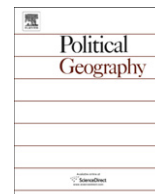




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Review Essay

Maps and power

Mapping: A critical introduction to cartography and GIS, Jeremy Crampton. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA and Oxford (2010).

Rethinking the power of maps, Denis Wood, John Fels, John Krygier. The Guilford Press, New York and London (2010).

For many people, geography is inconceivable without maps. That does not mean that maps are a universal form of human expression, as some will contend. Rather it diagnoses a particular spatial order that is often taken to be natural or even unchangeable, a conception of the world that passes for a kind of geographical common sense (Gramsci, 1971: 9). Introductory courses in geography affirm this approach, routinely using maps to convey the basic knowledge necessary for understanding key concepts and ideas. Still other courses teach students the “right” way to make maps as a fundamentally technical skill rather than a political activity. The advent of new geospatial technologies such as Google Earth and OpenStreetMap have made this task more interesting with their claims to “democratize” map-making. And yet these changes can no more be understood as manifestations of an abstract concept of democracy than they can be understood in terms of technology alone. Rather they have to be understood in terms of the social processes that shape the perception of maps as necessary, compelling people to read and now make maps in ever-greater numbers. Two recent works, by Denis Wood and Jeremy Crampton, advance this approach to mapping as a fundamentally social process. Though informed by debates in critical cartography, both works move beyond concerns with mapping techniques and artifacts (cf. Harley, 2001). Instead they explore how power works *through* maps, informing how they are made, read, and otherwise used.

For the better part of three decades (and counting), Denis Wood has persuasively argued that maps work in the “service of the state” by bringing into being a “socialized space” whose order is both constitutive of and guaranteed by the state. Maps do this not by representing reality but rather by “encoding” perceptions of the space within which reality transpires, providing individuals with a means of making sense of the complexity of everyday life that in turn shapes behavior. The great achievement of this process is thus “the ceaseless reproduction of the culture that brings maps into being” (Wood, 2010: 1; see also Wood, 1992). That culture (society?) is not unified by a single map, much less a shared reality, so much as it is organized by a common perspective on the world that makes government by states seem not only necessary but also inevitable. The ability to “see like a state” – to use Scott’s (1998) phrase – is most readily apparent in “political” maps that depict the terrestrial world as exhaustively categorized into

mutually exclusive sovereign territories. Wood’s singular contribution to the field has long been to demonstrate how a similar perspective works through more mundane maps such as the North Carolina State Highway Map or the pull-out map inserts found in *National Geographic* (Wood & Fels, 1986, 2008). In each instance, maps work by presenting a reality that is “just out of reach”, conveying a view that is at once at odds with peoples’ experiences at the same time that it helps make sense of them, inciting readers to bring the reality depicted by the map into being (see also Olsson, 2007). Wood relies on Barthian semiotics to develop his analysis, showing how this work is done every time a map is read or used (see also Krygier & Wood, 2005; Wood, 1993; Wood & Fels, 1986, 2008). These arguments are given a reprise in *Rethinking the Power of Maps* with the intent of providing a “sustained meditation on the relation of the map and the state” (Wood, 2010: 1). That effort here is complemented by the inclusion of new work that surveys efforts by indigenous peoples, artists, and community groups – many of them inspired by Wood’s work – to use maps to challenge the authority of the state, exploring the potential and limitations of “counter-mapping”.

As compelling as much of his argument is, Wood’s notion of the state as a monolithic, map-wielding entity is problematic in a number of regards. Among other things, it would seem to be an artifact of his reliance on semiotic readings of maps. Indeed, nowhere do states appear more monolithic – at least in spatial terms – than on maps. Much as this is a key function of maps, it leads Wood to conceive of power in overly idealized terms. The problems with that approach further compromise the intriguing discussion of “counter-mapping” that comprises the second half of the text. In it, Wood surveys efforts by indigenous peoples, parish residents, artists, Palestinians, and even a few geographers to change the world with maps. Wood lumps these efforts together under the heading of “counter-mapping”, forming a category that unites politically disparate efforts in terms of their shared opposition to the state. The outcomes of these efforts are decidedly mixed. On one end of the spectrum are indigenous peoples, whose initial use of maps to secure land and resources necessary for their collective well-being has been subsumed in many instances by a preoccupation with securing state recognition of legally-enshrined rights. Among other things, this has led to greater adherence to cartographic conventions accompanied by an increased tendency to conceive of space in terms of property rights, reproducing the state and capitalism as hegemonic forms of power and economy (see also Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). As Wood notes, this shift has led such unlikely actors as the World Bank and the US Army to take an interest in participatory mapping. The increasingly conventional approach to mapping indigenous lands contrasts with artists’ success in challenging dominant understandings of space through manipulating cartographic conventions. Consistent with his semiotic reading of maps, Wood’s assessment of their success makes

visual sense. But map artists' flaunting of cartographic conventions no more guarantees social change than indigenous peoples' appropriation of cartographic conventions, much less a discussion of the vastly different conditions under which those maps are made, read, and used. Reality, as it were, is always much messier than either maps or a clear-cut opposition between the state and people would imply.

Wood's concluding chapter on the mapping of Palestine acknowledges many of these points, exchanging the formality of semiotics for the "swamp of map use" (Wood, 1993: 50) to present a much more complex understanding of the relationship between maps and the state. Easily the most intriguing chapter of the book, Wood's account provides a glimpse into the rich possibilities for mapping as both a method and topic for research. Zionists, rather than Palestinians, are the authors of the counter-map of record in Wood's estimation, skillfully overwriting the British colonial origins of its territory with claims to Israel as the 3000 year-old homeland of a single population. Palestinian maps do not counter the logic of this claim so much as they provide a symbol of national identity that shadows Israeli claims. Wood points out how this territorial logic reduces the complexity of the situation to a simple binary of Israel/Palestine. This formulation further benefits the state, making any resolution of the conflict ultimately a matter of what Israel (and other states) are willing to recognize. The map does not advance a unified set of interests, as Wood argues in the first half of the book. Instead it is generative of them. The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's phrase "victims of a map" never rang more true. Yet the problem is not simply a matter of cartography. It is a problem of geography broadly construed, raising questions about the underlying notions of space that maps bring into being and that make mapping possible.

Jeremy Crampton's *Mapping: a Critical Introduction to Cartography and GIS* takes up the latter point, using a Foucauldian concept of power as fundamentally relational to approach mapping as social practice. Instead of working in the service of the state, Crampton demonstrates how maps align heterogeneous perspectives, providing a means of bringing them under state control. This point is compellingly illustrated in Crampton's chapter on geosurveillance that traces how strategies of total observation historically associated with authoritarian regimes have come to be viewed as necessary for protecting democratic societies from "outside" threats (Crampton, 2010: 116). Wood's fear of an all-powerful state is thus subsumed by fear that the state will not be powerful enough to protect its citizens from an external threat. Put differently, "counter-mapping" is not so much driven by opposition to an all-powerful state as by a desire to be governed. In place of an opposition between state and society, in other words, there exists a gradation of perspectives unified in their commitment to governing problems. Here Crampton draws attention to the process of mapping itself as diagnostic of power relations, informing what can and cannot be mapped to say nothing of the perceived need to map in the first place. Like Wood, Crampton's most poignant examples of this come through engagement with artists. Yet where Wood draws attention to the visual success of their efforts, Crampton is more concerned with how the artistic process itself elicits critical engagement with how mapping brings the world as we know it into being. This phenomenological approach builds on similar approaches developed by Pickles (2004), among others, linking them to geographers' more recent engagements with the works of Martin Heidegger (Crampton, 2010: 109–111). The sophistication of Crampton's approach is enhanced by the clarity of its presentation, allowing the text to admirably perform its stated task of introducing a critical perspective on space. It also passes as a compelling history of geography as a discipline.

Curiously missing from the text, however, is an engagement with mapping techniques themselves. This is all the more striking given Crampton's calls for critical cartography to develop its "one-two punch" of theoretically informed critique and knowledge of mapping techniques (Crampton, 2010: 16–17; see also Crampton & Krygier, 2005). While more exhaustive than Wood's effort, Crampton's cataloging of mapping techniques lacks anything that compares to Wood's close reading of particular maps. This is particularly beguiling in the too brief discussion of OpenStreet-Maps and Google Earth that Crampton characterizes as part of the "democratization of cartography" (Crampton, 2010: 37). Here a little bit of semiotics would go a long way, exploring how power relations work through the respective kinds of mapping that both technologies make possible. This omission leads Crampton to certain conclusions that seem untenable, most notably in his call for geographers to stop using race-based data. Crampton's admittedly "French" solution is not without merit in arguing that making race visible on maps helps racialize space (and spatialize race) in ways that make racism possible (Crampton, 2010: 158). Political maps and Google Earth, to take two examples, already do this without challenging the common sense understandings of race as a spatial phenomenon that Crampton critiques. Moreover, where would this approach leave efforts to use maps to make spatial patterns of racialized exclusion visible? Crampton contends that such efforts invariably run the risk of reproducing the very racial categories that undergird the practices of racism they seek to contest (see also Hale, 2005; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). And yet it would seem that race can be no more easily dismissed than maps.

The criticism raised here, however, should be regarded as supplementing, rather than detracting, from the merits of both works. Common sense, geographic or otherwise, should not be critiqued for its veracity alone. Rather, as Crampton points out, critique should be used to leverage new modes of thought and action (see also Gramsci, 1971: 9). Both Wood and Crampton contribute substantially to this effort, underscoring the importance of mapping, as broadly construed, as both an important topic for geographical inquiry and as a method for understanding how power relations work spatially. The merits of this approach are thus not purely concerns of research. They are also pedagogical, asking overdue questions about why and how maps are used. Given the effects of those practices discussed in both books, these are questions that are too important to be ignored. They are also questions that are too important to be left to geographers alone.

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