What Space for a Politics of Mapping?

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In recent years a variety of historians, political scientists and geographers have shown increasing interest in the relationships between mapping (cartography and GIS) and politics. This paper briefly discusses the project of Brian Harley, one of the most ardent and effective advocates of a political function of mapping, and then offers a critique of this work as ironically replicating many of the assumptions he sought to challenge. Harley reified the map as an ideological mask--an innovative and bold step--but finally fell back on the map as communicative confession of the truth of the landscape. The rest of the paper then considers where this leaves a critical politics of mapping with emphasis on two significant elements. First, is there space, or room for a politics of mapping which is more than just the acceptance of maps as political documents, in the Harleian sense? Second, what effects do maps have on our political conceptions of space and can a rethinking of maps lead to a rethinking of the politics of space?

What Space for a Politics of Mapping?

1. Why a critical politics of cartography is needed;

2. What it might look like

Why?

A political project historicises the present:

> "That is, to act against the time and so have an effect on
> time, to the advantage, it is to be hoped, of a coming time"
> —–Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*

We critique the present in order to overcome it and open up new possibilities. A "history of the present"–—Foucault's genealogies (a historical ontology)

How applies to mapping?

Spatial representation/Cartography is a (the?) source of the production of geographic knowledge

Long known or…? Harley, Pickles, Wood, Edney

Wanted to recover from "behind the text" the truth of the landscape. To get past the "silences and secrecies" of the map's "subliminal geometries" (Harley)

Truth as repressed by power; maps as political documents

Evades the question of how mapping necessarily produces the political, and how rethinking mapping can lead to a rethinking of the political

Ie., on the Harleian agenda politics is an *a priori* which gets inserted sometimes into mapping (and then obscured/repressed). Our task is to recover that *a priori*

A critical politics of cartography would be a historicised account of the ontological conditions of possibility (horizons of thought) for mapping, which is a political project

For example:

"geographical knowledges occupy a central position in all forms of political struggle"

—–David Harvey

"there is a politics of space because *politics is spatial*"
—–Stuart Elden, *Political Geography*, 2000

How? Heidegger's engagement of the *polis* or the spatial site in which humans have their being:

> "How is it, in particular, that reference to the earth belongs to political discourse? The answer, most succinctly, is: *necessarily*—taking necessity to have the sense it has in the *Timaeus*. Discourse on the city [*polis*] will at some point or other be compelled, of necessity, to make reference to the earth; at some point or other it will have to tell of the place on earth where the city is–or is to be–established and to tell how the constitution (*politeia*) of the city both determines and is determined by this location (Sallis, 1999, p. 139)."
> —John Sallis on Plato's *Timaeus*

Instead of using modern politics to understand the *polis*, we should use an understanding of the *polis* to rethink politics

Eg., space is not *res extensa*, calculable and taking on a "look"
(Arthur Robinson, *The look of maps* [1952])

This is the choropleth map, not the *khora*

But neither Elden (nor critical geopolitics?) come to grips with
maps as a central part of this production of geographic knowledge

Critical geopolitics would seem to be ideal place to critique the
"Cartesian perspectivalism" —–why hasn't it happened yet?

Possibly:
1. a critical politics of cartography is a highly derivative project
   (of Foucault, Heidegger, Ó Tuathail…?)
2. Can a distinction be successfully made be made between
   disciplinary issues and ontological grounds for those issues?
3. Map as *res extensa* has been so predominant it is difficult to
   question?

> "mapping depends heavily upon a Cartesian logic in which
> res extensa are presumed to be quite separate from the
> realms of mind and thought and capable of full depiction
> within some set of coordinates (a grid or graticule)"
> —–David Harvey, 2001

What does (could) it look like?

1. Overall approach: *a genealogy* (historical ontology)

A counter–memory and counter–mapping as resistance/opposition

"Contact point" of governmentality, ie where domination and
technologies of the self meet

Power as neither negative nor repressive (contra Harley), but productive (Foucault)

"In Foucault country, it always seems to be raining" ––Nigel Thrift
But our project is not to "get out from under" power:

"my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous then we always have something to do"

<div align="right">––Foucault</div>

Critical politics of cartography is highly situated spatially: not "being–in–the world," but finding our place in the world

2. *The project is a struggle* in the sense of a political intervention

Power as productive: community mapping as resistance

3. *The project is a practice* (Gr. *askesis*) and does not have as its target the map as product.

It is "ethical" because it is an *ethos*, the mores and habits (*habitus–* –Edward Casey, *Annals*, 2001)

What practices for what resistances? Will vary, but can try the "pleasure of mapping" (eg., map as biography of being in place)

"normalizing discourses have not colonized pleasure as they have colonized desire"

<div align="right">—Ladelle McWhorter, 1999</div>

cf. Aristotle who says that pleasures involved in activities are "more proper" to them than desires (Gr. *orexis*). Desires at some remove from activities, pleasure right there… pleasure *is* a [political] practice of freedom

4. *Treats the question of technology*, ie cartography and its relation to power–knowledges

Relations of people and technology

Digital divide

5. *The politics of scale*. Eg., the construction of local identity with reference to national identity. Citizenship across scale. See Hilda Kurtz, UGA who contrasts a commutarian model of citizenship with a traditional liberal model. The former emphasizes:

––embedded and embodied, experiential (phenomenological?)
––participatory
––identity–based
––nurtures political community