

Reflecting on J.B. Harley's Influence and What He Missed in "Deconstructing the Map"

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Why Map Deconstructions Mattered to Us

We never met Brian Harley, nor heard him speak, but his ideas deeply influenced our thinking, writing, and teaching about maps and mapping. His argument that maps function as social texts has a powerful force: after all, maps clearly do much more than simply store spatial data and communicate information. Harley's writing, along with work by Denis Wood, John Pickles, and Matthew Edney, opened up many routes for map studies beyond the technical, the cognitive, and applied functionalism. This body of scholarship, which we now recognize as "critical cartography," was important as it helped to integrate the map as a significant object of inquiry back into the intellectual mainstream of the social sciences and humanities.

Harley's early death in December 1991 almost certainly encouraged greater attention to his work. The fact that "Deconstructing the Map" was published two years before his demise has led to a kind of veneration and timelessness. He did not have the chance to publish less timely or hard-hitting subsequent pieces, and as a consequence "Deconstructing the Map" stands out. The sudden raid into alien disciplinary territory offered in the article provided a fashionable critique, and drawing on Foucault and Derrida strongly encouraged a reorientation of a previously largely empirical and acritical field. The article offered a challenge to accepted ways of writing about maps and was written in a style that caught the zeitgeist, at once accessible and also fashionably different.

Dodge came across Harley's body of critical work and "Deconstructing the Map" as *the* "must-read" piece in the late 1990s, as he began to switch his scholarship away from data-driven mapping work using geographic information systems (GIS) software toward interpreting the social politics of cartographic representations. The central tenet in Dodge's eventual PhD thesis deconstructing cyberspace cartographies was a framework around the levels of power and social rules of cartographic production that leaned heavily on Harley's 1989 article.

Perkins read "Deconstructing the Map" when the piece was first published. His research before that date had focused on the production and design of maps, and in particular on national variations in official mapping. Harley's paper touched a nerve, inviting him to ask much more critical questions around the role of maps as social constructions. Building on Harley's earlier book chapters on "Maps, Knowledge, and Power" (Harley 1988) and iconographic critiques of mapping, "Deconstructing the Map" offered a deeper series of explanations for what Perkins saw in contemporary mapping at the start of the last decade of the twentieth century. His interests shifted toward a much more critical focus, and as a direct consequence of reading the article he proposed a new third-year undergraduate course called Maps in Society that was strongly influenced by Harley's ideas.

More recently, while many of Harley's ideas have almost become a taken-for-granted tenet in any interpretation of cartographic forms and meaning, the 1989 article certainly now enjoys a classic status and continues to collect citations. It has been a central citation and is oftentimes quoted in what we've written on mapping over the past 15 years. As an overt endorsement, we selected it as a must-have inclusion in two anthologies we edited, which included paying a licensing fee to the University of Toronto Press for the privilege (Dodge 2010; Dodge, Kitchin, and Perkins 2011). We also continue to find the Harleyian approach, set forth with such power in "Deconstructing the Map," an essential foundation for building our work in retheorizing mapping as a practice.

We have also subjected multiple generations of undergraduate geography students at the University of Manchester to Harley's article as they struggle to engage with cultural interpretation and the politics of geographical knowledge. Sometimes students are quite resistant to thinking beyond the obvious surface appearance – "a map is just a map, why should I be bothered with deconstructing it?" Many practically minded geography students, who take a didactic view of learning and value the applied skills offered by GIScience courses, have found the political critique and

deconstruction advanced by Harley and others unhelpful because it does not tell you how to make better maps. The move toward a more participatory approach to mapping, deploying GIS to empower, nowadays offers a way of integrating critique and construction into a praxis that was simply not available when Harley was alive.

Many students probably did not read “Deconstructing the Map” fully (despite our encouragement) and failed to understand why power matters in mapping, or to appreciate the insight that can come from a deconstructive approach to cartography. Like many classic conceptual papers, “Deconstructing” offered an argument and delivered difficult ideas that can be challenging for students to take on board.

In regard to the cartographic evidence that Harley chose to deploy, it has to be acknowledged that reading “Deconstructing the Map” in 2014 does feel backward looking, with a somewhat old-fashioned masculine perspective and state-centric view of power. Harley tends to overlook the possibilities of counter-mapping and more inspiring examples that suggest ways of resisting hegemony. He was most comfortable when talking about maps from the past and not the present. Almost all of his research was grounded in the history of cartography, and he was a historian at heart. “Deconstructing the Map” has little to say about more contemporary concerns. GIS formed an uneasy target, something Harley had not researched and seemed to distrust. It was perhaps easier to critique the “nasty” work maps used to do, in early modern Europe or during the colonial period, when the interactive possibilities were limited to printed mapping, instead of facing the current, complex violence performed by cartography and allied geospatial technologies (see Gregory 2010).

What Harley Missed – or, Why Maps Are More Than Doom-Laden Representations of Power

By focusing on Foucauldian power-knowledge, “Deconstructing the Map” stresses the forceful potential of maps and their role in governmentality, in which the secrecy of cartographic knowledge is privileged, in particular by the state and the military, which often censor and silence other voices. This all speaks to what one might call a conspiratorial view of how space is governed for the benefit of the few, against the interests of the many, which resonates with research into particular assemblages of mapping tools (e.g., see Dodge 2004; Perkins and Dodge 2009 on how the view from nowhere is reified in powerful uses of satellite imagery). The danger of thinking like this is that it tends toward negative and doom-laden worldviews and often misses so much of the positive potential that is also inherent in cartography and the sheer joy of mapping.

In some regards, this is because Harley literally took maps *too* seriously. His target was the powerful knowledge through which cartography justified its existence, not the playful exercise of mapping in banal everyday contexts.

Intrinsic to why maps are interesting and powerful, however, is that they can be enrolled in so many *non-serious* contexts and that people very often find them fun and gain frivolous enjoyment from making a map. There is simple pleasure in employing a map to solve an everyday problem, in daydreaming about possibilities while flicking through the pages of an atlas (e.g., della Dora 2009), and now in engaging in the vicarious god-like digital play that is possible with Google Earth and StreetView (Kingsbury and Jones 2009). Maps can be made primarily to amuse and poke fun (Caquard and Dormann 2008), and even before Harley’s article was published, Denis Wood (1987) had drawn attention to the delights of map reading. More playful alternatives to the grim struggles over power and rationality that embody a Foucauldian worldview are increasingly gaining traction (see Perkins 2009; Caquard 2013). To be fair to Harley, he was aware of the multiple possibilities called into play by mapping, well illustrated in a personal recounting of his “favourite map” (Harley 1987). In the years since Harley’s death, the joy of using a map to good affect has underpinned the creative exuberance of artists employing cartographic forms in all manner of engaging and inspiring ways (e.g., Harmon 2010). Emotional cartographies are emerging as important foci for research (Nold 2009), and mapping is also celebrated for its narrative potential as an adjunct to literature and in filmic views of the world (see Caquard 2009; Rossetto 2014). The growth of map art and the increased use of maps in popular discourse since Harley’s death amply demonstrate, we think, that to read maps only as “top-down,” doom-laden sources of power misses so much of the beauty and the ludic possibilities in mapping.

While the essential argument in “Deconstructing the Map” centres on the “view from above,” today the leading edge of academic and socially informed analysis around the map is post-representational. It looks beyond the power of material artefacts and fixed public images, so as to shift the ontological focus onto *mapping* and the numerous practices that bring mapping into being (e.g., del Casino and Hanna 2006; Kitchin and Dodge 2007; della Dora 2009). Such a processual turn also requires different epistemological tools and techniques from those that Harley advocated. Research increasingly goes beyond the map, using embodied ethnographic and auto-ethnographic inquiries instead of textual-based map work. The field has shifted toward the study of personal map spaces and their co-construction, focusing on everyday practices deployed to solve immediate and often ephemeral problems.

A New Kind of Deconstruction of the (Google/OpenStreetMap/Me) Map?

The call for critique in “Deconstructing the Map” certainly still has relevance in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Critical cartography has emerged to offer so

much more than a textual critique of "bad" maps and a critical deconstruction of cartography. It facilitates active and progressive efforts to develop "good" maps. It deploys the tools that now exist to remap the world. Alternative mappings have grown apace in the years since "Deconstructing the Map," taking advantage of the intellectual space offered by Harley's challenge. For example, for over two decades geographer Danny Dorling has experimented with socially progressive geovisualization of spatial inequalities. This focus on mapping difference in novel ways is reflected in his WorldMapper project, bringing mapping tools to schoolchildren so as to reveal different global possibilities (Dorling, Barford, and Newman 2006). In 2013 Dorling was appointed to the MacKinder Chair of Geography in Oxford. The era of colonial mapping had been metaphorically replaced by one of critical and progressive cartographic discourse. Meanwhile, over the last decade or so, a cadre of Open mappers have been busy building a free cartography and harnessing the (geo)wisdom of crowds to remap different worlds. The dramatic decade-long growth of the wiki-based OpenStreetMap project reveals a novel set of different ways of doing mapping (Perkins 2014). Harley's emancipatory view of mapping is arguably coming to be enacted.

The past 10 years, however, have also witnessed a rapid and significant shift in power over the production of cartography, with a major decline in the role of authoritarian state bureaucracies and the rise of a few unaccountable and profit-driven corporations (see Leszczynski 2012). It is intriguing to contemplate what Harley might have made of the contemporary organization of global cartographic production: exemplified in the twin pillars of the Google mapping service and the surprising success of the wiki-based OpenStreetMap project. This shift away from the nation-state, toward multinational power and crowd-sourced volunteered geographic information, delivers self-centred "me maps" on everyone's smart phones. Mapping is ubiquitous, apparently mutable and mobile. The inherent risk in the current cartographic political economy was well observed recently by Jerry Brotton in his book *A History of Twelve Maps That Changed the World*, where he notes, "The history of maps has never previously known the possibility of a monopoly of valuable geographical information falling into the hands of one company" (Brotton 2012, 433).

Perhaps the last few years represent a high point for free online availability of worldwide mapping? This is, after all, driven by fierce competition for audience share and by the willingness of Google and a few other large Internet corporations to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on spatial data and overhead imagery. It depends on a business model driven by clicks and double taps and is part of a strategy dictated by the need for advertising revenue. The co-option of naïvely volunteered free labour in crowd-

sourced systems similarly ought to invite critical reflection. With notable exceptions, academic geographers have been equally naïve about the significance of Google's power and about the seductive claims of Open mapping advocates. Yet, paradoxically, a new virtual geography is emerging out of this context, which is coming to determine the access, resource allocation, and even meanings attached to places. The time is ripe for more new critical deconstruction of Google's and free mappers' worldviews, and of the mapping practices that call these into being. We need to invoke Harley's ghost and rage against the new machine!

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