

Cartography and Territory in International Relations

Written by Jeppe Strandsbjerg

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JEPPE STRANDBJERG, OCT 2 2013

Disputes over resources, citizenship and jurisdictions are everyday occurrences in international relations. Essentially they are questions of sovereignty, borders and, as such, territory. Consequently, these are issues of spatiality; of the political organisation of space. Interestingly, International Relations (IR), as a discipline, has traditionally been very reluctant to conceptualise space as a central concept for understanding world affairs. This is surprising because IR is an inherently spatial discipline (Walker 1993; Agnew 1994); its reluctance to admit this can probably be explained somewhat with a desire to distance itself from its geopolitical legacies after World War II as well as a 'Scientific' impulse to treat geography as a question of natural science (Strandsbjerg 2010). Admittedly, it is complex to theorise the human relationship to geography without either positing space as a social construction (thus underplaying materiality) or moving into unhelpful spatial determinism (thus underplaying sociality). Yet, as a way to approach questions of space, technologies – broadly speaking, cartographies – that mediate the relationship between humans and their environment, play a much more significant role than is commonly acknowledged.

Cartography and International Relations

For most people maps play an innocuous yet very practical role; useful for finding things and your way around. But, of course, maps do much more than that. As images or projections maps help shaping our beliefs about the world. Think about imperial world maps coloured with what Benedict Anderson (1991: 175) have called the imperial dye (British possessions in pink-red, French purple-blue and so on) or the red and blue coloured world maps from the Cold War that support the notion of a divided world. Such maps shape what has been called our geographical imaginary (Watts 1999; Gregory 2009) that is part of the geographical outlook we – as observers, decision makers, or scientists – implicitly employ to make sense of the world. Politicians respond to the world as they perceive and imagine it (Henrikson 1980) and maps play a fundamental role in shaping these imaginations. Alan K. Henrikson (1975), for example, has shown how a new "airman's view," typified by the North Pole-centered azimuthal projections, helped to promote a new world outlook among Americans, which he termed "Air-Age Globalism." It profoundly shaped the conduct of the war and the planning of the peace. As imagery, then, cartography is crucial in framing world views.

There is no doubt that maps are very powerful, though not only as documents. Over the last couple of decades the study of cartography has moved from a focus on maps toward a broader engagement with practice, different types of knowledge and 'the political field of its operations' (Crampton 2009: 840; see also Cosgrove 2005). With 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 point to the fact that cartography is never 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 colonial administration but less so for native populations that typically employed different ways of navigating their material environment. Likewise, maps illustrating variance in real estate prices construes a world for and of estate owners obscuring the world of other forms of residence.

Within IR the role of cartography has been addressed only superficially. Apart from Henrikson's account discussed above, John Ruggie's classic *Territoriality and Beyond* (1993) advances cartography alongside more general developments in visual arts that embodied a novel perception of space during the European Renaissance. In this

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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 (1993) ascribes significance to cartographic developments for understanding the particular modern spatiality that informs the perceived sovereign territorial order of IR. More recent work has developed this line of thinking (Larkins 2010); and Jordan Branch (2011), for example, argues that cartography was crucial along three dimensions in the transition from a medieval to a modern system of rule. Cartography was important for the homogenisation of territorial authority; for the linearization of political boundaries; and for the elimination of nonterritorial forms of organization. While clearly advancing the significance of cartography in IR; there is a case to be made for ascribing an even more important role for cartography.

Accordingly, 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 little role in 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. Rather, cartography is a practice that mediates the relationship between people and their physical environment. All cultures have historically made maps of one kind or the other (Harley 1987). These maps express different conceptions about cosmos and the immediate spatial environment of the particular group. Understood in this way, cartography is that social activity that makes sense of people's location on earth; defining both the world and a particular location in it. The significant difference here lies in the distinction between performance and mediation. The former connotes something voluntary and somewhat instrumental whereas mediation implies a necessary relationship.

Territory and the Cartographic Reality of Space

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. Organisation requires a notion of delimitation – of boundaries – that interrelates with the way in which the relation to the environment is mediated. And this relationship of mediation is always structured not only by epistemic beliefs (knowledge traditions) and ideological impulses, but also by practical needs and functions. Historically spatial measures were often tied to functionality; distance measured in travel time; agricultural land was measured in terms of labour (time) or capital (grain) input. Thus, through its mediating role, cartography works as a technology that produces a particular spatiality which provides the spatial reference for socio-political organisation.

The role of mediation becomes clear when looking at the definition of state borders. Historically, borders have often been defined in terms of markers in the landscape – erection of stones, particular sites, and so on – or borders have simply been less important than they are today. For the medieval ruler it was important who could claim authority over a city or castle but less significant exactly where the boundary lay. Sovereignty referred to sites and persons rather an abstract notion of the territory. With the advance of geometric, or scientific, cartography in Europe from 1500s onwards, borders would increasingly refer to a cartographic reality of space (Strandsbjerg 2010), where boundaries could be drawn on the map first and subsequently be implemented on the ground. Here the question of mediation is important because this process only works when the map helps navigating the landscape; i.e. you find in the landscape what you expect based on the reading of the map. In practice borders often refer to combination of abstract coordinates and features in the landscape. Documents drafted in Paris 1921 uses a combination of spatial points defined by longitude and latitude and features in the landscape such as *Vesterskov Mølle* (a mill), or a bridge located west of *skomagerhuset* (the cobbler's house) to describe the trajectory of the Danish-German border (Department of State 1968: 3-7).

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.

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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 IR. To the extent that modern IR has been defined with the emergence of territorial sovereignty we cannot understand this constitutive moment without understanding cartography. As indicated above, law cannot refer directly to the geography. 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 allow the sovereign-territory nexus to be identified cartographically first and subsequently be implemented through various process and struggles on the ground subsequently. In other words, without the cartographic ability to portray geography in a manner that allows neat boundaries to be drawn on it, 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 practice, we should start with cartography.

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