THE PROBLEM OF CARTOGRAPHY: *FROM SINGULAR TO PLURAL MAPPING*

Annelys de Vet

The traditional appearance of geographical maps often represents and reproduces singular and hegemonic world views. Moreover, maps regularly derive in more singular production processes. The reading of the map here is not a technical one, but a political and relational one. It is in plurality that we can encounter the many different ways of relating to space and stimulate more interdependent understandings. In order for maps to represent a multitude of factors, they need to come into being through the work of a multitude of map-makers. This essay argues for more participative map-making methods in order to foster shared authorship and collective belonging to a place.

Maps are an excellent graphic tool for non-linear storytelling and for affirming relationality. Their visualization, their design is not only concerned with final results, but also regards the conditions of making: how can maps be produced and imagined, and by who? The design process can catalyse the activation and articulation of locally anchored knowledge and experiences in order to make space for existing realities that are barely visible because of the hegemonic gaze that maps traditionally create. This leads us to the field of counter-mapping, where questions of methodology, transparency and the positionality of the map-maker are inherently posed. It's a (design) field that stimulates increased attunement to situated and plural approaches to humanize cartography. Here, design as a practice—and designers as practitioners—can play a meaningful role in facilitating these processes.

The politics of maps

The etymology of the word 'geography' goes back to the ancient Greek word *geografein*, which means 'writing of earth'. Cartography (from *khártēs* [map] and *gráphō* [to write]) is among its most important tools to ascribe our knowledge of a place. Typically, maps are made by specialists and are shaped on the basis of measurable and theoretical data. They are commonly put forward as neutral and are widely perceived as such, since the information can be 'verified' and the visual language has scientific appeal. But maps are coded, flattened representations of a space, and coding means making choices, simplifying and discarding many layers of information. Maps are objects that should be constantly and critically questioned, reshaped and contextualized. Which choices are made depends on the conditions in which a map is constructed. Who paid for it and how did it come into being? Who is the cartographer and what do they know about the place? Who is mapped in and what is mapped out? Depending on these choices—and why, how, when and where they are made—the result will be different. Therefore, a map can never be either neutral or objective. Any choice made in the context of a graphic engagement with geography is therefore also a political one.

From an understanding of the state as a territorially defined entity, the map is ascribed a prominent role as a tool for this territorialization of space. We recognize border-drawing cartographies as 'official'. As such, they also shape and reproduce singular and dominant world views in the interests of certain (ruling) political classes. Imbued with value judgements, they are (intentionally and unintentionally) reflections of the cultural and political world view in which they are produced. They are visual statements about the political understandings they illustrate. In other words, they are important actors in our visual discourses.

1   '… that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality,' Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', an inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, given on 2 December 1970, and published in French as *L'Ordre du Discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

Philosopher Michel Foucault stresses that the production of these discourses is 'controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed'[1] by procedures of exclusion that establish what is reasonable, true and acceptable to say or depict—or what is not. And we come to inhabit the geographic narratives through their repetition in the maps we use. They form the basis of most people's geopolitical imaginations and play an important role in how we identify. They influence our 'way of being in the world' and thus concretely inform our behaviour.

An atlas as a collection of maps in book form is an educational tool that provides an early introduction to the concept of nations as spaces. It is also often many people's introduction to their own national identities and it plays a role in forming value judgements about other nationalities of the world. Let us look at the De Boeck Atlas, the gold standard in the Flemish educational system, and how it depicts the contemporary world. My son had to purchase this atlas in the second year of secondary school. The first thing we checked together was the way Palestine was mapped. The atlas left us astonished; in the index, between Palermo and Paleul, there was nothing. No mention of Palestine, not as a location, not as an occupied region, not as a state. In this atlas, Palestine simply does not exist. Israel was mapped without a hint of connection to any Palestinian narrative. In addition, the designation of the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank, 'Westelijke Jordaanoever', was printed in smaller type than the Israeli biblical naming 'Samaria and Judea', undoubtedly adopting the Israeli narrative of space and suggesting the West Bank as Israeli territory. The De Boeck Atlas ignores the existence of Palestine (even though 136 of the 196 members of the United Nations recognize Palestine as an independent state) and depicts annexed East Jerusalem as Israel's capital. What the atlas suggests is illegal according to international law. Despite posing as unbiased and objective, the De Boeck Atlas forcefully conceals Palestinian existence from Flemish youth. So who gets to decide?

Only a few months later, having entered the third year of secondary school, my son returned home surprised by the results of a geography test. The teacher had misjudged his answer to a question about contemporary countries in the former Western Roman Empire. In the test, my son named Greece and Palestine as two states that existed historically and still bear the same name. This answer was marked as incorrect because, according to the teacher, 'Palestine is not recognized by everyone as a country'. I was indignant and wrote a letter explaining that my son had been to occupied Palestine himself and witnessed its existence with his own eyes. I wrote how Palestine is subject to an illegal military occupation that keeps the people from self-government, even though they have their own president, passport, government and institutions. I mentioned how in this response, the land of a people is ignored. The teacher corrected her reaction to the test, but defended her initial response by arguing that, as a history teacher, she should approach the information as 'objectively' as possible. Her response does not stand alone but is an expression of the educational system of many European schools. This is an example of the actual (and violent) impact of so-called 'official' atlases and their capacity to perform 'objectivity'.

Unfortunately, the De Boeck Atlas is not an exception. For instance, Palestine is not labelled on Google Maps either. When doing a search online, the software frames the map on the dotted out-lines of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but fails to display the name 'Palestine'. By contrast, 'Israel' and 'Jordan' are stated

in bold letters labelling their respective states. 7amleh, the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, stresses how Google is 'violating international law and agreements about the geography of Palestine (West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza) and disregarding the restrictions to movement imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli occupation, putting their lives in danger'.[2]
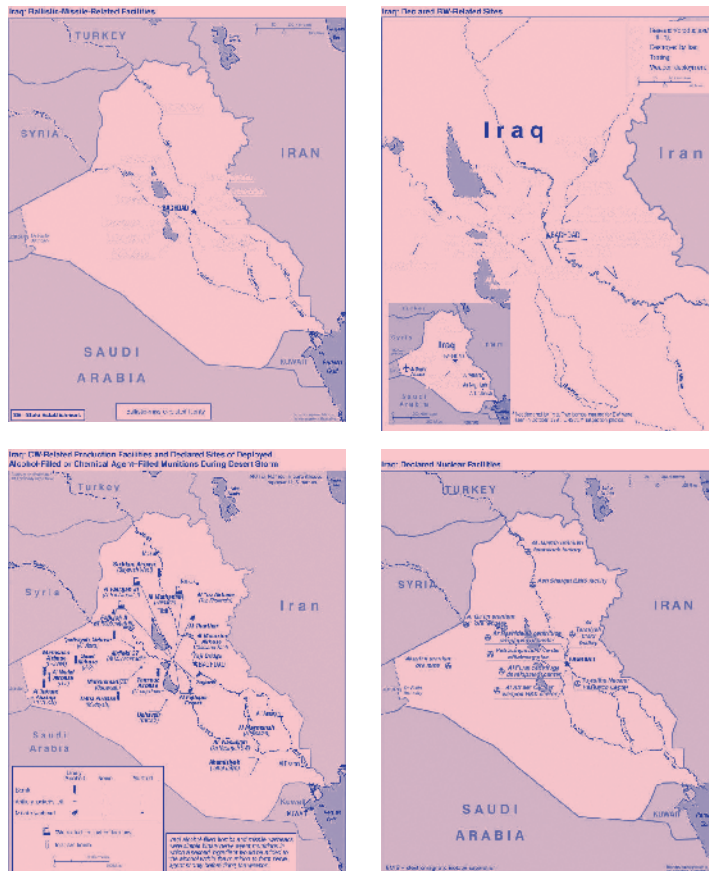
To trace the origins of the dotted lines on the above maps, we must go back no longer than a century. Two years before the conclusion of World War I, in 1916, two representatives of Great Britain and France secretly drew up a map to partition what is now referred to as the Middle East. Colonel Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot distributed former Ottoman Empire territories between the UK, France and the Russian Empire. Following that division, which became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, it allocated control to Britain over what is today southern Israel and Palestine, Jordan and southern Iraq. At the Peace Conference in Paris (1919–20), representatives of the UK, France, the United States and Italy—nobody from the divided regions themselves—officially agreed on the outlines of the Mandate System (the internationally sanctioned method of colonialism[3]). The map they had drawn, which led to the creation of many new states including Iraq and Syria, failed utterly to consider the demographics or socio-cultural and religious aspects of the territories they divided. In 1947 the United Nations (which at the time included fifty states, but no representatives from Palestine or the involved local communities) proposed partitioning Palestine into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, providing a set of unrealistic and impossible promises to the Arabs. In 1949, a year after the establishment of the State of Israel, the plan was overruled and further armistice lines were forcefully set by Israeli military forces. New boundaries were drawn, known as 'the green line' marking the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and later East Jerusalem. These lines were defined in 1949 and redefined during the 1967 war. They are still used on 'official' maps of the region, despite being contested throughout this entire process, and they are largely ignored, with violence being conducted on the ground. They conceal the tangible brutality of a century-old process of Zionist colonization. In their singular representation of space, the above maps hide spatial injustice in support of the Israeli claim on land.

Another homicidal example of top-down cartography is a series of maps of Iraq, whose borders were also defined during the Sykes-Picot Agreement. I am referring to the maps of Iraq that appeared in predominantly Western media prior to the 2003 invasion. From the BBC to the *New York Times*, from CNN to *Le Monde* and *Der Zeit*, broadcast media platforms around the world showed probable production facilities for—and indicated locations of—(nuclear) weapons of mass destruction. These maps illustrated journalistic articles and were widely and uncritically reproduced from American war propaganda. One could say that they functioned as cartographic artillery; the designed objects became tools used to prepare and convince the public of the need for a military invasion. According to then US President George W. Bush and then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, their official first and foremost justification for the attack in 2003 was 'to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction'.[4] Later it was publicly admitted that this argument was false, which debunks these graphics as pertinent lies; no evidence of weapons of mass destruction has ever been found. However, the maps had already done their destructive work in facilitating the Second Gulf War.

Maps of Iraq: published in 2002 and 2003 in mainstream media
showing the 'suspected' sites of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Mapping positionality

The above cases are prime examples of map-making as a process of creating rather than simply revealing knowledge. There is a direct link between those maps and the tangible realities resulting on the ground: through the drawing of borders, the (il)legalization of territories, nationhood and checkpoints. The maps appear as singular and solid representations of a place, and these graphics form a manual for how people relate to that space. These maps had the power to shape new realities but did not do so in support of the inhabitants, their representation or self-understanding.

Atlases are regularly presented as neutral and objective tools of representation of space too. But places are not stable; they mean different things to different people, even different things at different times. Generally, standard atlases do not acknowledge that they are conceived through the choices of their makers—people—who are informed by an array of factors including culture, time, power and technology. The apparent authorlessness of these works seems to give them legitimacy and authority, but their distant and dislocated representations create alienation between inhabitants and their locales. This is why scholar Helga Tawil-Souri draws attention to the positionality and methodology of the map-maker:

> Maps of any territory are expressions of ideological and political values, functioning as symbolic elements that reflect abstract and concrete national and local sentiments and goals. The politics of map-making and the power maps serve is part of a process of territorial socialization. Moreover, map

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production is a process structured by political and social norms and values (whether the cartographer is aware of it or not). Mapping is an interpretive act, in which the map conveys not merely facts but also, and always, the author's intentions and values. The politics of mapping, however, lie not only in what one maps, but also in how one maps.[5]

Positionality is the social and political context that creates our identity and how that influences and biases our perception of and outlook on the world. Hence, the author of a map proposes a certain kind of 'knowledge', but does so at the expense of other knowledges, subjectivities and understandings. Cartographers are not filling a void by creating a map in an unmapped world; rather, they are *replacing* or overwriting existing relations with their 'authoritative' mapped proposal. When articulating information, in particular national narratives, being aware of the methodology and position of the author can be as informative as the content itself.

Relational mapping

To be clear, no map can ever communicate what locality is, let alone what kinds of experiences and feelings that locality may evoke. Maps and mappings are always in a state of becoming, always in a state of simultaneity. The identification of a given region and its inhabitants is rooted in a multitude of factors. Therefore, we need diverse maps that challenge the reductive binaries between author/reader, producer/consumer, map/space, nation/territory. We need maps that propose no premise for an objective or scientific cartography, but maps that acknowledge that no such thing is possible.

'Counter-mapping', a term coined by Nancy Peluso[6] in 1995, is a map-making process whereby communities appropriate the state's techniques of formal mapping and make their own maps as alternatives to those used by governments. However, counter-mapping was practised in many different configurations long before this term arose. These alternative cartographies have become tools in the broader strategy for advocacy as they articulate community claims for rights over land. In addition to representing geographic information, counter-maps negotiate between social, cultural and historical understandings and experiences. According to geographers Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, counter-maps are 'checks on power whose aim is to contest the oppressive message, application and implications of hegemonic cartographic depictions'.[7] It is a subversive practice of storytelling, charting the experiences and customs of those whose voices are at best ignored but typically erased altogether. Because, as a matter of course, people are not invited to make a map of the place they inhabit; the territory is already mapped for them by an unnamed, and therefore seemingly position-free, source. Counter-maps 'aim at emancipating the map by radically humanizing it, which implies consciously bringing to light the geographical information that matters to the people whose existence and interests traditional cartography usually invisibilizes'.[8] Another related methodology is deep-mapping, where the map recognizes the slippery identity of place and seeks to visualize the multiple identities that contribute towards constructing the human experience of it. Van Houtum and Lacy define it as a field that is 'concerned with the humanization of space to give

a rich, situational, consciously relational and subjective account of place-related emotions in order to counter the "cartographic cleanism of human beings shown on hegemonic maps":

Subjective mapping

Who is the author and who owns the narrative? A territory seems to belong to, or be owned by, those who delineate and map it. Could a collective mapping propose a more collective belonging? While the discourse around counter-mapping mostly addresses its visual output, I'd like to focus on the process: namely to argue that maps should be produced through collaboration, with a focus on mapping from situated knowledge, from specific and located positions and lived reflections. Here, design can play a meaningful role in facilitating different kinds of mapping trajectories.

Subjective Atlas of Palestine, Ed. Annelys de Vet. 010 Publishers (2007)

In my design practice I have been working with these questions through the establishment of a series of so-called *Subjective Atlases*. With these publications, I have attempted to approach the process of mapping localities otherwise. The *Subjective Atlases* produce collections of maps that foster multiple perspectives. These atlases are compiled from contributions from many different locals in the form of graphics, maps, photos and other visualizations to collate a lived, experiential and situated understanding of a place. A key difference between the top-down map and the subjectively mapped atlas lies in the acknowledgment of positionality and methodology. The atlas does not only consider the depicted terrain through a plurality of localized voices, but acknowledges the positions these come from and thus the inevitable positionality of information. One of the first publications in the series was the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine* (2007), a project that changed my life in general and my design practice in particular. This atlas was made by more than thirty creatives in Palestine who mapped their perspectives during a workshop that I coordinated with the International Academy of Arts in Ramallah. They did not come with a central narrative, with a linear order and hegemonic portrayals.

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This atlas does not present clear-cut maps of what is happening to the territory; here, 'mapping' is 'the dyadic process at the heart of representations without fixed meanings.'[9]

9   Helga Tawil-Souri, 'Mapping Israel–Palestine'.

While traditional cartography is a practice of skimming down, *Subjective Atlases* are a methodology of building up—the opposite of discarding information, in a sense. The project's opposition to the authoritative map-maker lies in its relation to information. The conventional cartographer assumes the position of having access to *all* necessary information, then funnels it into the visual shape of a map: a reductive, clinical process, whereas the *Subjective Atlas* assumes the position of needing to *collect* information, to build up and layer this knowledge. The images, snapshots and graphs reveal how the abstractions of cartographic reason are hideously partial.

Full series of fourteen Subjective Atlases (2004–2023), photo Sana Ghobbeh

The information portrayed in a *Subjective Atlas* is tightly bound to the place it depicts and is deeply connected to the ways in which different inhabitants understand their geography. In opening multiple entry points to the possible experience of place, these *Subjective Atlases* aim to reduce the potential for alienation. The design process, in its aim, doesn't push towards a singular design object (material culture) but towards redesigning the process of organization, creation and subjectivation (societal values and human behaviour). More than the commodity of the book, the fluidity and distribution of exchange is what matters. The methodology is an instrument to activate a participative and interactive process. That is why I use the term 'subjective' in relation to 'atlas'. Subjectivity is placed in response to objectivity; factual information is replaced by information that derives from someone's own experience. This underlines the opposition between subject and object: the subject as someone or something who acts themself, and an object who is acted upon. A *Subjective Atlas* speaks, takes a position and is active.

Revealing social reality

As this essay illustrates, maps are instruments of power that can hugely affect our relation to place. They are tools that shape our relations to the world around us, and we can (and should) mould them to stress our interconnected ways of being in the world. Alternative and collaborative cartographies can foster and

strengthen the ability to engage in an aesthetic, affective and experiential understanding of a place. By seeing a place as a common space for collective belonging, map-makers would do well to facilitate more participatory design processes where connection with a place's history or identity can form the starting point for active imagination.

But how can we develop maps that acknowledge the cultural notions, political ideologies and power relations of the spaces in question? How to address the positionality and fragility inherent in the process of map-making? How can maps activate aesthetic and affective relations to place and reveal social realities? I believe that as designers and people engaged in visual discourses, we are faced with both possibility and responsibility. We should experiment more with forms of collective production. Design can answer social questions when it is allowed to be collaborative and organic rather than prescribed as in its solution-seeking tradition. It is a powerful practice that can reveal hidden relationships entangled in our immediate environments and can facilitate a more plural and connected mapping of our surroundings. As designer Danah Abdullah states: 'If designers want to partake in meaningful change, and alter the direction of what they do, it is about understanding and addressing power—race, class, gender, sexuality, ability—and how these intersect.'[10] When design is practised as an opening of possibilities through negotiation with the given, it can allow us to build relations that strive for emancipation. Moving from singular to plural ways of designing might help us to open up more situated and diverse world views.

10   Danah Abdulla, 'Against Performative Positivity', FUTURESS, 21 January 2021, https://futuress.org/stories/against-performative-positivity/.