

Cartography is Dead (Thank God!)

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Let's admit it. Cartography is dead. And then let's thank our lucky stars that after **the** better part of a century mapmaking is freeing itself from the dead hand of academia.

That's the crux of the matter: even as cartography was shanghaiing mapmaking, university geography departments were shanghaiing cartography. Some mapmakers were happy to "upgrade" their calling by shedding the craft implications of "making" and taking on the title of "professor," but in general mapmaking imperatives were too universal to be constrained this way and so, no matter how badly university-based cartographers demanded it, few noticed, and even fewer paid attention to the attempts to make mapmaking a profession. Throughout this period - which we might call the Age of Cartography - people with every kind of background continued to make every conceivable kind of map. Today it's harder and harder for even cartographers to pretend they have much relevance.

How many people attended NACIS XXIII? A hundred-fifty? I've been told that 11,000 people took part in the most recent ESRI user's conference. Mapmaking? *By all means!* Cartography? *What's cartography?*

But then, easy come, easy go.

When I tell people cartography's not much better than a hundred years old they stare at me like I'm crazy. Pointing to words like "pre-historic," "ancient," and "medieval" in, for example, the title of the first volume of the Harley and Woodward *History of Cartography* they ask me, "What are you talking about?" The facts are simple enough: as far as we know "cartography" was coined as a Portuguese neologism ("cartographia") by the Viscount de Santarem in 1839. Helen Wallis and Arthur Robinson say that the word "was quickly picked up and applied to the making of maps," and that "mapmakers were soon calling themselves cartographers." In fact, "cartography" is not attested to by the Oxford English Dictionary until 1859, "cartographer" not until 1863, "cartographic" not until 1880 (in the phrase "the cartographical art being only in its infancy"), and "cartogram" not until 1890 (and not in its modern sense until 1934). The word seems only gradually to have caught on, in fact, precisely as the subject to which it referred was making its way into the halls of academe. Imagine trying to justify a faculty position in "mapmaking." "Cartography" sounds *so* much more respectable.

In 1962 Erwin Raisz pointed out that, "In 1920 there were only two universities giving courses in cartography. At present the number is well over a hundred." As we know, the number continued to rise into the early 1990s, when it began to decline. The signs are everywhere that this decline will accelerate. I'm betting that none of the positions currently occupied by cartographers will be filled with them once they fall vacant. Cartography will turn out to have been a mid-twentieth century phenomenon.

The *field's* dead. We're just waiting for the death rattle. The *word* will stick around a while (words do), but its day is passing too.

It has to. Take its use in phrases like "the history of cartography" or "cartographical innovations." Applied to mapmaking prior to 1839 - to pick the earliest *conceivable* date - the word is at best anachronistic, at

worst unpardonably presumptuous. Conflating the history of mapmaking with that of cartography is like conflating the history of walking with that of the automobile. Were the history of the automobile written like we write the history of cartography, volumes of it would be devoted to the invention of sandals, of shoes. It's not just silly, it denies the novelty of the innovation when it arrives. If "cartography" does survive, it will only be to refer to the practice of academic cartography in the twentieth century.

Not the nineteenth?

No, the word was too new then. It was still searching for its proper subject and form. It had yet to entrench itself. This only happened once those calling themselves cartographers entrenched themselves in universities and the related government bureaucracies.

Mapmaking didn't endure this professionalization alone. What happened to mapmaking happened to a range of practices as part of a general professionalization, an "embourgeoisment," of what we might call the "white collar" trades. Apprenticeships vanished to be replaced with schooling. Names were changed. They were Latinized. Gravediggers became morticians. Newshounds became journalists. Teachers became educators. Sawbones became doctors. Mapmakers became cartographers. Ivan Illich refers to the middle of the twentieth century as The Age of Disabling Professions, "disabling" because the professionalization of so much life-work tended to disable non-professionals from imagining they could ... bury a body, start a newspaper, teach, care for their own health, make a map.

To give a perfectly parallel example, it was in the middle of the nineteenth century that Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux coined the phrase "landscape architects" for themselves. "Landscape architect" caught on as a way to designate those who designed gardens, parks, campuses, residential precincts, even cities. In 1900 Harvard created the first landscape architecture department. The number of departments increased only slowly, but it exploded after World War II. Soon enough histories of landscape architecture were being written. Need I say that these historians discovered prehistoric, ancient, and medieval landscape architecture? Today landscape architects too are falling on harder times as civil engineers, architects, city planners (who broke from landscape architecture in the 1920s), park and playground designers (from new schools in forestry and natural resources), gardeners, earth artists, and others take on the design of gardens, parks, playgrounds, subdivisions, cities.

Strong professions organize to prevent the practice of their mysteries by outsiders - Illich thinks about professions as cults - by conning legislatures into passing licensure laws. Weaker professions settle for certification programs. The weakest get along as they can. It's against the law to practice law or medicine without a license. Public school teachers and accountants need to be certified. *Anyone* can call him- or herself an interior decorator or a cartographer. But all professions alike repel threats to the integrity of their professionalism by denigrating nonprofessional work as at best incompetent, and at worst as dangerous, threatening, even evil. Since the plain fact is that almost all maps are, and always have been, made by nonprofessionals (at least nonprofessional *cartographers*), cartography as a profession has been comparatively quiet about the quality of nonprofessional work. It has generally contented itself with encouraging what it has seen as good. But when threatened, it has responded with full professional hauteur.

Classic was its reaction to the Peters' map. Arno Peters' map was ignored until its prominence and sales soared. Then it was attacked on all

fronts: the map was ugly, the projection was stolen, and Peters wasn't a cartographer but (gasp!) a journalist-propagandist for (double gasp!) left-ist causes. When this strategy failed to stem the map's growing popularity, the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping issued a fatwa against not just the Peters' but all rectangular world maps. This had the useful effect of damning the Peter's along with the Mercator (which Peters was using as a straw map to advocate for the superiority of his own projection), while seeming to attack neither. The feint fooled no one: *in order to castigate the Peters' and the Mercator, the ACSM was prepared to excommunicate an entire class of projections.* Nearly the entire profession endorsed this idiotic resolution. Signing on were the American Cartographic Association, the American Geographical Society, the Association of American Geographers, the Canadian Cartographic Association, the National Geographic Society (but not NACIS). The resolution's complete lack of effect - its *laughable* lack of effect - demonstrated to one and all *how little authority the profession had.*

This was in 1989. It was, in its way, the death knell of the profession. GIS and ESRI just rolled the corpse over the cliff.

The whole episode in its rigid prissiness - whose holier-than-thou tone attracts professional apologists even today! - made it really clear why the profession had to go: it was in the way. *Of what?* Of the ongoing evolution of human - not cartographic - mapmaking. The thing is, when it comes to mapmaking *there are no outsiders*, no more than there are outsiders when it comes to speaking or writing English. These are birthrights of the members of our society, who acquire the ability to speak and make maps as they grow up in it. Speaking and mapmaking are not like open-heart surgery or professional basketball which do require specialized training and years of practice. You can't just step into the shoes of an NBA player and expect to score. You can't just claw your way into your friend's chest and repair her heart no matter how insistently her situation calls for it. But when a communication situation calls for speaking or making a map, you can just open your mouth (or attack the keyboard) or pick up your pen (or your mouse).

I have no interest in denying that specialized training and years of practice can transform stumbling speech into eloquence, or a crude sketch map into a penetrating analysis; but surprisingly, training and practice are no guarantee of either. What seems to promote both are situations that call for them and people who are willing to rise to the challenge. I'm thinking at the moment of Gwendolyn Warren's need to map where Detroit commuters ran over black kids on the Pointes-Downtown track, but I could just as easily be thinking of John Snow grappling with the nature of cholera or Tom Van Sant with the fragility of the earth. I could be thinking of Joseph Minard's compulsion to map Napoleon's losses on his Russian campaign or of Woody Sullivan's to map the earth's electromagnetic radiation (and so produce the first map of the earth at night). I could be thinking of Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Map to which he was driven by his conviction that "spaceship earth" required a new way of being seen if its global reality were to be grasped, but I could as well be thinking of William Smith's "Delineation of the Strata of England and Wales with Part of Scotland" to which *he* was driven by *his* conviction that the earth required a new way of being seen if its *geologic* reality were to be grasped. I could be thinking of Kevin Lynch's "mental maps" of Boston, or of Harry Beck's map of the London Underground, but just as easily -

It's a long list, this of landmark maps made by people who were anything but professional cartographers, who were, in the cases above, "a black person of Detroit," a man of medicine, an artist, an engineer, an astronomer, a designer/engineer/architect/ visionary, "a canal digger,"

an urban planner, an engineering draughtsman ... The communications situations they found themselves in called for maps and, as humans in map-immersed societies, they made maps in response. Thousands and thousands and thousands of mapmakers, trained in anything but cartography, do this everyday, many of them making their living at it, and many of the maps they make are as fine as any that have ever been made. Some of them, like the examples above, are sure to change the way we think about the world, and about maps.

There's a lot that cartographers have learned that is useful and valuable - I have no interest in belittling the positive contributions made by the generations of academic cartographers - but there's a lot that was dead wood to begin with, and is so rotten today it's threatening the rest of it. All the prescriptive bullshit, every map must have a legend and a scale - all that - ignored in fact on a gazillion effective, useful maps, all that has to stop. And design! Academic cartographers have never understood a thing - *not a thing* - about design. God knows that, as a group, the *least* interesting, *least* attractive, *least* significant maps have been made by university cartographers: all that design talk, *from design illiterates*, that's got to stop. And the hectoring of committed, driven people —*you can't change scale in a Xerox machine* - that's not helpful either. What would be helpful would be to offer professional *assistance*, on bended knee if necessary, to all the people trying to ameliorate their situation by mapping it: the First Peoples who have come to realize it's map or be mapped; the impoverished locals trying to grapple with the impact of transnational mining, logging, and industrial development; people concerned about the rapid deterioration of their environment; people trying to get a handle on the concept of place ...

Cartographers played a significant role in making the world safe for colonizers, mining conglomerates, and the military. We need to pay a little back. There's no saving the profession. *It's over*. But as it fades away there's still an opportunity to leave a legacy we could contemplate without shame. That can't be beyond our reach.

For twenty-five years Denis Wood taught landscape architecture design studios and the history of landscape architecture as a professor in the School of Design at North Carolina State University. His Five Billion Years of Global Change was just published by Guilford Press.