

Human Rights: Mappings, Surveillance, and Sousveillance.

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Summary

Human rights abuses are increasingly being mapped and documented through data and cartographic activities, from drones patrolling borders, to satellite data being used to identify genocide and mass graves. This documentation is creating a new relational dynamic between between the mapper and the mapped within the human rights context, translating into new productions of space, and ultimately reproduce hegemony. The nature of these activities mirror the divine gaze of God, positioning the commissioner of the map in a seemingly omniscient position. This process has been shown to be instrumental in the forming of the Other, and with that the subjugation of the Other. In cases of human rights abuses this further *reOthering* through documentary can have a increasingly detrimental effect. However, some mapping projects are working to counter these narratives, through sousveillance projects. This paper though questions to what extent these new practices can break-away from the Cartographic Gaze to create new knowledges and representations of the world that avoid the process of *reOthering*, and further subjugation.

KEYWORDS: Human Rights, Mapping, Migration, The Other, Foucault, Sartre

While maps have long been used by states as tools of control, a theme that can be traced back to the Babylonians (Finkel, 1995), the sixteenth century saw this on an unprecedented scale. Newly ‘discovered’ lands required an increasingly detailed series of mappings. These maps were produced as views from above and worked to serve as tools of possession, the explorer and cartographers’ elevated position and the commanding view provided by the maps mirrored the divine gaze of God, positioning the commissioner of the map in a seemingly omniscient position.

This cartographic gaze was the precursor to the surveillant gaze, epitomized by Bentham’s Panopticon and the work of Foucault. These new maps of the sixteenth century gave monarchs and the landowners that served them greater control and further-reaching power. Ownership over space became defined in robust terms, and alongside the process of enclosure, the position of the peasantry, landowners and the monarchy became ever solidified, changing the perception and understanding of space itself.

But this is about more than the direction from which we view – the Cartographic Gaze also embodies the Sartrean conceptualisation of Gazing, serving as another battlefield for the definition of self/Other. Like the panopticon the cartographic gaze is about power. The ‘God’s’ eye view or ‘gaze’ defines people, resources and power. This makes maps instrumental in the forming of the ‘Other’ – much like the gaze of Medusa (or the prison guard) those who are looked upon (or believe themselves to be) are turned to stone. This positions the map maker in a divine position and strips the mapped of their self-determination, limiting insurrection.

To take this Sartrean tone further, maps are ‘nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility [are] only alibis for aggression’ (Sartre, 1963, 21). Furthermore, the cartographic gaze proliferated the illusion of accuracy in maps and data. Wood (2015) argues that nineteenth-century empiricism imbued maps with the myth that what they visualised was ‘veridical and value-free pictures of reality’ (n.p.).

Of course there has been much discussion around PGIS and other participatory tools that suggests that people no longer have to settle for representations being imposed upon them; as access becomes cheaper, making a self-representation no longer requires intermediaries to call, invite, edit or

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prescribe the way in which cartographic representations are produced. In the late 2000s emergent digital interfaces became more and more accessible, giving rise to what has been popularly called ‘ cartography 2.0’ (Crampton, 2009).

‘When individuals make their own maps, they offer an expression of what they consider important, what they consider to be “of interest”, and for what they are willing to fight’ (Institute for Applied Autonomy, 2008, 35).

Using these maps as part of the process of human rights advocacy involves an explicit recognition of maps as rhetorical devices. In this way, maps no longer solely represent space but are used to shape the direction of the argument, to identify those objects to be considered and also to lay out the discursive boundaries of the discussion. However, while these tactical cartographies may be able to amplify voices, change conversations and influence policies, their experimentation is still bound by the cartographic gaze. The new resources ‘cartography 2.0’ offers up, which include Google Earth and Google Maps, were first built upon newly available military satellite data, introduced in 2005 (Crampton, 2009). While this allowed for mappings of alternative visions of society (Evans, 2013), the colonial logics of cartographic vision itself are much harder to transform. A fundamental problem in this transformation is the overly simplistic that these PGIS projects are seen as a practice as replacing bad colonial maps with good anti-colonial ones. Yet, it is clear that these new maps are neither inherently good nor beyond question; they are open to multiple readings, and they may have potentially undesirable outcomes.

With the rise and spread of digital tools for mapping and open data at the end of the twentieth century, the modes of seeing derived from the cartographic gaze became embedded in new tools. These reinforced the illusionary vision of the cartographic gaze but also diversified and expanded who could participate in the manufacture of this gaze. These impossibilities of escaping the cartographic gaze can be broadly seen in three areas

- i) The ‘ politics’ of a platform refers to how power gets embedded into computational layers as well as how relations play out through user engagement with the platform (Gillespie, 2010; Helmond, 2015; Langlois and Elmer, 2013). Mapping platforms, while less often considered by new media scholars, are sites at which decisions around programming, often hidden from users, are deeply embroiled in politics. As mapping platforms often pre-determine places and their meanings, they shape users’ spatial imaginations and limit what is possible to map.

Whether elite or lay produced, all mapping, even that which aims to counter the status quo, is based upon classification and codification of real world objects into taxonomies and terminology. The slots into which data might be fitted are defined by those who make the software, not those who create the knowledge (Brown et al., 2013). For a long time the knowledge of local peoples has been translated through tools and language to suit the needs of the coloniser (Kitchin et al., 2009), resulting in mapping platforms that resemble or make programmable the coloniser’s renderings of place and space. While the more collaborative approaches of PGIS may attempt to re-prioritise local and minoritarian spatial knowledges, this knowledge becomes mediated through tools invented by the military at the height of colonial worldviews (Harris, 2016; Elwood, 2006; Carver, 2003). This is something that occurs at the very level of translation from subjugated knowledge into Western information, particularly in relation to the often flexible, porous nature of indigenous understandings of land, and the hard lines of scientific maps and their taxonomies (Harris, 2016).

- ii) Just as platforms can have political decisions embedded in them, so too can the software and visual libraries people use to create the visual interfaces and symbology of maps. The development of ISOs, international treaties on mark-up language, symbology and database structures of geographic information embed the cartographic gaze into the visual representation of spatial information. While this consistency of forms can help build literacy through repetition and ensures compatibility across platforms, it also privileges particular ways of seeing data and reifies the idea that visualisations are objective representations of the truth.

To take a rather basic example: Google’s decision to give over more space to the

mapping of roads and then make these a more prominent and detailed feature of its service does well in helping navigation but also skews the viewer's perceptions of the importance (and quantity) of roads, while at the same time diminishing the presence of people and cities. This might seem a harmless issue, but in order to incorporate the additional road labels, the names of urban centres have been removed, effectively eliminating their existence (O'Beirne, 2016).

- iii) As Branston and Stafford (2010) note, 'no representation can contain more than a fraction of its real-world subject' (129). No map, counter, participatory, military or otherwise, can be a perfect depiction of territory, in fact for a map to be a truly faithful representation of space, it would need to be at a scale of 1:1, including every feature of the land at correct scale; this feat has only been achieved in fiction, in Borges' (2000, 1960) celebrated story *On Exactitude in Science*.

Even more problematic, those items, be they people, objects, data or locations, that do make their way on to a map, having been seen as a legitimate representation by the cartographer, do then themselves rarely, if ever, have any one single, fixed and unchanging meaning (Hall, 1997). This predicament is perhaps captured best by the now infamous question: 'Whose knowledge counts?', first asked by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in 1979. Regardless of the completeness of a map, the deeply embedded Euro-American, industrial-military, colonial cartographic gaze means that data that already conforms to this worldview is what gets taken seriously, or given legitimacy (McFarlane, 2006). This evokes the work of Spivak (1988) when she questions whether the subaltern can speak. To fully understand the way in which we understand the Other – or in this case collect and analysis data about the Other – we must turn the anthropological gaze on ourselves and view our representations about, or on behalf of, the Other as a function of our geopolitical and institutional positioning (Kapoor, 2005). And 'to this day many groups, communities and individuals consider themselves to be dangerously mis-represented' (Kidd, 2016, 8). The virtues of participatory GIS and counter-mapping cannot alone erode the conflict between what Barthes (1957) would term the denotations and the connotations of the cartographic artefacts.

SOME SOLUTIONS: COUNTER MAPPING

For many critical cartographers, tensions exist between the desire to challenge the cartographic gaze yet still produce a map that is easily readable and understandable to audiences. Breaking conventions means taking the user outside of how they are trained to see. While this can yield affective moments and transformative encounters, it may also distract from the delivery of the maps' messages. The inaccuracy, bias or total lack of representation that can be found in maps has led people to argue that we need to draw new maps, maps of resistance that can be used to attack the visible and invisible (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2008). What strategies contestatory cartographers choose rests on considerations of audiences and desired outcomes.

While participatory mapping practices involve local or affected communities, they use traditional, institutional models and modes for mapping, often led by an outside practitioner. Counter-maps seek to both subvert the methodological practice of mapping and expose and challenge power relations; to question at its core the cartographic gaze. Distinct from more general uses of mapping or PGIS, counter-mapping involves an explicit engagement with the ethics and risks that arise in the process of making maps together. This often involves critical analysis of how people, and the places they inhabit, become represented. Counter-mapping then might be seen as a direct response to the top-down, elitist, colonial mapping embodied by the cartographic gaze, bringing together a new collective order that will better represent the people who are being mapped and producing the map (Parker, 2006). There are three ways we can move towards this;

- i) Knowledge must not be provincialised, nor passed off as universal (Robinson, 2003). This becomes an increasingly difficult task within the cartographic gaze. First, there is a bias towards the creation of God's eye views of the world, which frequently exclude other interpretations and understanding of existence that may not be considered to be 'proper maps'.

- ii) Second, a deep examination of the gaze must be undertaken to avoid the transference of unresolved conflicts onto any new contestatory mapping projects. Without deep examinations of these conflicts and the gaze there runs the risk that all attempts to create counter-maps that follow traditional cartographic perspectives become co-opted by the cartographic gaze, and all those that reject the traditional cartographic perspectives are themselves rejected as not legitimate representations of space. To allow this is to once more unwittingly pass on own failings to the subjugated (Kapoor, 2005).
- iii) The same issues arise around control of the maps, ownership of the computing power required to aggregate collected data sets and knowledges, and who is seen as a legitimate person or company to carry out such work. These issues mean that in mapping maps onto other maps the alternative narratives of counter-maps can be assumed within the new map, developed from a less critical position, and thus the alternative narrative can become occluded by the illusion of completeness that comes with drawing together multiple datasets. This concern can once again leave us feeling trapped and that there is no way out of the limitations of the cartographic gaze.

However, this is not meant as an argument for a retreat into simple localism (Ellerman, 2002); rather, it calls for a change in cartographic practice. Such an engagement, however, must counter the unequal power relations, seek to eliminate the cartographic gaze and move beyond a liberal conception of integrating subaltern knowledge as an addition to Western knowledge – in other words, a more radical conception is needed.

Maps certainly already colonise the imagination, and it is thus essential to ensure they do not continue to colonise or subjugate, through the obscuring guise of PGIS and data visualisation, those who are being mapped (Bayley, 2016). However, this is difficult to escape: even the great cartographic theorist Brian Harley has expressed something of personal outrage that he himself might have been duped by such maps and visualisations, which, he later came to note, were more destructive than guns and warships in their power to oppress the Other and to crush insurrection against anything but the map's representation of power (Harley, 2002). It is perhaps salient that we evoke the work of Sartre, who's perhaps most enduring quote 'hell is other people', both captures the solidifying created through being mapped, as well as coming from his play 'no exit', which rather sums up our thoughts on escaping the cartographic gaze.

Maps, be they cartographic, data visualisations, participatory or counter, all sit in this space between the virtual and the real. Here Winnicott's question on maps becomes salient in relation to data: did you find the world or did you make it up? The use of geographic information has changed dramatically in the past decade and continues to do so. The platforms and related tools available to make maps are important factors impacting geographic information use and counter-mapping narratives (Brown et al., 2013). PGIS within the human rights sphere aspires to deliver a more democratic spatial governance, but the majority of this work still emphasises the incorporation of local voices into maps produced and controlled by specialists and articulating their agendas, rather than subverting mapping or changing what is mapped (Perkins, 2007). Counter-mapping has gone some way to challenge this, but the transformation is far from complete.

In pointing out these limitations, my intention is not to suggest that these new modes of working should be abandoned. Instead it serves as a call to question at every turn, every representation. It is well known that this is required, yet terms like participatory and contestatory, or mashup and counter-map, all too easily lure the creator and reader into forgetting the in-built biases of the platform, the coding, the symbology the creator and the reader that are tied up in the inescapable, yet very much challengeable, cartographic gaze. The power to map – as with the power to collect, analyse and visualise statistical information – rested largely in government and large-scale corporate organisations. Yet the power of the cartographic gaze is not restricted to those in positions of authority.

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Biography

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