

Reclaiming the map: British Geography and ambivalent cartographic practice

Martin Dodge and Chris Perkins
Geography, School of Environment
University of Manchester

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 the UK. 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, instead of designing a better location map. RGS-IBG is a ‘world leading’ geographical organisation with a long history of involvement in the state of the art of mapping. The Map Room in their headquarters in Kensington Gore gives readers access to one of the largest private map collections in the world and has recently benefited from a major cash injection to improve access to its collections². And specialist cartographic skills still exist to create bespoke maps. The conference organisers *could* have done better but the fact that they *chose* not to, reflects an interesting moment in the way our discipline deploys mapping which, we think, can be read as symptomatic of three wider issues. Firstly, the ambivalent relations between mapping and the work of geographers in the 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 on the web.

1. Geographers Don’t Map Anymore Do They?

A 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

¹ Currently available at <<http://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/CCA653C-F7F8-45AE-B451-9C2280EDC812/0/GoogleMapBackcover.pdf>>. Technically, its effectiveness for orientation and navigation is weak, with a poor design aesthetic and a generic, Web source.

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 the GIS 'geeks'. 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 and use 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.

Evidence that many geographers do not feel at home *working* with the map can be found in significant disciplinary places. For example, in the period from 1990 there has been a marked and continual 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 2006³. Mapping seems to have been squeezed out as a side effect of changing 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*. Furthermore, 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*. Nor is mapping well represented in other indices of disciplinary practice. There are few PhDs that explicitly focus on mapping in the UK, and limited research funding. Geography as a discipline has also retreated from collecting mapping and increasingly no longer maintains distinct departmental map collections⁴.

It may be tempting to see the decline in mapping solely as a reflection of technological change: GIS in this view has 'replaced' the map, analysis offers more powerful tools than representation such as maps (Fisher 1998). However, the decline also parallels the rising significance of 'theory' in geographical discourse.

² A £7 million Heritage National Lottery Fund grant, <<http://www.unlockingthearchives.rgs.org/>>.

³ Source: Authors' calculation.

Epistemological alternatives to empiricist and 'scientific' studies have gained ground, at the same time as geographers have begun to employ different visual media. The drastic decline in regional studies has exacerbated the retreat from maps.

The situation can be contrasted this with the much richer diversity of mapping in the North American Geography where a different disciplinary politics operates. In the USA in the four decades after the second-world-war an academic sub-discipline of cartography grew with its own graduate programs, distinct paradigms and literature, far in excess of developments in the UK (McMaster and McMaster 2002). There are more postgraduate students doing mapping research in the USA, 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. Cartography is still much better integrated with the geography mainstream in the USA: there are many sessions at every AAG conference, and the active and diverse research sponsored by the Cartography Speciality Group, which Sui (2004) reports has consistently been the third largest speciality group in the organization. The rise of GIS has not seen such a severe retreat from the cartographic representation as has taken place in the UK.

However, despite the decline in cartography use within geography at a university level 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, where pupils are taught spatial literacy, and where mapping is almost always assumed to be apolitical, neutral and a scientific process (Winter 2007).

Meanwhile it can be argued that Geography as a discipline in the UK is facing challenging times. The subject is declining in popularity at 'A' level, in part because of administrative changes in the organization of course selection, but also it has been

⁴ In the period from 2004 to 2008 departmental map libraries shut in Bristol, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Salford, Sheffield, Swansea and SOAS. In Manchester, Portsmouth, Oxford and Reading they were relocated into the main university library.

argued because of the way it is being taught. The image of the school discipline is old fashioned and sometimes uninspiring, dominated by a ‘tired and content-heavy curriculum’ (Winter 2007: 350). Learning mapping skills at school all too often emphasizes training and technical abilities, at the expense of wider social concerns or emotional engagement. In universities the challenges are different: disciplinary identity is under threat, following recent administrative up-scalings resulting in closures and mergers with other subjects, but the decline at ‘A’ level clearly also effects the viability of university programmes. Maps hardly feature in University geography in the UK, except as a subsidiary part of GIS in degree programmes and here too mapping is also only rarely used in imaginative or thought-provoking ways.

We believe, the *Google Map* used on the RGS-IBG conference programme is symptomatic of the above and furthermore sends a powerful signal that geographers are not competent at mapping, and care little 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. Maps are visual, immensely appealing and can be rhetorically powerful, and should, we believe, 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, and globally uniform food products, able to generate large profits, but this convenience comes 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 low quality. Cheaper production methods, widely-accessible desktop mapping tools, and new distribution channels such as the Web devalue real skills in surveying, compilation, categorisation and cartographic

design. The *British Cartographic Society* has recognised these damaging trends, launching a “better maps campaign” aimed at other graphical professions⁵; in 2007 it completely re-branded its annual conference into a training-event, concerned with teaching map-design skills, and in so doing largely abandoned 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 a few monopoly database suppliers. These portals are more concerned with 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 (Zook and Graham 2007). Tasty organic alternatives exist on the web but are harder to find, more expensive and cater for minority interests.

In the UK, cartography as a separate discipline has been in decline for nearly two decades (Forrest 2003): delegate numbers at cartographic conferences peaked in late 1980s. Membership and participation in cartographic societies has also declined throughout the 1990s and continues apace. Cartographic offices in British universities increasingly no longer simply design maps for geographers. Instead they fulfil different roles, such as web design, or marketing. Mapping often becomes a sideline. By 2007 it was no longer possible to study for an undergraduate degree in cartography at a British university (Forrest 2007), and mapping research has been largely subsumed into the broader orbit of GI science and geomatic engineering.

Yet, the widespread disregard for professional 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 taking the easiest path and nothing more.

⁵ See <<http://www.cartography.org.uk/Pages/Membership/DesignG/index.html>>.

But we argue on the contrary that this kind of mapping choice (quickly grabbing a map off the web) is perhaps symptomatic of the rise 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 but exploit the voluntary effort of many ‘amateurs’ (cf. Goodchild 2007). Much energy is being expended in developing alternative community-owned collaborative cartographies, for example, unpaid ‘amateurs’ working on the OpenStreetMap project⁶ 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 geomatic industry.

These ‘amateur mappers’ are almost completely disassociated from British academic Geography. Pressures in the academy in the UK push researchers towards narrowly

⁶ ‘OpenStreetMap is a free editable map of the whole world. It is made by people like you.’, Source: <<http://wiki.openstreetmap.org>>.

defined outputs, reflecting the commodification and neo-liberalisation of our work (Berg 2006), which leave little time for significant DIY or community activism. 'Amateur mapping' is hard to justify on the RAE return. It does not generate income. It does not hit the right internationally-recognised journals nor 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 use these maps, shouldn't more geographers be speaking about these issues? We believe it is firmly in the interests of the discipline to 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 have a strangely ambivalent relationship with mapping, 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 programme should show the potential of our discipline to innovate, instead of simply replicating a lowest common denominator cartographic product.

There are some 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; Pinder 2007) and belatedly geographers are starting to change their practices. 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. Maps are central in the recent ‘Give Geography Its Place’ campaign, not least in the logo for the campaign, which features a global map image.⁷ 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 (2008); Dodge et al. (2008) and Monmonier (2006). 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 education⁸. Populist thematic atlases continue to depict British identities and inequalities using mapping in innovative ways, relying on the visual power of mapped socio-demographic data, that increasingly plays an important role in the policy process (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.

For this potential to be realised, however a number of things will have to change. There needs to be an RGS-IBG research group to encourage and facilitate critical and creative research on mapping. Mapping skills may still appear in the geography benchmark statements⁹, but their deployment by geographers needs to reflect these words. More courses need to be taught, and more mapping incorporated into existing courses, instead of shut-off in the somewhat marginalized GIS domain. More creative

⁷ See <<http://www.ggip.co.uk>>.

⁸ See <<http://www.worldmapper.org/>>; <<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps>> <<http://edina.ac.uk/digimap/>>.

⁹ ‘[P]reparing effective maps and diagrams using a range of appropriate technologies’, <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/Geography.asp>>.

research needs to be carried out around the real world ways in which mapping is deployed. As geographers we need to use the power of maps once more. We should get out there and make our own maps!

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