

MEANINGFUL MAPS: FOSTERING SHARED SPATIAL UNDERSTANDING

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Most if not all ideas have a spatial component. For example, rum is most often seen as Caribbean, sports have famed locales (hockey is Canadian of course), and Elvis Presley was (or maybe still “is”) American. Socially, slavery links Africa to America, Apartheid is South African, and Fascism Italian (or German, or Spanish...). Religions too have spatially defined origins and territories (think of the Temple Mount or the Cave of the Patriarchs), with all the social upheavals that emerge when contested. Even commercial deals have a spatial component, since they consider access to markets (distance), implying the recognition of where the market is in the first place. Therefore, to merely think implies being a mapmaker, at least cognitively and/or metaphysically, and this is true without the need to actually produce any physical representation of a spatial understanding. In other words, we constantly make maps in our head, regardless of whether we write them down anywhere. My research, which is part of my job at the Mapping and Charting Establishment, aims at improving the value of our maps, even those in our brain, making them meaningful in the context of military operations.

To do so, I attempt to temporarily escape the physical realities of map making, seen as the design of a cartographic product such as a paper map. Do not take me wrong: this aspect of cartography does matter. It does so because the choice of ontologies (such as boundaries) through textual or visual signifiers, colors, etc, influences what the physical map users will ultimately be able to understand of the geography depicted. However, for the mapmaker in all of us, this happens after we actually proceed with sense-making in a geographic sense, creating a personal geography of the problem at hand. Consequently, I rather suggest a study of our spatial understanding “in action,” one which is post-structuralist, socially constructed, and focuses on its epistemology: the theory of knowledge. What does that mean? Here we go:

Firstly, that our spatial understanding be post-structuralist suggests that spatially related “things” do not have to exist in opposition, nor necessarily be hierarchical. Just like roads and train tracks can exist in equality as ontologies on a paper map, space visualized as the territorial spread of a cultural artifact (the language spoken for example) and a road distance analysis may have equal values in a contextual judgment. Our spatial understanding therefore does not have to be selective like a paper map will, invariably choosing certain “things” to be displayed with prominence over others to avoid cluttering.

Second, our notions of “truths,” beliefs and justifications, along with their territories (the space they are perceived to consume), are but a social construction. That they be normative is no excuse to be exclusive. For example, just like there is no “two” sides to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are no “two” geographies. There are rather a quasi-infinite number of sides, all complex, and the product of varying beliefs and justifications, most often expressed as narratives. Understanding how different individuals or communities perceive space therefore requires an understanding of their social environment in a significant amount of detail, beyond the dichotomy of the “us” and “them” so prevalent for militaries pressed into demonizing their enemy.

Thirdly, of course, our spatial understanding depends on epistemology because it is socially constructed. Our geographic preferences, even if only cognitive, are a derivative of the value we deliberately or involuntarily associate with certain ideas and contexts. For example, most perceive “The West Bank” near Jerusalem as a mosaic of Arab clans and Jewish factions, in some parts thanks to the UN (particularly the Oslo Accord Map) and European news. Conversely, as an engineer, I am rather uniquely tempted to perceive the same area as a quagmire of infrastructure: unbalanced, exclusive, and conjectural. For me, the West Bank is therefore multi-layered and spatially convoluted, but certainly not mutually exclusive of Jews and Arabs. In essence, both have a huge importance in each other’s society that maps tend to minimize by a binary perspective, informed in large part by security needs.

Consequentially, in understanding these perspectives on the origins and existence of our cognitive and metaphysical maps, even if short of their physical representation, we see that our spatial understanding is a criteria for what constitutes useful knowledge, and thus frames our decisions. We are slaves to a very personal geography, one that exists in our head, and which needs to be exorcised if we are to truly develop any shared understanding amongst different individuals or communities, often from different cultures, nations, states, etc.

Most practitioners would therefore now expect that I divulge a methodology that leads to meaningful maps, particularly since the very name of this conference invokes the word. But there is no step-by-step method for a problem that reigns in a world of social complexity. I also restrain myself in giving extensive examples of what I call meaningful maps. This is because every map lies in a contextual space that defies physical representation alone, ie. maps are diminutive of the thought process behind their creation. Rather, the way to exorcise from our thoughts and minds the involuntary criteria that limits our spatial understanding starts with acknowledging our biases and those of other stakeholders to our idea (such as joint partners or other government departments). This happens through changing our method of questioning the maps we think of. Only then can we proceed with the physical design of ontologies (the paper map, for example).

For example, here are some questions pertinent to solving a complex defense or International Relations problem, particularly with diverse teams (joint, inter-agency, international, etc):

- Why do we (Westerners) see just about all geographies with political state lines? Are we really limited to Post-Westphalian perspectives in our understanding of territory, and does it serve the purpose we pretend it to do?
- Why do we almost always neglect detail in our geographic depictions of the religiosity of locations? That religious beliefs be taboo in our Western militaries, and most spheres of our societies, has nothing to do with how space gains value for so many through religious history or beliefs.
- Why is Nationalism so commonly mapped pejoratively, yet codified as a force for territorial recognition at the UN (“right of self-determination”)? It begets whether territory is emotional or legal, or if it can ever be both?
- How do indigenous people conceptualize their ancestral territory? Is it from where their ancestors hunted and lived (which is often very small)? Or is it from the name given to expenses of land in post-colonial times (which are often very big)? Perhaps rather it is from the narratives of elders who romantically fed the social consciousness of their communities that rivers, mountains and plains are a richness to be nurtured (as in admired), versus a resource that they too exploited. If so, maybe some rivers and mountains and plains are more important, and form the basis of a compromise?

These are of course macro-examples. In our day-to-day spatial understandings, however, they give the tone to the social, cultural, political and other factors that should be considered. We are slaves of our geographies, emancipated only by their commonality with those of others. Understanding where these intersection touch, and where they conflict, requires less method than approach: inquisitive, critical, culturally literate, and self-reflective.

For a more thorough research on this topic, refer to the following:

Primeau, M. (2017, May). *Discursive maps at the edge of chaos*. School of Advanced Military Studies: URL: <http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p4013coll3/id/3671/rec/1>