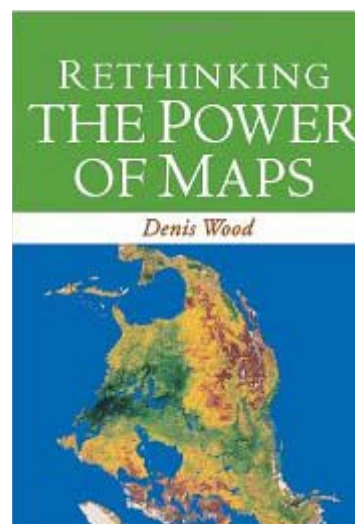


***Rethinking the Power of Maps*, by Denis Wood PhD**

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Today they are scribbled on the back of business cards, delivered with admonitions by our GPS, or arrive on our desktop from Mappy or Google. Most of us, if we reflect on maps at all, are likely to think of them as aids for getting from one place to another without getting lost, happy not to risk roadway suicide refolding their bed sheet-sized ancestors to fit the glove compartment! In the newspaper or on the Internet maps may also seem to be easy ways to digest data, viz., the red/blue state maps used to explain the 2008 US elections or tracking the spread of influenza. However, Denis Wood's sequel to *The Power of Maps*, takes us far, far deeper into the substratum of how we come to have and use these tools. It examines the assumptions we make about them and their import for both local and global communities.



Wood subjects what we call “a map” to a strict historical scrutiny. At least in the West, maps are with few exceptions a product of the age of nation building. To quote the author, “The things we recognize as maps gained currency only in the last 400 years or so and within this period only in relatively stable states with entrenched, centralized bureaucracies and well-established academies.” In truth, far from being passive reflections of geography, maps help construct the state as we know it.

How does this work? Drawing boundaries and naming places are ways of affirming the existence of a state and its reach. The resulting maps, then, both affirm and are affirmed by the authority of the state. The existence of the map offered a sense of identity to both the population within and a claim of proprietorship against those without. Maps are used to tell us that “things are,” and that they are “there.” At their absolute worst, as history shows, they often give legitimacy, if not a sense of absolute righteousness, to engaging in seizure and genocide.

Maps are not passive pieces of paper or pixels on your computer screen that they at first seem to be. While they present themselves as simply representing facts of nature and society, maps, whether gerrymandering local voting or school districts or staking a claim to territory, are in fact propositions supporting both local and geopolitical agendas in search of acceptance.

Besides chronicling this power and agency of maps with numerous historical and contemporary accounts, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* contains a brilliantly written, major case study, the mapping and counter-mapping and counter-counter-mapping of Palestine. The focal point of this history is the claim to existence of the State of Israel and propositions as to its geographical reach. I started reading the book from the beginning, but found the cartographic language a bit daunting, so followed the author's suggestion of jumping to this illustrative chapter, whose story line and impact helped me make much better sense of the rest.

Maps share in the power of culture, in which the making of maps has in fact become a part. They are social constructs shaping our reality. They operate like the most influential levels of culture, those that speak to us from below the waterline of consciousness about what we should believe to be real and meaningful. Maps easily close our minds and eyes to conflicting or competing realities that might challenge implanted values and attitudes. Whether justifying contemporary Israeli expansion or motivating the century long march of the “Manifest Destiny” of the white man in America, maps ease the conscience of both their creators and users. Who can argue with “what is?” Here as well as elsewhere rapacious abstraction has the power to gnaw at our humanity.

Beyond tracking the basic story of the development of mapping and its purposes, Wood explores the impact of the legend and symbols and colors used in designing maps, what they tell us and what they hide, as well as how they advertise. The incisiveness and precision with which he examines elements that we take for granted on maps is at once a sociological and epistemological analysis of the minds of both makers and end users of maps. It explains the results of employing them and gives us clues to interpreting the language and codes they embody.

Maps are about relationships, how one landscape or feature of what is being measured and presented relates to or elbows another aside in the style of presentation, relative size and importance. Far from innocent notes and symbols, the legend placed on maps (or its absence), too, inevitably bear intentionality. Though we might generally agree that even the most lavishly illustrated menu is not the meal, when it comes to maps, we are far less likely to disentangle reality from its representation by the cartographer or fathom the intentions of his or her patrons.

Given the political, military, financial and social influences behind the creation and use of maps, it is not surprising that elevated consciousness about their actual sources, origins and nature would result in resistance to propositions they espouse. Inevitably this leads to counter-mapping as an expression of criticism and protest.

Wood looks at the rise and fall of cartography as a scholarly discipline, both in the making and classification of maps. He points to a decline of sustainability in this academic venture, due to both internal and external criticism and the fact that technological tools are democratizing the ability to make maps. He provides numerous examples of “home grown” mapmaking taking on a life of its own, embodying both artistic elegance and a sense of affection for the places in people’s lives.

Google, the blabbing GPS, et al, are now automating the past intentions and assumptions of mapmakers. Recognizing this, Wood becomes an unabashed advocate of “talking back to the map” and, in a populist sense, “taking back the map.” This perspective and tone resonates through the entire book, but is most explicit in Chapters 5 to 7 where alternative propositions, everything from activist criticism to Dada map art are explored. Wood argues that we need to get beyond the fictive “public participation” that is often championed with a political agenda of balancing support and interests for projects if we are to enter into real democratization of maps.

Rethinking the Power of Maps is not an easy read, but an eye opening one. The language can be daunting even for US English speakers, not just in the use of vocabulary but in the broadness of the conceptual frame—I read it with my browser open to Wikipedia. The end notes are a copious resource not only listing and explaining references but providing additional commentary on the part of the author that would have overburdened the text.

In sum, I can do no better than quote from the first pages of the book: “Maps are engines that convert social energy into social work,” whose outputs include the framing of social space, social order, and social knowledge.