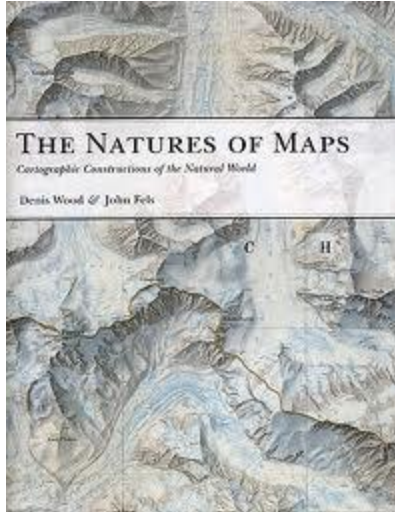


## The Problem with Mapping the World

by Sasha



Author Denis Wood has been present since the advent of the cartographic renaissance, bringing micromapping and digital technologies together with deconstructionist philosophy to energize the field. But looking back he does not necessarily like the effects of his work. In 2008, Wood teamed up with John Fels to describe the implications and insinuations of his three decades of expertise in a gloriously illustrated coffee table book called *The Natures of Maps*, published by Chicago University Press. His conclusions are as stunning as the book is a work of art.

From local Anarchist Bookfairs to international conferences, counterinsurgency manuals to grassroots eco-activists, mapping provides a tense backdrop to tremendous struggles. As law enforcement task forces generate training scenarios of Earth First!ers occupying rural towns with ELF cohorts rampaging through the forests, urban activists contend over the most adequate method of mapping networks of power and resistance. In this rocky social terrain, maps become a metaphor not only for projecting the layout of a space, but for contemplating the combinatorial structures of differential networking patterns, and predicting the future outcomes of strategies and tactics relative to the skill sets of interlocking subjects. From blockades to canopy occupations to free states and overall strategies, mapping can be a crucial tool for direct action and social movements, and *The Natures of Maps* offers the reader a good jumping off point for fascinating insights in the potentials and portent of cartography in nature.

*The Natures of Maps* is bound by a dual-meaning: first, what *are* maps and second, how do maps reflect what *is* in nature. Maps, according to Wood and Fels, present a reference point for what is elsewhere. They abstract meaning from an incredibly complex terrain, and place it onto a rough

plane of understanding that offers a specific perspective. This perspective comes about through a *perimap* and an *epimap*—what the map tells you (through blurbs, legends, illustrations, etc.), and why it tells you that (via accompanying texts, advertisements, and the context of mapping). So, rather than simply instructing the reader on where things *are*, the *perimap* tells a reader *how* the places are: how many of certain animals live in specific areas; how high the elevation reaches in certain areas; what trees exist where, and so on. Beyond that *perimap*, the *epimap* provides the context or reason for the map: to show how industry damages a country, where hurricanes will likely touch down, why environmental conservation matters, and so on.

The *epi-* and *perimaps* form a cognitive cartography that envelopes the reader in what Wood and Fels call “space grammar”. That is, the interplay between the map and the reader’s mind, their memories, senses, values, opens a relationship that allows a restructuring of ideas and understandings. So, a map can begin with a basic understanding, and direct the flow of thought toward a conclusive comprehension of the world. It is this comprehension that fascinates Wood and Fels for the rest of the book, as they uncover eight possible “natures” of maps: the presentation of nature as threatened, threatening, grandiose, opulent, possessable, systematic, mysterious, or, simply, as a park.

The dilemma behind all of these categories, which seems to irritate the authors throughout the book, is that no map of nature is innocent. There is always an underlying purpose; always a current pulling the reader toward a general understanding. Sometimes, a map is an exploitation of the harnessing of nature, other times it is a schizophrenic withdrawal from nature. It can be harsh or forgiving. However, underneath the apparent manipulation of meaning lies the tremendous fun of analysis—What does this map mean? What is the cartographer trying to say? In which direction does the apparent “objectivity” flow? From circular, 17<sup>th</sup> Century maps of ancient towns to maps taken from a satellite, every image has its back-story, and one can spend a good amount of time flipping through *The Natures of Maps* and exploring the images themselves.

Although maps provide this tension of fun and anxiety, for Wood and Fels the sad underlying truth of environmental devastation holds a haunting presence over the entire work. The authors reference maps from different times in history, showing the depletion of the MidWest’s hardwood forests. There are scattered references to species depletion throughout the book. Even the most pure renditions of the aesthetically perfect world obscure “the culture, with its rockets, satellites, cameras, dish antennas, transmission lines, computers, pine plantations, railroads, pulp plants, paper mills, chemical works, and so forth and so on, that permits these maps of nature to be made.”

With this near-primitivist ethic of irony, Wood and Fels hit on an abject truth about their own field that looms supreme. The influx of digital technologies and satellite imaging have brought drastic changes in the way that people in developed nations relate to the world. While Google Maps enables the computer pilot to swoop down from a hemispheric to dynamic portraits of everyday life, satnav systems coordinate drone strikes and fly-bys from Afghanistan to the US-Mexico border, Montana to Colombia. For the North Atlantic countries, maps and mapping wield a power today that they haven't commanded since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. It is fitting, perhaps, that Denis Wood, who has lived his life at the cutting edge of this sharply changing field, would cowrite this book of deep insight and reflection, apparently hauling in the anchor from the latest Age of Exploration and setting sail toward other stars.

What is next for the field of cartography? Wood and Fels don't answer that question, although it is fairly obvious that the security state will continue to spread its surveillance nets to incorporate things one can hardly imagine. The technological gap between Earth First! and the repressive state apparatus is so vast that trying to draw new innovations from cartography would be pointless. What *The Natures of Maps* does, however, is provide a resource for inspiration that will touch both the recreational map lover and the hard-core cartography wonk. Conceiving of maps and our world and our relationships with both in new ways never fails to unlock the spirit of adventure and take our plans to the next level of fruition.