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Why Theory in the History of Cartography?: Discussion

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36. For example, Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., Blackwell, 1994), whose opening chapter is entitled 'Maps of the intellectual landscape'.

37. For example, John Ziman, *Reliable Knowledge. An Exploration of the Grounds for Belief in Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), Chap. 4.

38. Almost any issue of *The Times Literary Supplement* contains a review using the trope.

39. Throughout the 1980s, both editors not only taught and lectured in the light of their new definition of a map

but cajoled others to adopt a more liberal stance. For the new approach, see J. B. Harley and David Woodward, eds., *The History of Cartography, Volume 1, Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. xv–xxi. The impact of critical theory is even more evident in the substance of the second volume, two books of which have been published so far: Book 1, *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies* (1992); Book 2, *Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies* (1994).

RESUMÉ: Lorsqu'on se concentre sur la notion d'histoire en histoire de la cartographie, on a l'attention attirée sur la nécessité de distinguer deux sources de théories: la théorie critique pour la façon dont les cartes sont interprétées en tant que documents historiques; et une variété de différentes sortes de théories (telles que celles des sciences sociales, de la littérature et des sciences) pour les renseignements fournis par les cartes. Cette discussion provient du rapport entre l'histoire, par définition un sujet basé sur un texte (au sens large), avec une théorie critique et leur préoccupation commune des problèmes d'auteur, de l'importance du contexte et du genre au niveau expérimental ainsi que les différents niveaux de relation entre la théorie et l'histoire de la cartographie.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Wenn wir uns auf die 'Geschichte' der Geschichte der Kartographie richten, muß ein Unterschied zwischen zwei Quellen der Theorie gemacht werden: die kritische Theorie in welcher Karten als historische Dokumente interpretiert werden; und eine Vielfalt von Theorien (sowie jene der Sozialwissenschaften, Geisteswissenschaften und Naturwissenschaften) für die Information die von Karten abgeleitet wird. Die Behauptung bezieht sich auf die Verbindung der Geschichte, meistens ein textgebundenes (*sensu largo*) Objekt, mit kritischer Theorie und deren allgemeinen Beschäftigung mit Problemen der Autorschaft, der Bedeutung des Verbandes und Stils auf empirischen Niveau und den verschiedenen Niveaus den Bedeutung der Theorie zur Geschichte der Kartographie.

KEYWORDS: Theory in the history of cartography; critical theory; history as text; authors and map makers; context; genre; *The History of Cartography*.

Discussion

Following the presentation of the three substantive papers printed above, the session chairman invited comments from the floor—both from invited discussants and from anyone else who wished to contribute to the debate. Those who spoke were asked to consider whether they would like to prepare a written version of their intervention. Of the dozen or so who spoke in Vienna, five elected to do this and their comments are printed below.

All five are fluent English speakers; English was the language in which formal papers were presented, and English was the language in which the debate in Vienna was conducted. Many of those for whom English is not the first language commented afterwards that abstract, theoretical arguments are particularly difficult to follow in another language. To this extent the proceedings in Vienna were in a real sense unrepresentative of the subdiscipline as a whole. It was agreed that, if further sessions on theory in the history of cartography are arranged for future conferences, the debate must be made accessible to all who wish to participate, irrespective of language. Ways of achieving a truly open forum are being explored.

Tony Campbell, British Library, U.K.

In considering the place of ideas in our subject, there are dangers at either extreme. Too rigid application of theory can lead to an historical self-fulfilment. That some early maps were used as instruments of temporal power does not justify a general assumption that all others—from whatever period or region—should be read in the same light. Finding what is being sought, unless there is corroboration from non-cartographic sources, can be as self-deluding as it is satisfying. Where, for instance, is the hand of 'big brother' in a map that was

unambiguously made, bought and used for a simple, straightforward function such as way-finding? The relevance of any grand theory must be reaffirmed for each cultural context, not merely asserted with growing stridency. Unless continuing attempts are made to understand a map's context, the history of cartography will be at the mercy of fashion, lurching from one anachronistic concern to another.

At the other extreme, the empirical 'coal-face', are those who present their unearthed nuggets without comment. Just as theory without a factual grounding is self-indulgent, so pure information is essentially pointless. If those who seek to provide our history with its necessary theoretical underpinning need to maintain contact with historical reality through cited examples, those who engage in the detailed research which is our subject's lifeblood are urged to set their findings into an interpretative framework. If there is no question 'why?', there can be no adequate answers.

David Fletcher, London Guildhall University, U.K.

It is at the level of personal interest and motivation that the argument over the place of theory in the history of cartography needs to be tackled and resolved. Two extreme caricatures can be compared. On the one hand, there is the person for whom theory is a self-serving and possibly self-indulgent preoccupation. Old maps are the raw materials for their abstract propositions. Such people may have as much interest in the maps themselves as computer buffs have in the work of the people for whom they write programs—their hearts lie elsewhere. The counterpoint to this caricature is the keen antiquarian map hunter who is deeply suspicious or even phobic about theory.

Both of these unreal but perhaps not so entirely unrecognisable characters would be forced to confess that some level of theorising is inevitable in any human activity. They would also acknowledge that we must never lose sight of the raw materials and disciplinary base which gives our discipline its identity. Hence, the key issue is not whether or not theory has a place within the history of cartography, but rather what kind of theory.

The role of theory should thus be to bring together the contributions of all the different kinds of people with their diverse specialisms who contribute to our emerging understanding of the history of cartography. Theory should, however, never be prescriptive or dogmatic. In some social-science disciplines there is sometimes a tendency to privilege the contribution of certain kinds of theoretically structured contributions above more empirically based offerings. This form of damaging elitism is one that in a small but growing field we can ill afford and should resist. The lynchpin of our subject is detailed descriptive work carried out with a clear purpose, that is with an implicit theory in mind.

Theory should be geared to providing a set of connected propositions which enable us to explain or to understand phenomena. In my view the central task of the history of cartography is to understand what cartographic representations tell us about how people thought about their environment in past times and different cultures. Other people will have different ideas on the essence of the objectives. What is important is to be able to turn the study of the raw material of a map into an interpretative exercise. At the very minimum the role of theory is to give purpose and direction to our efforts.

In summary, we need a mature middle position that acknowledges the value of a critical and interpretative approach to sources, and one that does not demote the empirical base on which theoretical structures are to be created. We should acknowledge that theory is no more mystifying than organised, systematic, thought and that theory building and detailed empirical work are inseparable and mutually dependent.

Naftali Kadmon, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

I have the feeling that *Conference on the History of Cartography* is something of a misnomer. The title *Conference on the History of (some) Maps or of (some) Map Makers* would be more representative of the themes dealt with by the majority of speakers in Vienna. The papers which were presented displayed a wide collective body of learning about the life and times of map makers, historical dates, map collecting and even map production methods, but rather scant knowledge of cartography and *its* theory. In presenting papers at a conference dedicated to the history of cartography—and at a session on theory—there should be, in my opinion, more awareness of the theory of cartography, not only of the theory of history. And as to history, the past is fast approaching the present; the life time of some modern digital cartographic techniques is measured in months.

Roger J.P. Kain, University of Exeter, U.K.

Writing in the history of cartography must be theoretically informed and infused with conceptual and intellectual rigour if it is to speak on equal terms with the humanities and social sciences and not to be relegated as a pursuit of purely antiquarian value. This need is relevant to research and also to teaching. If the history of cartography is to achieve a place in Higher Education curricula, it must be able to satisfy increasing external scrutiny of the conceptual bases and contents of courses. Theory debate is not an 'optional extra' but a desideratum for academic credibility.

What form should these conceptual and methodological formulations take? I think we have to start with some reference to the question: What is the history of cartography? and to recognise that our subject embodies a plurality of concerns. Map history cannot be thought of at present as a parallel to, for example, one of the systematic branches of history: political, economic, or social, where there has been a long period of paradigm shift such that the range of issues investigated, and the kinds of questions considered valid by a consensus of practitioners, has been refined over many decades of epistemological debate. These long-established areas of history have also been defined and narrowed in terms of content as subdisciplines have fissioned from them: economic history spawning urban history which in turn subdivided into urban social history, urban industrial history, and other subdisciplines so specialised that it is possible to conceive of perhaps a single, overarching body of theory: (neo-classical or Marxist economics, for example), which might be appropriate for all practitioners.

My contention is that it is not similarly legitimate to propose one single, unifying theory of the history of the map because of the variety of approaches conducted under the label 'history of cartography'. Maps are of different kinds, they mesh into the events of the past in very different social, political, cultural and economic arenas and come into the writing of interpretive histories in very different ways. Maps and their connections to history are as diverse as the disciplines which study maps and which unite loosely under the umbrella of history of cartography. Each type of history invokes a different set of theoretical stances and conceptual and methodological approaches. For example, my own work has required political theory of social control to explain state involvement in cadastral mapping in the European Enlightenment and economic theory to help understand the rise of estate mapping associated with the transition from feudalism to capitalism in early modern England.

In summary, we need to be theoretically informed if we are to be academically respectable. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that the plurality of the history of cartography as at present constituted will necessitate a range of conceptual approaches. It is important that we debate these approaches and, perhaps even more importantly, that we are seen to debate them by the wider academic community.

Dennis Reinhartz, University of Texas at Arlington, U.S.A.

Establishing and understanding the theoretical foundation is absolutely essential to the further delineation and structuring of the history of cartography. Such a perhaps open-ended process will help us to define better what is the history of cartography—for ourselves, our students, and others with whom we interact.

But any theory must be universal enough not to exclude any of the diversity of interests and approaches of the interdisciplinary pursuit of the history of cartography; it should unify this developing field, not disperse it. Each of us comes to the field somewhat differently, be it from history, geography, anthropology, art history, archival and library science, collecting, or any of numerous other perspectives, and each of us potentially has unique insights and a great deal to offer the history of cartography.

And finally, any philosophical investigation or explanation should strive resolutely for the maintenance of rigorous standards of 'scientific' historiographical research in the methodology of the history of cartography. Such standards are necessary to strengthen the legitimacy of the discipline.