

Reclaiming the map: British Geography and ambivalent cartographic practice

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“There are no longer any blanks on the world map. But the blanks of ignorance and misunderstanding make the task of the Society more important than it has ever been - for all those whose interest, travel, work or imagination take them to the ends of the earth.” Sir Neil Cossons OBE, President, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) 2003 to 2006.

<<http://www.rgs.org/GeographyToday/Geography+and+the+society.htm>>

The location map printed on the back page of the *RGS-IBG 2007 Annual International Conference* programme has prompted us to think again about the place of maps in the Geography discipline in Britain. This mundane representation, simply showing the streets of the West End of London and the conference venues as oversized push-pins, was taken from *Google Maps*¹. We wondered why the RGS-IBG deployed a generic *Google Map* for their flagship annual conference. We find it hard to believe that RGS-IBG as a ‘world leading’ geographical organisation has no better map of its location or could not commission one. After all, the Map Room in their headquarters in Kensington Gore gives readers access to one of the largest private map collections in the world. And specialist cartographic skills still exist out there. Of course the conference organisers *could* have done better but the fact that they *chose* not to, indicates, we think, a deeper lack of concern for maps; ‘its only a location map’ one can hear them say, ‘who really cares?’

In our view deploying this map can be read as symptomatic of three significant issues. Firstly, the ambivalent relations between mapping and the work of geographers in the

¹ Currently available at <<http://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/CCA653C-F7F8-45AE-B451-9C2280EDC812/0/GoogleMapBackcover.pdf>>, last accessed 10 September 2007. Technically, its effectiveness for orientation and navigation is weak, with a poor design aesthetic and a generic, Web source. Furthermore, the legality of its commercial reproduction by RGS-IBG is unclear. Google Maps’ Terms of Use state: “For business users, Google Maps is made available for your internal use only and may not be commercially redistributed, except that map data may be accessed and displayed by using the Google Maps API pursuant to the API terms and conditions.” <www.google.com/intl/en_uk/help/terms_maps.html>.

UK today; second, a continuing disregard for professional cartographic practice; and third, British Geography's disassociation from newly-significant approaches to the visual representation of space, and spatial practices, that are blossoming in wider social contexts and particularly online.

1. Geographers Don't Map Anymore Do They?

It is apparent that many geographers have a problem with maps nowadays. The lack of map use has been well noted in the discipline over the last couple of decades (Wheeler 1998; Martin 2000). Across a range of geographical practices - be it research, publishing, or teaching - many, and perhaps the majority, of geographers do not see the need to map. Paradoxically, mapping is much easier to do, but in the Geography discipline is best left to the technicians in drawing offices, and to GIS professionals. Physical geographers may map their results on occasion, but most human geographers somehow feel that mapping is a pursuit beneath them, or somehow antithetical to progressive work. They may deconstruct the cultural significance of different media, but they only rarely make maps. The map as an artefact is apparently seen as tainted, embodying descriptive, naïve and acritical values - part of an ocularcentric orthodoxy central to many positivist knowledge claims, and rejected by many researchers.

Many geographers do not feel at home *working* with the map. In significant disciplinary places, mapping has been pushed out. As just one example, in the period from 1990 there has been a significant reduction in the number of maps illustrating articles published in *Transactions*, the pre-eminent journal of British Geography, a decline from an average of 2.5 maps per article in 1989 to under 0.5 maps per article by 2006². It may be tempting to see the decline in mapping as a reflection of technological change: GIS in this view has 'replaced' the map as visualization. However, the decline also parallels the rising significance of 'theory' in geographical discourse. Epistemological alternatives to empiricist and 'scientific' studies have gained ground, at the same time as geographers have begun to deploy different visual media. Mapping seems to have been squeezed out as a side effect of changing

² Source: Authors' calculation.

editorial policies and research priorities. These trends are unlikely to change: we predict, at the time of writing, that there will be few, if any, articles with maps in this issue of *Transactions*. Nor is mapping well represented in other indices of disciplinary practice. There was only a single session at the 2007 RGS-IBG annual conference that explicitly considered mapping, and no specialist research group in RGS-IBG is concerned with visualization, cartography or mapping *per se*. Contrast this with the much richer diversity of mapping sessions at every AAG conference, and the active and diverse research sponsored by the Cartography Speciality Group in the USA, which Sui (2004) reports has consistently been the third largest speciality group in the organization. North American practice reflects a different disciplinary politics. There are more postgraduate students doing mapping research, a better-established institutional context, readily available mapping in the public domain, ongoing professional networks fostering active collaboration, and a much larger GI industry encouraging these trends.

However, despite our academic retreat from mapping in the UK, the map remains one of the few emblems of our discipline for those looking in from outside. On the street and in the pub, British geography is still about maps. This difference between our academic practice and everyday lay perceptions also reflects the gulf that has opened between school and university geography in the UK. 'Map skills' are still a central part of the National Curriculum, but no longer feature except as part of GIS in degree programmes. Many of us may have rejected the iconic representation and disciplinary history that created the popular image of mapping, but many geographers still signal their disciplinary identity by displaying maps on their departmental and office walls, and still deploy the mapped image to exemplify in lectures.

Meanwhile it can be argued that Geography as a discipline is facing challenging times. For a number of reasons geography is declining in popularity as an 'A' level subject. Its identity in British universities is also under threat, following recent administrative up-scalings resulting in closures and mergers with other subjects. More broadly, geographers are not well represented amongst the ranks of public intellectuals (Castree 2006), nor do we have much influence on the public policy process (Ward 2005).

We believe, RGS-IBG's apparent lack of concern over the map used on their conference programme is symptomatic of the above and furthermore sends a powerful signal that geographers are not competent at mapping, and don't care about cartographic quality. We contend this is short-sighted because the map offers Geography one of its few 'unique selling points' that can distinguish us from other parts of the academy, at a difficult time for the discipline. In this context we surely need to be making best use of assets that distinguish us from other fields. Maps are such an asset: they are visual, immensely appealing and can be rhetorically powerful, and should be at the heart of Geography's identity. We can ill-afford to turn our backs on popular perceptions of the discipline and the role of cartography!

2. Cartographers: Who Needs Them Anymore?

The skills of professional cartographers to fashion uniquely powerful and affective images of place are increasingly being disregarded, in the search for easier and more cost-effective solutions. This is part of a change in the political economy of cartography. A comparison with fast food illustrates this change powerfully. The 'McDonaldization' of the food industry has led to a cheap, superficially tasty, uniform, convenient, and global food products, able to generate large profits but with significant social and cultural implications. 'Mc-Maps' – made with easy-to-use technology, are also cheap to produce, also seductive at first glance, and can also leave a nasty taste in the mouth. Often, too, they lack lasting impact, have supplanted better alternatives, and are disposable. Cheaper production methods, widely-accessible desktop mapping tools, and new distribution channels such as the Web devalue real skills in surveying, compilation, categorisation and drawing. The *British Cartographic Society* recognised these inexorable trends, launching a "better maps campaign" aimed at other graphical professions³; this year it has completely re-branded its annual conference into a training event, concerned with teaching map-design skills, and in so doing almost completely abandoning an academic program.

Publicly accessible cartography is increasingly in the domain of a handful of online publishers (dominated by global media corporations such as Google and Yahoo) that draw maps on-demand from databases. These portals are more concerned with

³ See <<http://www.cartography.org.uk/Pages/Membership/DesignG/index.html>>.

attracting advertising revenue than with mapping quality. Superficially, mapping is more available to all, but just like the McDonalds in every district, so web-served mapping increasingly offers only a very limited diet, controlled by distant and unaccountable corporations who could withdraw or change mapping at will. Tasty organic alternatives exist on the web but are harder to find, more expensive and cater for minority interests.

Technological change has been a powerful motor in this shift. In many ways, computer algorithms are seen to be capable of replacing the human judgement of cartographers. And even when the visual map is still deployed, the technology need not be deployed with care. It might appear that specialist design skills are irrelevant when you can follow default options in a software package. Inevitably cartographic practice and quality declined in the rush towards GIS, and this trend has been exacerbated by the rise of web-served map portals.

Technology had been a powerful influence on the development of a specialist cartographic discipline that emerged in the 1960s as separate from Geography, with its own supporting publication infrastructure, training requirements and specialist teaching and research institutions. Separation encouraged geographers to neglect the map. In the UK, cartography as a separate discipline has been in decline for over a decade: it is no longer possible to study for an undergraduate degree in cartography at a British university; since 2000 there have also been significant closures of map libraries in several geography departments in the UK; cartographic offices in British universities are being shut or else increasingly fulfil different roles; and membership of professional cartographic societies in the UK is in decline.

Yet, the widespread disregard for cartography belies a significant growth in all kinds of mapping and a genuine creative flowering of alternative, collaborative and everyday map-making *outside* the academy and particularly on the web.

3. Mapping Reinvigorated?

The fact that the RGS-IBG conference organisers sourced a 'Mc-Map' for the location map is, one might argue, merely a sign of a sloppy approach to information presentation - taking the easiest path and nothing more. But we argue on the contrary

that this kind of mapping choice (quickly grabbing a map off the web) is perhaps symptomatic of new forces in the visual representation of space.

Methods of making and using information are changing. Whilst there is a continuing need for high-quality bespoke printed maps fashioned by professional cartographers, commissioned and sold by specialists, communities are now also able to make their own targeted maps, deploying collaborative mapping tools, with a ‘mash-up’ mode of production and a hacking ethos. The mash-up combines heterogeneous online sources, adding appropriate individual material and has the potential to deliver radical and empowering alternatives that have so far been largely absent in the rhetoric of participatory GIS. A well-designed mash-up can meet local needs, instead of just being part of a commodified circulation of uniform cartographic images reinforcing the interests of the powerful. Map hacking is increasingly common and arguably offers an increasingly effective way of meeting user needs, as well as opening up wholly new possibilities. Mapping becomes both easier, and we would argue, potentially *better*. It can be argued that these new collaborative strategies can reinvigorate mapping.

Beyond mashing together other people’s data a growing number of individuals and groups are active in subverting existing structures with ‘wiki’ mapping projects building ‘bottom-up’, open-source, cartographic databases that do not rely on corporations. Much energy is being expended in developing alternative community-owned collaborative cartographies (for example, unpaid amateurs’ working on the OpenStreetMap project⁴ have mapped 66 000 kilometres of roads in the last six months and their data and participatory approach are increasingly being taken seriously by major players in the geomantic industry.

These ‘everyday mappers’ are almost completely disassociated from British academic Geography. Pressures in the academy in the UK push researchers towards narrowly defined outputs, reflecting the commodification and neo-liberalisation of our work (Berg 2006), which leave little time for significant DIY or community activism.

⁴ “OpenStreetMap is a free editable map of the whole world. It is made by people like you.”
<<http://www.openstreetmap.org>>

'Everyday mapping' is hard to justify on the RAE return. It does not generate income. It doesn't hit the right internationally-recognised journals. It doesn't signify as an esteem indicator. The ongoing and practical nature of this map making is at odds with the short timescales and narrow research orientation of neo-liberal agendas.

However, geographers have an intellectual tradition that allows us to help make these maps much more fit-for-purpose, and to offer significant explanations for these profound social trends. If a whole generation is growing up expecting to make and deploy these maps, should not we be speaking about these issues and be a part of this process, instead of regarding the map as an old fashioned icon for a discredited kind of past practice?

4. Conclusions

It seems likely in the short term that Geography in the UK will continue to be strangely disengaged from mapping creativity, but this need not be so. There is real scope to begin to reinvigorate our own mapping practice, starting with how we teach students about the nature of maps, and how they can use them creatively to tell uniquely spatial stories - a vital and distinctive skill that all geography students should take from their degree. The emerging field of critical cartography (Crampton and Krygier 2006) needs to be enacted in the UK as well. We need to engage with these new kinds of mapping, acknowledge the iconic role of the medium for the discipline, and investigate the ambivalent relationships between geography and cartography. And, crucially, new maps need to be *constructed* as well as deconstructed. Maps in the next RGS-IBG conference brochure should show the potential of our discipline to innovate, instead of simply replicating a lowest common denominator cartographic product.

There are also grounds for optimism. Mapping has been at the centre of research across the humanities and social sciences for the last decade (cf. Abrams and Hall 2005) and belatedly geographers are starting to change their practices. A range of research initiatives is beginning to bring maps back to the centre of geographical scholarship. A new Maps and Society Commission was established in 2007 by the *International Cartographic Association* to foster social scientific research into mapping, and encourage a dialogue between the technical worlds of cartography and

wider social groups engaged in everyday mapping. Monmonier's (2007) review of the field recently noted increasing trends towards humanistic mapping research in the published literature. Conference sessions and monographs increasingly emphasise contextual understandings of the medium, for example Wood and Fels 2007; Dodge et al. forthcoming . Major recent British mapping research projects emphasise the innovative visual power of maps, from the striking Worldmapper cartograms being widely disseminated across schools by the University of Sheffield, to the innovative deployment of historical map sources in GIS and the more accessible use of high-quality cartographic data served from the EDINA Digimap service to higher education⁵. Mass-market thematic atlases continue to depict British identities and inequalities using mapping in innovative ways (e.g., Dorling and Thomas 2007). Nor are institutional structures always negative: in the University of Manchester a new map library is being established with a substantial financial investment to create purpose-designed reader space, and new staff appointments, resulting in the best facility in the north of England. Meanwhile cartography in the large copyright libraries in the UK is thriving, with libraries deploying cutting edge technologies to exploit historic collections over the Web⁶.

What is lacking, however, is an official voice, or action supporting these initiatives. There needs to be an RGS-IBG research group encouraging and facilitating critical and creative research on mapping. There needs to be an appreciation in the organization that maps still matter. Mapping skills may still appear in the geography benchmark statements⁷, but their deployment by RGS-IBG does not yet reflect these words. It is hard to reclaim the map when our professional organization is so careless in the way it regards the medium and when mapping forms a significant blank in the world map of its web presence.

⁵ See <<http://www.worldmapper.org/>>; <<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps>> <<http://edina.ac.uk/digimap/>>.

⁶ Digital exploitation is particularly rich in the National Library of Scotland (see <<http://www.nls.uk/maps/early/index.html>>), whilst The British Library continues to exploit historic mapping using the potential of mash-ups and the Web (see the exhibition *London a Life in Maps* that ran from November 2006 to March 2007, and its parallel virtual exhibition, <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/londoninmaps/exhibition.html>>).

⁷ "preparing effective maps and diagrams using a range of appropriate technologies", <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/Geography.asp>>

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