

Cartography and Territory in International Relations

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Disputes over resources, citizenship and jurisdictions are everyday occurrences in international relations. Essentially they are questions of sovereignty, borders and, as such, territory. In consequence, these are issues of spatiality; of the political organisation of space. Somewhat surprisingly, International Relations (IR), as a discipline, has traditionally been very reluctant to view space as a central concept for understanding world affairs. One way to approach questions of space is to investigate how technologies – broadly speaking, cartographies – that mediate the relationship between humans and their environment shape and define the spatiality of politics.

What is a map?

For most people maps are very practical and innocent; useful for finding things and your way around – no more, no less. But maps do much more than that. As images or projections maps help shaping our beliefs about the world. Think about colonial world maps coloured with what Benedict Anderson (1991: 175) has called the imperial dye (British possessions in pink-red, French purple-blue and so on) or the red and blue dyed maps from the Cold War that supported the notion of a divided world. More specifically, statesmen (& women) respond to the world as they perceive and imagine it (Henrikson 1980), and maps play a fundamental role in shaping these imaginations.

Maps are very powerful but not only as documents. Over the last couple of decades the study of cartography has moved from a focus on maps as products towards a broader engagement with the practice of map-making, different types of knowledge production and ‘the political field of its operations’ (Crampton 2009: 840; see also Cosgrove 2005). With this focus on practice and types of knowledge we should understand cartography as always entailing a particular understanding of what a map is and how to make it. The political field points to the fact that cartography never is a neutral practice but always supports, and is supported by, particular interests. Seen as a practice, cartography gains a performative character that construes different realities based on the choice of input and audience. The mentioned colonial maps were useful,

for example, for the empires' administrations, but less so for native populations who typically employed different ways of navigating their material environment.

Cartography in International Relations

Within IR the role of cartography has been addressed only superficially. John Ruggie's classic "Territoriality and Beyond" (1993), however, advances cartography alongside more general developments in visual arts that embodied a novel perception of space during the European Renaissance. In this view, an epistemic change transformed the perception of space and – in effect – laid the foundation of modern territoriality defined by neat boundaries and homogenous political spaces as the political ideal. In a similar manner, Rob Walker ascribes significance to cartographic developments for understanding the particular modern spatiality that informs the perceived sovereign territorial order of IR (Walker 1993). More recent work has developed this line of thinking (Larkins 2010); Jordan Branch (Branch 2011), for example, argues that cartography was crucial to the 'transition from medieval to modern' systems of rule. While this work clearly advances the significance of cartography in IR, there is a case to be made for ascribing an even more important role to cartography.

In accord with what has been discussed so far, constructivist IR theorists stress the role of ideas and beliefs in order to explain agency and the construction of an international system. In that, such scholars emphasise the constitutive or performative character of maps. As performative practice, however, cartography tends to be portrayed as a very human endeavour in the sense that nature, geography itself, plays only a small role in determining what is on the map. In other words, materiality is left behind. In response, we should adopt a different take on cartography, broadening the perceived impact beyond mere perceptions or beliefs. This is not to say that cartography does not have a performative nature; it does, but it also plays a more essential – and often overlooked role – as mediating the relationship between humans and their environment. The fact that all cultures historically have had cartographies in various guises suggests that the role of mediation establishes different spatialities that condition different ways of organising space politically. Thus, through its mediating role, cartography works as a technology that produces a particular spatiality which provides the reference for socio-political organisation.

Mapping sovereignty

The role of mediation becomes clear when looking at the definition of state borders. Approaching the end of World War I the US set up an inquiry in 1917 to collect data on various expected geographical claims by the warring parties. According to Jeremy Crampton this was a group of technicians and scientists, rather than diplomats that provided the backbone of the US approach to the Versailles Negotiations. Indeed constituting the decision making establishment, the politics of space became a matter of identifying homogenous racialized populations and drawing a territorial lines around them (Crampton 2006: 747). The various claims were compiled and ordered within a cartographic space. This exemplifies the mediating role of cartography with regard to territorial boundaries; if we turn to maritime issues, however, the relationship between boundaries and cartography becomes even clearer. At sea, boundaries cannot be marked by erecting stones and similar, and there are no mills, bridges, or mountains which could serve as a reference point. Maritime boundaries refer to geological markers such as continental shelves or long distances measured from a baseline (Strandsbjerg 2012). To become a reference point for boundaries such markers needs to be made tangible through calculation and mapping. In consequence, maritime boundaries can only be defined with reference to a map; or more precisely a cartographically defined space.

In consequence of its space-society mediating function cartography plays a crucial role for International Relations. To the extent that modern IR has been defined with the emergence of territorial sovereignty we cannot understand this constitutive moment without understanding cartography. A spatial delimitation of authority will always have to be mediated through cartography. As such, the notion of territorial sovereignty relies on a cartographic spatiality that allows the sovereign-territory nexus to be identified cartographically first and subsequently be implemented through various process and struggles on the ground. In other words, without the cartographic ability to portray geography in a manner that allows neat boundaries to be drawn, sovereignty could not primarily refer to territory. By implication, cartography is about more than mere perceptions and beliefs. It is about how we, as humans, get access to and interrelate with the environment. Any spatial ordering of large scale social organisation relies on, and refers to, a cartographic reality of space. Hence, to understand the spatiality of a particular social order, we should start with cartography.

A longer version of this paper will be forthcoming in e-International Relations:

<http://www.e-ir.info/>

For more detailed accounts of the relationship between cartography and IR see:

Strandsbjerg, J. (2010). Territory, Globalisation and International Relations: the cartographic reality of space. Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Strandsbjerg, J. (2012). "Cartopolitics, Geopolitics and Boundaries in the Arctic." Geopolitics 17(4): 818-842.

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Cosgrove, D. (2005). "Maps, Mapping, Modernity: Art and Cartography in the Twentieth Century." Imago Mundi 57(1): 35-54.

Crampton, J. W. (2006). "The cartographic calculation of space: race mapping and the Balkans at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919." Social & Cultural Geography 7(5): 731-752.

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Larkins, J. (2010). From Hierarchy to Anarchy: territory and politics before Westphalia. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

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Walker, R. B. J. (1993). Inside/outside: international relations as political theory. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.