical meaning of the theory, where readers could continue to admire the construction without confronting its author's practical role.

Slide 11. An origin story centred on discovery

09:57–10:47 / 50 seconds

Christaller's retrospective account supplied another way to organize memory. The German account appeared in 1968 and an English version in 1972. A story centred on observation, curiosity and discovery directs attention toward the individual thinker. The institutional career can then seem separate from the theory's origin and meaning. We examine that effect. We do not need to invent a secret agreement between the author and his later readers. An autobiographical text is evidence of how its author represented his past. Its omissions and emphasis require comparison with publications and institutional records from the periods concerned. Scientific recognition should never give an author exclusive authority over the history of his own contribution.

Slide 12. Career priority and scientific responsibility

10:47–11:48 / 61 seconds

The professional mechanism is ordinary enough to be disturbing. Important commissions offer access, recognition and an opportunity to make expertise consequential. A career can continue while the state pursues criminal objectives. The claim that an expert had to earn a living answers a biographical question. It does not answer the question of responsibility for the work performed. In Christaller's case, the career and the territorial commission have to be considered together. After the war, another professional interest entered the picture: geography's need for a successful theoretical ancestor. The discipline could preserve the product by detaching the author's institutional participation from its scientific significance. We call that production of scientific innocence. It concerns the historical account that enables recognition. It does not mean that a mathematical relation loses validity because its author served a criminal regime.

Slide 13. Why this belongs at this conference

11:48–12:42 / 54 seconds

This case belongs at a conference on war and its environmental legacies because the organization of knowledge shapes how we investigate transformed environments. War

destroys and reorganizes settlement and land use. Expertise can support those interventions. Subsequent scientific accounts determine whether the violence remains part of the explanation or becomes irrelevant background. The Christaller case does not establish a chemical contamination pathway. It establishes a historical problem about the relation between expert work, state purpose and disciplinary memory. That problem matters whenever a technical account begins with an apparently available territory and leaves the process that made it available outside the frame. An adequate account of war's consequences must investigate that process and the role of expertise within it.

Slide 14. Key takeaways

12:42–13:39 / 57 seconds

The central conclusion is that scientific innocence is a product of historical selection. In this case, a useful spatial model circulated with an account that made the author's wartime work dispensable. We have identified the professional logic of participation, the political conditions of the planning surface and the disciplinary interest in an elegant predecessor. Our interpretation of the planned endpoint explains why the development question must include historical purpose. These propositions do not require sympathy toward the expert or toward the community that reconstructed his legacy. They require records and careful distinctions. We can assess the formal usefulness of a model while examining the work its author performed and the history its users teach. A scientific community remains responsible for the context it makes irrelevant.

Slide 15. Sources and the critical bibliography

13:39–14:08 / 29 seconds

The conference publication presents the interpretation. The critical bibliography connects it with Christaller's original texts, including the wartime planning publications and the retrospective account. Historical studies by Rössler, Barnes and Minca provide the institutional reconstruction. These sources allow the argument to be examined beyond a textbook diagram. The closing QR code opens the bibliography, with original-language titles and publication details for further investigation.

Slide 16. What did the discipline make irrelevant?

14:08–15:00 / 52 seconds

I return to the point at which I began. I learned the elegant theory when I was about nineteen. I learned its political and institutional history much later. The gap between those encounters is the subject of this presentation. A discipline transmits more than propositions. It transmits a decision about which histories a reader must know. In this case, career continuity and theoretical value became compatible with an account that detached violent territorial planning from scientific meaning. Our task is to reconstruct that detachment and its consequences. The theory's canonical beauty cannot answer the historical question. We have to restore the work, the institutions and the people that the inherited representation left outside.

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illustration on slide 7 is an original schematic, not a reproduced figure. https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000201_000010_BJVVV1000271/

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Speaker guidance

The timed slide sections contain the spoken text. The personal opening states Dmitry Nikolaenko’s account of his experience. The “final stop” argument interprets the prescribed endpoint of the wartime application. The chronology distinguishes the original formulation from subsequent Nazi planning. Suggested timings total fifteen minutes at approximately 132 words per minute. The full reference list and this guidance are outside the speaking time.