with a comprehensive work on the country still in its most dramatic state of flux. In addition to differentiating Russia from its predecessors and neighbors, the book helps us to see internal differences within the set of semiautonomous ethnic republics within the Russian Federation (should we call them “Internal Abroad”?). Indeed, the question “What is Russia?” remains open to various interpretations, as a recent collection of essays from Russia’s best young analysts attests (Inoe 1995). Russia remains an unclear geocultural concept for Russians, as evident in the recent establishment of a special official commission for defining the new republic’s “national idea.” Indeed, unlike other republics of the USSR, Russia in the Soviet period lacked such major politico-cultural identifiers as its own branch of the Communist Party, academy of sciences, distinctive capital, and anthem (p. 54). It is easier to explain what is not Russia than what is, yet answering the former question could help to explain the latter.

The disadvantage in using such an approach is that it emphasizes the marginal, the exceptional, the other, often at the expense of explaining the mainstream, the center, the essence. While it does a good job of showing disunifying, marginal ingredients of the area (economic political disunity, ethnic and other regional specificities), the book is less successful in explaining the unifying (“essential”) ingredients of the country. The latter minimal list, in my opinion, should include the following: the Russian language, the culture precipitated by Orthodox customs and norms, a shared historical experience, urban life, and the capital city. The average person in modern Russia is a Russian Orthodox urban dweller with largely Moscow-centered cultural life. It is certainly challenging to write regional geographic accounts along these supposedly homogeneous themes. Yet if geography is a study of differences, spatial variations, unique features, exceptions of different sort, then could our constructions be considered representative? Showing diversity may hide the essence.

Key Words: economic transition, post-Soviet republics, regional geography, Russia, Russian Federation, USSR.

References


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This is a vexing book. If you have followed the decade-long engagement among social theorists, cartographers, and cartographic historians since the widely read “Deconstructing the Map” (1989) by J.B. Harley, you will have become familiar with the terrain of this discourse. Item 1: Maps are not the objective, innocent vessels of meaning that many in and out of the disciplines associated with maps and mapmaking have claimed that they are, or can be. Item 2: In many (perhaps most) instances maps serve particular interests and fix power relations in ways that are predictable as well as reflective of mainstream understandings of historical-geographical reality. Item 3: Map users are (in general) unaware of the insidious nature of this characteristic of cartography, and (in general) tend to accept maps as objective, mirror-like renderings of the world. This argument has been made numerous times before and after Harley in both academic settings (cf. Edney 1986, 1993; Curry 1994; Crampton 1994; Pickles 1995) and more widely read volumes (Monmonier 1991, 1995; Wood 1992). Why then has the distinguished historian Jeremy Black chosen to make these points yet again? This is the question that readers of Maps and Politics will be asking after working through this loosely organized volume.

In the Introduction, Black clearly states his intention to debunk the widely held myth of objective cartography:

Can politics be treated as a subset of cartography, a matter of subject specialization and/or readily
apparent bias, but one that is separable from the vast bulk and purpose of cartographic production and use? Or are the power and purpose of maps inherently political? This book addresses these important questions and seeks to emphasize that the apparent “objectivity” of the mapmaking and map-using processes cannot be divorced from aspects of the politics of representation (p. 10).

But after this promising (if somewhat limited) programmatic statement, Black stumbles out of the gate, and we begin a torturous trip through four rambling chapters that fail to engage meaningfully with mapmaking or map-using processes (1) “Cartography as Power,” (2) “Mapping the World and Its Peoples,” (3) “Socio-Economic Issues and Cartography,” and (4) “The Problems of Mapping Politics”. There are three major problems here.

First, in Black’s view, cartography exists as a practice that is adrift in the disciplinary sea of the social sciences. He misses (or rejects) the strong historical links held by cartography to academic geography and, hence, cannot draw on the dynamics of political and intellectual change in the discipline over the last 150 years. While, as he claims, space does not “belong” to geography, in many ways, cartography does. Evidence is given of this strong relationship during the twentieth century in Rundstrom’s study of applied academic cartography (1989), and it was woven tightly into Gregory’s Geographical Imaginations (1994).

Second, Black commits repeatedly the common flaw (with a few notable exceptions) of mistaking maps for cartography. Maps and atlases become actors and agents that are independent of the people who made them, the cartographers. While maps are not objective to Black, they readily become abstracted objects, floating free in the world, speaking to the map user with only a tenuous connection to the processes of their creation (was it tradition, craft, indenture, assembly line, manual, automated, Fordist, flexible?). These processes (e.g., generalization) only become operational as caricatures of themselves, drawn from introductory texts and used to explain the “problems” with mapmaking.

Finally, this book is troublesome in that Black sets out with the intention (I believe, given the broad title) of doing so much more than he finally accomplishes. In the end, it reads like another trek over the (by now) familiar ground mentioned above. It is richly illustrated in color and black and white (fifty figures in 162 pages of text) and contains many examples that have been chosen to illustrate particular aspects of the political nature of cartography. Indeed, many of the examples are quite interesting and might have provided the raw material for an interesting study of political cartography. These examples lose their effect, however, through haphazard and scattershot organization. For example, in one short (seven-page) section of chapter 3 (“Socio-Economic Issues and Cartography”), Black uses as examples of political cartography a mainstream atlas of the world (1968), a left-liberal world atlas (1990–1991), a magazine cover (1950), CNN and Fox (current), another left-liberal world atlas (1995), a study of the early modern Scottish grain market (1995), and a study of the diffusion of American cattle-ranching traditions (1993). Without question, these are all examples of politicized cartography (is there any other kind?), and they may indeed illustrate the particular point being made in the paragraph at hand. What is missing is a consistent structure running through the whole of the work, a structure that is firmly rooted in political or social theory. In this book, theoretical points are often made and then forgotten from one paragraph to the next, leaving sections standing on their own, or quite often floating free of connections to the theme of the chapter.

This weakness abates somewhat in the two most focused chapters in the book, “Frontiers” (chapter 5) and “War as an Aspect of Political Cartography” (chapter 6). In these chapters, the author adopts a historical/chronological approach to his narrative that allows him (and the reader) to make comparisons and connections between material changes in the conditions of (European) life and the mapping of these conditions. The best chapter in the book, chapter 5, hints at what the rest might have been. Black is an accomplished author, skillful writer, and distinguished historian, and the subject he has chosen for this book demands the attention of scholars with many theoretical perspectives. The richness of the examples used throughout the book suggest that, had more attention been paid to the structural and organizational weaknesses described above, this might have been a stronger contribution. Because it contains many rich illustrations, it could serve as the starting point for more sophisticated discussions of politicized cartography, but beyond this, it accom-
Plishes only the limited success of vanquishing the poststructuralist whipping boy, objectivity. With that finally accomplished, perhaps scholars involved in this research can move into more fertile areas. For example, how do automation and digitization, as well as appeals to scientific ideals by those involved in the new cartography, change the ways that maps in all their forms become politicized?

Key Words: cartography, politics, history of cartography, boundaries, ideology.

References


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Over the past several years, a new generation of political geographers has offered novel interpretations of global politics. Drawing on insights from poststructuralist theory, scholars have begun to examine geopolitics as a form of power/knowledge that participates in the active production of geographical worlds. Among the most notable of these new purveyors of “critical geopolitics” has been Gearóid Ó Tuathail, whose innovative and wide-ranging book, Critical Geopolitics, captures some of this new thinking in a collection of essays that share a concern with “the politics of writing global space.” Drawing on theorists ranging from Foucault to Derrida and Baudrillard, Ó Tuathail engages in a deconstructive reading of the ways in which intellectuals of statecraft make sense of geopolitical order. The book’s overarching concern is to challenge these familiar renderings of political space, by developing a “critical geopolitics” capable of exposing the hidden assumptions, exclusionary traces, and heterogeneous textuality of geopolitics-as-statecraft. As Ó Tuathail writes, “there is a geo-politics beyond, beneath, and within ‘geopolitics,’ a geopolitical gaze, a particular congealment of geo-power, which exceeds that which is normally conceptualized as the geopolitical tradition” (p. 62). Critical geopolitics works to disclose this excess, to highlight the “outside” or “infrastructure” that is the condition of possibility for geopolitical knowledge.

The first section of the book traces the historical emergence of the “classical” geopolitical tradition at the end of the nineteenth century, a tradition whose origins lie in the imperial rivalries of the Great Powers of Europe. Central to this enterprise was the development and codification of geographical knowledge as a form of geopower: “geography was not something already possessed by the earth but an active writing of the earth by an expanding, centralizing imperial state” (p. 2). Chapter 1 provides brief sketches of some of the key figures of this geopolitical tradition—Ratzel, Mahan, Kjellen, Haushofer, Spykman, and especially Halford Mackinder—in order to draw out some of their common epistemological assumptions. Above all, Ó Tuathail...