
COMMENTARY

Wood(s) and Trees – (Re)posting Nature

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Consider the following snapshots. It is the start of the 1990s. The Wall is down, Communism in the Eastern Bloc is in its death throes, Francis Fukayama claims history has ended, and neo-liberal orthodoxies seem to offer few alternatives to an economically driven and rationalist agenda, dominated by global multinationals and partly regulated by nation-states. Individual agency appears powerless in the face of these overwhelming power structures. Meanwhile, mapping is increasingly becoming digital but is still very much in the control of publishers and producers. The orthodox approach to understanding how maps work is still informed by the work of Arthur Robinson and by notions of cartographic communication: maps are neutral, and the cartographer has nothing to do with politics. But a challenge is gaining ground from critics such as J.B. Harley, Denis Cosgrove, John Pickles, and Denis Wood. In 1992 *The Power of Maps* by Denis Wood (with John Fels) is published – a persuasive, passionate clarion call for a social constructivist view of mapping, thrown together from disparate previously published material, capped by additional original chapters.

Fast forward to the summer of 2008. A very different world. Robinson is dead. Harley is dead. Cosgrove is dead. Multinational power has, if anything, increased, but inexorable globalization faces significant challenges. The “war on terror” reveals that history is very much alive; ideological conflict and fear dominate on the global geopolitical stage; militant Islam lurks, evading surveillance, and China and India are new global players threatening American economic hegemony. The technological changes that facilitate development and the exercise of American power are themselves complex and negotiated. The Internet has grown from nothing in 15 years to dominate social and economic life, bringing

about convergence, and the promise of instant electronic communication, but also encouraging local and individual freedom. Web 2.0 threatens a complex subversion of existing power structures. States encourage the free flow of capital but carefully regulate citizens and migration. Media are increasingly global, but meaning is still constituted in local language and cultures. And Nature is reasserting its agency. HIV/AIDs devastates Africa. Oil and gas prices soar to new highs and bio-fuel production displaces food acreage, leading to rising food prices. Global warming is increasingly accepted as a significant threat. Losses in biodiversity are bemoaned. Fears about the process and outcomes of genetic modification abound.

The world of mapping has shifted in response to these changes. The hard copy is much less significant than it was 20 years ago. The national mapping agency inexorably loses its power. Mapping is increasingly interactive. It is increasingly shared, instead of being sold, as social networking, the mash-up, and the blogosphere shift the balance toward how information is deployed instead of how it is created. The world of ideas has shifted, too: in comparison to 1992 there are now many different ways of understanding mapping that take debate well beyond Harley’s “power-talk” (Pickles 2004). Critical cartographic approaches now reflect cultural complexity, negotiated power, and everyday mapping practices (Crampton and Krygier 2006). And now, in 2008, a new book by Denis Wood and John Fels is published.

A new book from Denis Wood can be an important event. Sixteen years later, the passionately argued polemic of *The Power of Maps* still provokes, enrages, and enthuses readers. It played a significant role in shifting perceptions of mapping away from Robinsonian orthodoxy toward a propositional view of mapping. *The Natures of Maps* will

be even more influential and probably even longer-lasting. It builds on a social constructivist view, developing a new and closely argued exploration of how meaning might be constructed through mapping, then applies this to a strongly specialist context: maps that have particular things to say about Nature. Unlike the *Power of Maps*, it is almost entirely newly written. The focus on *Natures* serves twin purposes, playing with the ambiguity of the phrase.

On the one hand, it allows Wood and Fels to develop arguments for their view of mapping and to contrast these with the landmark Robinson and Petchenik text the *Nature of Maps* (1976). Playing on nature isn't new in the map world: the Harley collection published in 2001 sought to reject Robinsonian ideas by substituting a *New Nature of Maps*. Wood and Fels, however, reject *singularity* in favour of the inclusive *plural*, to reveal more than a single interpretation. They develop these ideas in the introductory set of chapters, which explore the map's construction of knowledge, embracing the idea that the map is a field of concepts for conveying authority over territory that works through its taken-for-granted factuality. Maps employ a kind of propositional logic linking space to a particular set of meanings by what they term "postings": claims that are placed on the map and, together, merge into a sophisticated argument, endowing mapping with many of the characteristics of reference objects, replacing individual agency with a shared and socially validated form of objectivity. Postings are given social assent through repeated use. Wood and Fels argue that the surroundings of the map, which they term the *paramap*, are fundamental in understanding how this social authority is constructed. The *paramap* comprises the *perimap* (elements physically associated with the text) and the *epimap* (elements circulating freely around the text and shaping its reception). This approach is informed at once by elements of semiotics, structuralism, deconstruction, and a kind of cognitive cartography related to the perspective of the newly emerging multi-disciplinary field of cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguistics has grown, since the late 1980s, into an influential field of research that focuses on a holistic approach to language in which human cognition figures as a central explanatory device and in which language is understood as embodied, situated, and conceptual.

A very different set of meanings of the term "Nature" is developed in the second, and much longer, section of this book. Here Wood and Fels focus on Nature with a capital *N*, as an entity supposedly free of ideology, the epitome of a subject for objective cartography. The mapping of Nature has formed a challenging activity for map-makers, and a rich diversity of different conceptions is revealed if a critical eye is cast at mapping. Wood and Fels deploy a selection of eight particular things maps of Nature might have to say about the world to reveal how different maps in fact construct different ideologies. Their eight different

constructions of Nature in map form are a selection, not a complete universe: as they acknowledge, there are other Natures out there to be read, beyond the scope of this book. Nor do they seek to imply that these Natures flow from particular "types of map": the same map might be involved in the construction of very different ideas. Instead, these ideas are distilled from the ways in which everyday map readers deploy maps in the construction and reconstruction of their ideas of Nature. The strategy in the bulk of this book is to offer an in-depth, empirical, and strongly accessible analysis of popular mass-market published maps, to reveal both the play of particular interpretations and also how concepts elaborated in the first section are worked through in particular sets of practice.

The authors start with the inescapable threats to Nature from people, focusing, for example, on an advertisement for Canon that has run for many years in American mass-market elite monthlies such as *Scientific American* and *National Geographic*, exploring the interplay of photograph, text, and map in the construction of endangered Nature. A second trope is the threat of Nature, here exemplified by hurricane risk mapping. Nature also reveals our powerlessness and evokes feelings of awe: sublime grandeur, however, can be captured and presented, scaled for us in map form. In contrast to this, our love of Nature can also encourage a sentimental focus on beauty: a sense of wonder emerges from these constructions. The exotic has always been collected, classified, and possessed: this fifth construction of Nature brings together science and travel, allowing species to be checked off at a stroke and placed in field guides or bio-geographic regionalizations. But science can be holistic as well as taxonomic, and a more paradigmatic view of Nature as a system is constructed and published in the profusion of thematic map types that so characterize scientific atlases. While science depends on knowing, the mystery of Nature and its unknowable qualities is also often evoked in mapping of the Earth from space. And a final theme presented here is represented in the over-coded, intensely thematic topographic survey map, where Nature is there for us to use.

These constructions rely upon a rich series of readings of individual maps and depend strongly upon the presentation of excerpts of these maps, juxtaposed to the words. They reveal a complex deconstruction of the cultural significance of different mappings, explored in thought-provoking prose. Fun to read! But a paradox for any contextual reading emerges straight away. Despite the refreshing use of full colour – what a pleasure to see 179 full-colour plates – it is inescapable that the mapping context is only partly captured. No book can quite grasp the *size* of the USGS map of the Grand Canyon; no book can *display* the poster of Earth from space on the wall; an excerpt from a topographic quad is never the same as its

full unfolded real-world *use*. However lavish – and *The Natures of Maps* is lavish – the stories woven here are different from the interwoven complexities of construction in the real world.

This focus on different constructions instead of on presenting the complex story of real-world use encourages the reader toward an atomized view of different natures. The constructions overlap and coalesce – grandeur can threaten; Nature at risk is often structured as beauty despoiled; taxonomy is strongly implicated as system. A matrix of relations is negotiated in practice, and the complex and rich theoretical links between the practices of constructing meaning are inevitably simplified by the adoption of an almost classificatory grid for the bulk of the book.

The examples mapped here might also be criticized as rather too much dominated by a narrowly defined and mass-market North American experience: USGS, *National Geographic*, the AAG, official state maps – fine, OK – but what about other places and other voices? What about counter-mapping of rainforests, or Indigenous peoples' mapped views of Nature, or the global Greenmap movement? What about other places – like the rich tradition of Russian mapping of Nature – or more on marine or atmospheric contexts? Or artistic conceptions of Nature? The authors acknowledge their partial stories, and justify the contemporary emphasis, but they might have sought to explain *why* they tell these stories as against others.

Of more significance are the epistemological changes of the last 25 years. These are rather skimmed over. The cultural turn has led to a vast profusion of theorists' being deployed to understand different kinds of mapping contexts. Many of these move beyond the map into an analysis of how mapping is *performed*, including, for example, Baudrillardian analyses of hyperreality; actor-network approaches to mapping contexts; postcolonial explorations of encounters between mapping traditions; ethno-methodological observations of the everyday deployment of the image; Deleuzian non-representational theory; affectual work; holistic performative studies drawing on feminist theory; and notions of mapping as ontogenetic (for examples of different approaches see Dodge, Kitchin, and Perkins forthcoming). Wood and Fels focus on the immediate context of mapping: they acknowledge that performance, practice, and context matter but largely offer up textual analysis of the map, and a cognitive and textual analysis of its use, instead of ethnographic evidence of *actual* mapping practices. Maps do not only connote authority. My feeling is that their approach still rather underplays the social and performative implications of mapping.

I was also rather uneasy about the lack of discussion about Nature itself. Just as the mapping world has changed over the last 25 years, so has thinking about

Nature (for a recent overview of these ideas see Castree 2005). There needs to be a chapter setting Nature into a theoretical context – exploring the significance of functionalist, Marxist, feminist, post-structural, and non-representational approaches, for example – which might then have better situated the different propositions about Nature. The first nature of maps is theorized; the second is merely described. The story would have been richer had this second intellectual strand been incorporated.

But it is the changing world that causes me most worry and led me to begin this piece the way I did. *The Natures of Maps* chooses to focus almost entirely on hard-copy, published, everyday mapping – at a time when the hard copy is in retreat and when the mapping of Nature is increasingly conveyed in fleeting and interactive images, served from Web sites or seen as media graphics on television screens. It is likely that this much more interactive mapping will increase in significance in the future. And the contexts through which these maps are deployed are different from those that are the main focus of attention of the empirical sections of this book. Maps of the distribution of species are no longer just separately compiled by experts and published in hard copy in field guides. Instead, GIS allows these data to be shared, with multiple inputs from amateurs as well as professionals. The Web disseminates these, with different effects. New knowledges are being made and mapped. The specifications of mapping systems emerge in online communities: crowds source knowledge, instead of knowledge flowing down from on high. All of these trends are underplayed in *The Natures of Maps*.

Over the last 30 years Denis Wood has played a significant role in the renaissance of critical cartography. He has built a reputation as a man with something to say, who writes with a style that is uniquely identifiable, advances passionate arguments, and recognizes that *how* you say something is as important as what you say. *The Natures of Maps* is written in the tradition of an argument. Like *The Power of Maps*, it is partial: the argument underplays the performative turn, under-theorizes Nature, and underplays technological change. But all the best polemics are partial. This book should be read well beyond the mapping world. It stands comparison with other polemics about Nature, such as William Cronon's 1996 *Uncommon Ground* or Barry Lopez's 1986 *Arctic Dreams*. Buy it, read it, reread it, and respond to it!

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