Maps and the State

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It's important to understand this about maps: they are not terribly old. As we know them they've been around five or six hundred years at most. Far from being rooted in some primal instinct "to communicate a sense of place, some sense of *here* in relation to *there*," maps are actually rooted in the needs of nascent states to take on form and organize their many interests. Maps arise with the modern state.

This is to say that maps are less pictures of the world *as it is* than instruments for its *creation and maintenance*. Rather than representations, maps are systems of propositions, arguments composed of "this is there" statements about what the world might be. It was this propositional logic that made maps attractive to states in the first place, and it is their prioritizing of location that makes maps more and more valuable to the state every day. Maps are machines for establishing the locations of things that maps bring into being, things like states, things like private property.

Maps are inimicable, therefore, to any formation inimicable to the state, customary common property, for instance, many Indigenous populations, most nomadic peoples.

A Little History

As we know it today mapmaking was literally cobbled together in the 14th and 15th centuries (perhaps as early as the 12th century in China) from a grab-bag of previously independent discourse functions.[i] These included a rare small-scale cosmographic speculation function (T-and-O maps in Europe), a still rarer large-scale property control function (graphic cadasters), and a budding region-scaled navigation function (*portolan* charts in Europe). During the Renaissance it dawned on Europeans that all three functions involved location, and over time each was subsumed beneath the mantle of a Map that had not hitherto existed. This happened simultaneously in Japan and elsewhere and as I say probably earlier in China. The powerful generalization implied that maps could be made of anything that had a locative component, and it led to the universal deployment of maps that we're familiar with today.

It was probably not necessary to have said more than 1) prior to the 14th and 15th centuries few people used maps at all, and none used them for much; and 2) to point out that this generalization of what had been *independent* as no more than *varied* threads of a common *map fabric*, took place at precisely the moment that polities around the world began to understand themselves as modern, or as proto-modern states.

These new states construed themselves as *territorial* entities. This was in contradistinction, for example, to the feudal societies – organized around bonds of reciprocal obligations – out of which so many young states evolved. The emergent sense of the state as a territory, rather than, say, as an allegiance to a king, gave the new states a huge interest in location and so in mapmaking.[ii] Indeed it may not be too much to say that the modern state consists of little more than a great tabulation of locations – increasingly in map form – over which states exercise their various authorities: maps of the locations of the territory over which they are sovereign, and therefore maps of the locations of the borders which bound their territories; maps of the locations of their constituent elements (territories, provinces, states, counties, parishes and the like, each in turn making maps like crazy); maps of the locations of their resources and properties (which is to say *all* resources and properties over which they exercise eminent domain); maps of the locations of their citizens (to deliver services, question, tax, conscript); as well as maps of the locations of all the things *outside* their boundaries that concern them, which in the case of large modern states is almost everything in the world.

To say nothing of the moon. Or Mars. Or the rest of the solar system.

Everything, that is, *that has a location,* for the logic of the map, as I've said, is a propositional one constructed out of the fundamental cartographic propositions that *this is there*, what John Fels and I call "postings."[iii] Each of these postings encapsulates a powerful existence claim – *this is* – that gains enormous power by being *posted* (that is, from the indexicality vouchsafed by the sign plane of the map). The power gained by the posting of these existence claims arises from the fact that every instance of map use constitutes an implicit act of validation. This validation – all but automatic – is structured by antecedent validations performed in situations ranging from map-learning exercises in school, through successful uses of maps in way-finding, to the sight of Colin Powell pointing out on a map of Iraq the locations of weapons of mass destruction.[iv] The claim "*this is there*" is powerful precisely because it implies the performance of an existence test: *that you can go there and check it out*. Having done this in the past, you know the outcome: it *is* there. (Besides, who would fake such a challenge?) The assent thus given to the postings spreads to the territory that the postings collaboratively construct, and this endows the map as a whole with an intrinsic factuality whose social manifestation is the authority the map carries into public action.[v]

Maps Enable the State's Control of Land

Can it be doubted that this locative authority is the reason that the earliest and most consistent use of what became maps – across cultures and throughout history – is *the control of land, the registration of real property*? I think not. Nor, I think, can it be doubted that it was this locative authority that gave the map so heightened a role in the rise of the early modern state.[vi]

In their history of cadastral mapping Roger Kain and Elizabeth Baigent put it this way: "Cadastral maps played an important role in the rise of modern Europe" – and I might add modern Asia, the modern Americas, and Australia – "as tools for the consolidation and extension of land-based national power," where by "extension" we need to hear among many other things … *colonial settlement.*[vii] Kain and Baigent go on to say:

> In the early years of European settlement in the New World in the seventeenth century, whether in the Liesbeeck River valley east of Cape Town in South Africa, or on the Atlantic seaboard of North America, land surveying and the production of cadastral maps became established as a concomitant of colonial settlement. Land availability, if not the only lure of migrations from Europe, was a most important influence in the individual decision to migrate. As Sarah Hughes comments in the context of Virginia: 'Immigrant colonists gazing at a wilderness envisaged its taming and imagined new markers bounding the edges of their own fields and meadows. The men who could measure the metes and bounds of those fields held the key to transforming a worthless, uncultivated territory into individual farms.'"[viii]

Immigrants, settlers, colonists, they weren't much good at acknowledging aboriginal title. It was, after all, invariably customary in form and so had never been patented, which is a way of saying that it was place-, not location-based. Immigrants were particularly bad when it came to mobile swidden cultivators, to indigenous occupants who cultivated less than they foraged, to hunters, to herders.

These are not coincidences, the behavior of the colonists and this characteristic ineptitude of maps, for if maps are great at establishing location, they're pathetic when it comes to expressing a sense of place. But it was precisely this pair of complementary "virtues" that made the map so invaluable in laying the grounds for migration. A sense of *place* would only have … *gotten in the way*, could only have *deterred* people from imagining a life of their own in a place already richly inhabited by others. Only when maps are understood in this way does Bernard Nietschmann's, "More Indigenous territory has been claimed by maps than by guns," make any sense, though at the very same time it renders wholly moot his assertion that, "and more Indigenous territory can be reclaimed and defended by maps than by guns."[ix]

In the first place, as I've so often pointed out, maps by themselves have no power at all.[x] They're rather used to *wield* power: power flows *through* the map. Power is a measure of work, and work is the application of a force through a distance. The work of maps is to apply social forces to people to bring into being a particular socialized space. The forces in question? *Ultimately*, I've insisted, they're those of the courts, the police, and the military. The reason maps are so often turned to, however, is because of their ability to replace, *to reduce the necessity for*, the application of armed force. For armed force maps substitute the force of the authority of the map: "Look! It's right here on the map. This is *my* property!"

But the map's authority cannot be separated from that of the state that backs it up. Put simply, the authority of the map is only as great as the authority of the state that guarantees it, and only in the rarest cases is a state about to guarantee maps securing land claims against it.

Map Culture Makes It Hard To Imagine Other Forms of Title

This is the unanswerable objection to the use of maps in Indigenous claims to their place in the world, however they construe that place. Maps not only put the ball in the state's court, but in its hands. Yet the real problem is, no matter what the world view or space-time conceptions of the people in question, they *have to be bent* into the world view and space-time conceptions of the court or risk being dismissed as … *unintelligible*. Of course bending them this way means taking on board all of professional cartography's spatial epistemology, including its commitment to discrete boundaries, especially since these tend to be bundled into available GPS and GIS technologies. In contradistinction to Nietschmann's 1995 insistence that an Indigenous map made with computer technology, "… will have transcendental powers because it can easily be translated by everyone everywhere; it transcends literacy; [and] it is visually comprehensible," came Walker and Peters' caution six years later that, "The job of mapping should not end with the drawing of boundaries; where social scientists assist social groups to draw maps, it is crucial that they also document and communicate *what these boundaries mean for local people*."[xi] And the questions Nancy Peluso asked in 1995 still *have not been answered*: "The key theoretical questions about the impacts of counter-mapping on resource control," she wrote, "are to what degree new notions of territoriality reflect older ones; how the reinvention of these traditions benefits or works to the detriment of customary practice, law, and resource distribution; and how the intervention of NGOs … affect the villagers' access to and control over … resources."[xii] Whatever maps have, it ain't "just technical stuff," and it sure ain't transcendental powers either.

Whatever maps have *they carry with them*, no matter who's doing the mapping. The problem with Indigenous mapping, therefore, is that it's simultaneously cooptive and reactionary, first obligating Indigenous peoples to adopt a technology of those who used that very technology to consolidate control of Indigenous lands in the first place; and then enmeshing Indigenous peoples in a kind of schoolyard name-calling – "You map me, huh? I map you!!" – that leads *only* to the principal's office. When the result is heightened dignity, enhanced security, and greater access to resources, doubtless this is one way to go, but Nietschmann was twice wrong when he insisted that "a map can only be challenged by another map, and the effectiveness of the challenge is based on the geographic authenticity of the map makers." In fact a map's effectiveness is a function of the social forces the map is able to put into play, and maps can be challenged – and have been for five hundred years – by military action, armed revolt, varying degrees of resistance, political action, actions at law, and even stories, songs, and other expressive behavior, as the Gitxsan and the Wet'suwet'en demonstrated when they entered the Gitxsan *adaawk* and the Wet'suwet'en *kungax* into evidence in the land claims suit they brought against British Columbia and Canada in 1987.[xiii]

A few years after that the Martu Aboriginal people presented an Australian court with *a dish of sand* from their country, on the understanding that it would be returned once a determination of their native title claim had been made. The court accepted the sand, acknowledging that the "symbolic gesture was a demonstration of the claimants' strongly-held belief in their ownership of their traditional territories."[xiv] The aboriginal people of Fitzroy Crossing won their right to appear in court after presenting Australia's National Native Title Tribunal with a painting known as *Ngurrara II*: "Frustrated by their inability to articulate their arguments in courtroom English, the people of Fitzroy Crossing decided to paint their 'evidence.' They would set down, on canvas, a document that would show how each person related to a particular area of the Great Sandy Desert – and to the long stories that had been passed down for generations." The tribunal accepted the painting, one member commenting that the painting was "the most eloquent and overwhelming evidence that had ever been presented" to them.[xv] In the end, of course, maps were made, though the court came close to expressing regret about the necessity: "Although the Court has to set boundaries in order to define the area of a native title determination, it is a fact that in the extremely arid region of the Western Desert boundaries between Aboriginal groups are rarely clear cut. They are very open to human movement across them. Desert people define their connection to the land much more in terms of groups of sites, thinking of them as points in space not as areas with borders." Notwithstanding this concession, long lists of coordinates setting the boundaries concluded the decision.

Yes, *of course!* The claims will *always* be mapped – that's how map-immersed nation-states do it – but the resulting map will be just another state map, *reinforcing* the state's right to make it, there'll be nothing Indigenous about it, not in any conventional sense of Indigenous. And yet having been challenged by a song, a dish of sand, a painting, *no state map can ever again be quite the authoritative thing that it was*. And this in the end has to be the systemic contribution of Indigenous mapping – no matter its manifold contradictions – to cartographic critique: that of calling into question the authority of the state's maps. Unless the contribution lies in the very contradictions, cracking open, the way they do, the shell of the map as they remake it.

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[i] See the article, “Maps,” I co-authored with John Krygier for the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Elsevier, Oxford, 2009), pp. 421-430. There’s a PDF at my website http://www.deniswood.net/content/papers/elsevier/maps.pdf; also the first chapter of my *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (Guilford, New York, 2010), where the argument is already somewhat refined.

[ii] For an extended version of this argument, see my *Rethinking*, op. cit., pp. 27-35

[iii] Again, see *The Natures of Maps*, op. cit., in which the map’s propositional logic is articulated in the second chapter; but also see the rearticulation of these ideas in my *Rethinking*, op. cit., pp. 39-67.

[iv] The whole process is similar to what Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer write about as the production of facts by witnessing and reporting in their *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985).

[v] The use of the map by Colin Powell to advance the Bush war claims is a brilliant example of how the map’s authority can be/is exploited in public action. Bush may have intended to go to war whatever the case, but the authority of the Powell map greased the political skids.

[vi] I adduce others reasons involving the shape of the geobody in *Rethinking the Power of Maps*, op. cit., pp., especially pp. 28-35

[vii] Here is the definition of a cadastre spelled out in the Bogor Declaration of the 1996 United Nations Interregional Meeting of Experts on the Cadastre: “A cadastre is normally a parcel based, and up-to-date land information system containing a record of interests in land (e.g. rights, restrictions and responsibilities). It usually includes a geometric description of land parcels linked to other records describing the nature of the interests, the ownership or control of those interests, and often the value of the parcel and its improvements. It may be established for fiscal purposes (e.g. valuation and equitable taxation), legal purposes (conveyancing), to assist in the management of land and land use (e.g. for planning and other administrative purposes), and enables sustainable development and environmental protection.” You can download he declaration at http://www.geom.unimelb.edu.au/fig7/Bogor/BogorDeclaration.html, but also see the FIG site (Fédération Internationale des Géomètres) for all things cadastral (at http://www.fig.net/news/news_2010.htm).

[viii] Roger Kain and Elizabeth Baigent, *The Cadastral Map in the Service of the State: A History of Property* Mapping, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 265, where the Hughes quote comes from, Sarah Hughes, *Surveyors and Statesmen: Land Measuring in Colonial Virginia*, Virginia Surveyors’ Foundation and the Virginia Association of Surveyors, Richmond,1 979, p. 11.

[ix] And Nietschmann went on: “Whereas maps like guns must be accurate, they have the additional advantages that they are inexpensive, don’t require a permit, can be openly carried and used, internationally neutralize the invader’s one-sided legalistic claims, and can be duplicated and transmitted electronically which defies all borders, all pretexts, and all occupations” (“Defending the Miskito Reefs with Maps and GPS: Mapping With Sail, Scuba, and Satellite,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly 18*(4), 1995, pp. 34-37, quoted on p. 37).

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[x] Most recently in *Rethinking the Power of Maps*, op cit., especially pp 1-7, and with reference to Indigenous mapping, pp. 117-l18.

[xi] The Nietschmann again comes from "Defending the Miskito Reefs," op. cit., p. 37; Walker and Peters make their remark in their "Maps, Metaphors, and Meanings," op. cit., p. 412. The emphasis is mine.

[xii] Peluso, 1995, op. cit., p. 393. Despite her concerns she does conclude that, "given the alternative futures – of not being on the map, as it were, being obscured from view and having local claims obscured, there almost seems to be no choice," to Indigenous mapping (p. 403).

[xiii] What we do in maps, legal documents, and other scripted forms, *many* peoples express in song, dance, and ritual. See Marina Roseman's "Singers of the Landscape: Song, History, and Property Rights in the Malaysian Rain Forest" (*American Anthropologist, New Series 100*(1), 1998, pp. 106-121), among many others, making this point. While these ought to be recognized by civil and common law courts as forms of title, they are not maps, and the use of the map *metaphor* obscures rather than clarifies essential distinctions. See further below.

[xiv] The decision, *James on behalf of the Martu People v Western Australia [2002] FCA 1208 (27 September 2002)*, was written by Justice Robert French and is online (I've quoted, however, from a report submitted to him which he read into the record). He added that, "After making the determination I propose to make today, and before adjourning, I will invite Mr. Graeme Neate, the President of the National Native Title Tribunal to return the sand to the Martu People in a Piti or traditional wooden dish."

[xv] And it was a painting, not a map, though it could be seen as a sort of map by map-trained eyes. See Geraldine Brooks, "The Painted Desert: How Aborigines Turned Ancient Rituals into Chic Contemporary Art," *New Yorker*, July 28, 2003, pp. 63-67, where I've quoted from p. 65. For the tradition of viewing Australian Aboriginal paintings as maps, see Turnbull's *Maps Are Territories*, op. cit., and Peter Sutton's two thoughtful chapters in Woodward and Lewis, op. cit., pp. 353-416.