

After the Map: Cartography, Navigation, and the Transformation of Territory in the Twentieth Century

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Traversing varied material, institutional, and conceptual terrains, plotting shifts in how space has been represented and enacted throughout the 20th century, and rendering connections between spatial technologies and politics, *After The Map* ventures far beyond conventional boundaries of the history of cartography. It is a beautiful book, not only in its dazzling array of illustrations (available in high-resolution colour form on the accompanying website, www.afterthemap.info [2]), but also in the elegance of its writing and the deftness of its arguments. Case studies of rich technological and ideational complexity – compelling enough in isolation – serve as foundations for stories on a far grander scale, exploring the changing forms of globalism and functioning of state power during the 20th century. On this basis alone, William Rankin's work deserves a wide readership. The analytical nuance and spirit of humility that runs throughout the book means that it goes further still. Among the most significant developments in spatial representations and practices during the 20th century, Rankin suggests, was a shift away from timeless, singular truth to active use and engagement. It seems to me that *After The Map* partakes in a similar logic. Rather than just being told a particular tale, readers are encouraged to think more deeply and clearly about issues such as the stakes of knowing and of not knowing about space, and the ways in which all humans shape, and are in turn shaped by, spatial representations and technologies. It is above all else this intellectual generosity, summed up by the conclusion taking the form not of prescriptive statements but of four open-ended questions (pp. 297–8), that makes reading the book such an engaging and edifying experience.

Rankin orders his analysis by case studies, devoting a section to each of three major projects that have facilitated distinct forms of orientation in space. He begins with the International Map of the World (IMW), instantiated in the 1890s and formally dissolved in the 1980s. The overarching theme of this section is the increase in scepticism as to the value of grandiose cartographic projects as the 20th century progressed. The IMW started as a project explicitly rooted in a spirit of scientific internationalism, seeking to end cartographic secrecy and rivalry between nations, and proclaiming the possibility and virtue of uniform, comprehensive, and accurate mapping of the world's entire land surface. Early doubts over the IMW's efficacy focused on limits to representation in the form of patchy surveys and (to those new to the history of cartography, surprisingly fierce) debates over the colour schemes used to depict relief. These limitations, the focus of chapter one, gave way during the mid-20th century with the multifaceted erosion of the foundations

of scientific internationalism, the focus of chapter two. Nation-states and associated colonies were no longer uncontested as the basic building blocks of global space; spatial processes seemed too irreducibly multiple for the claim that there could be a single global base map to be convincing; and users of maps were increasingly taken to be too diverse to be catered to by a general overview of the world.

The second section develops the notion that multiplicity of reception became a key facet of spatial technologies through the 20th century, focusing on the development of cartographic grids from the First World War onwards. Rankin convincingly outlines how grids have two key distinguishing features relative to graticules of latitude and longitude: they render the world in two-dimensional form on a regional rather than a global scale; and they do not so much *represent* space on map-images as *structure* the actual space. It follows that grids' primary aim is not to facilitate knowledge of a space, but action within that space. A further major contention developed fully in this section, but pertinent throughout the book, is that while the 20th century's most significant spatial technologies emanated from militarised projects, they quickly developed multiple manifestations and uses that took them beyond the realm of unitary state power. As I will consider shortly, this element of Rankin's analysis, while open to some queries, provides a welcome corrective to theories of power that have become deeply embedded in the history of cartography over the past four decades.

The third section examines navigation technologies, bringing the story up to the current era of the Global Positioning System (GPS). In keeping with a well-established line of argument in Science and Technology Studies concerning the contingency and socio-political bases of epistemological success, Rankin insists that GPS's rise to near-ubiquity was neither inevitable nor determined by its frequently cited 'virtues of accuracy, globalism, and miniaturization' (p. 255). Instead, GPS was part of a broader ideational shift through the 20th century from a notion of global space composed of bounded areas to its conception as unbounded series of points. I will critically assess the central ramifications of this claim of a discernable change in the nature of territory later. For now, it is worth mentioning that it is one aspect of Rankin's broader attempt throughout the book to balance two *potentially* contrary claims. One is that major, generalisable shifts occurred during the 20th century in how people thought of and interacted with terrestrial space; the other is that imaginings and technologies of space have a kind of entropic tendency, with multiplicity of use resisting monopolisation by single agencies or logics. For the most part, I feel that Rankin threads together these lines of argument to good effect. The remainder of this review will highlight what I take to be the most significant elements of this success, as well as engaging a few points where further exploration or clarification would appear to be welcome.

In recent years, a much-needed corrective has begun to develop to the model of map production and reception that rose to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. This older strand of scholarship, variously labelled the New History of Cartography and the 'critical paradigm', itself started out as a much-needed corrective within a field previously dominated by dry-as-dust technical accounts of the rendering, manufacture, and correction of map images. The 'critical paradigm's' criticism was aimed, above all, at the simplistic epistemological assumptions of this earlier strand of cartographic history. The likes of J. B. Harley, David Woodward, and Denis Wood took aim at the notion that the story of maps (especially in the modern western world) was a politically neutral, Whiggish tale of increasing accuracy. Instead, armed with theoretical insights adapted from Foucault and Derrida, this generation of scholars suggested that the real story was one of the complicity of spatial representations in furthering established state and social orders. Rankin's work forms part of a current trend among historians of cartography away from this direct equation of maps and power. His focus on 'geo-epistemology' (p. 2) – a term encompassing the ways in which use reshapes spatial technologies even as these tools impact people's imaginations and experiences of the world – takes forward recent scholarship that introduces reception as a problematic in map history and proposes that 'maps are in a constant state of becoming, constantly being remade'.⁽¹⁾

A couple of *After The Map's* contributions to the emerging notion that spatial technologies are shaped through diverse interactions involving multiple actors seem especially noteworthy. Firstly, it convincingly argues that even when spatial tools such as Universal Traverse Mercator (UTM) and GPS were developed

initially under the auspices of the American military in its mid-20th-century pomp, they swiftly exceeded the intentions of particular institutional actors and were put to various uses. If the equation of navigational technology and state power fails to hold in this instance of extreme military-industrial involvement, we have good reason to doubt its validity as a general rule. Secondly, Rankin does more than simply disavow the 'critical paradigm' by weight of empirical evidence. He instead suggests that its epistemological core – scepticism towards the possibility of a singular truthful representation – was in fact current among cartographers of the mid-20th century working on the IMW. Far from being a profound critique of the ideals and ideas at the heart of modern mapping, Rankin argues that the 'New History' was 'a forceful mainstreaming of the anti-universalist impulse that underlay the demise of the IMW' (p. 69). The idea that those involved in mapping were sharply aware of its limitations – epistemological as well practical – is highly significant (although it applies, I would argue, not just to the post-war era but also to European surveyors at least as far back as the 19th century). It suggests that the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' employed by the 'critical paradigm', according to which those engaged in mapping were to be routinely distrusted due to their position as agents of problematic power relations, might be give way in cartographic history to something closer to a 'hermeneutics of faith'. Rather than reducing the study of maps to 'a tearing off of masks' (2), it would be a good thing for scholars to follow Rankin's lead in exploring the complexity and diversity of intentions behind the production and manipulation of spatial technologies.

Rankin is clear that his particular hermeneutics of faith does not involve adhering to actors' categories. This is most apparent as he develops the grandest argumentative arc in *After The Map*, positing 'a shift in the nature of territory' through the 20th century (p. 3). The activities of 'cartographers, geodesists, and engineers' brought about this change; but, Rankin tells us, they showed few signs of recognising it (p. 19). The book proposes that at the outset of the 20th century, global space was understood as the sum of mutually exclusive geographical areas separated by clear, linear boundaries. This notion began to fray from the Second World War onwards in three interrelated ways: the idea of a singular foundational global space came to seem inadequate in the face of 'social, ecological, [and] economic complexity' (p. 68); open-ended regions rather than bounded states increasingly became objects of political and political significance; and points – more mobile and circumscribed than areas – took on a growing significance. These dynamics both fostered and were supercharged by spatial technologies, especially the advent of regionally centred cartographic grids and the pointillist logic of GPS. They have generated, Rankin contends, the currently dominant model of globality based not on fixity and universality, but on mobility and plurality: the global as 'the sum total of an infinite series of fragmented, partial, regional experiences' (p. 80).

The starting point of this account of territory – the notion that it was 'a relatively unproblematic category' in the early 20th century (p. 6) – is disputable. In fact, some of the key developments that it locates in the mid-20th century might be backdated 50 years. Various natural and human phenomena, burgeoning networks of connectivity, and the prospect of closing frontiers during the 'Age of Empire' generated a sharp awareness of the limitations of nation-states' territories as the building blocks of global space. Such awareness of territory as a live issue was integral to the advent of geopolitical thought and a professionalized discipline of geography in Europe and the United States during the decades before the First World War. At the very moment that a uniform and universal sense of globality became, perhaps, fully plausible, a host of alternative 'geo-epistemologies' developed. Contrary to Rankin's suggestion, in this very particular sense we have never been global.

Querying this aspect does not diminish *After The Map*'s convincing theorisation of territory in the wake of the Second World War. Perhaps the most intriguing element of this analysis, and certainly one that invites further consideration, focuses on how, and with what effects, the rise of GPS renders the point the foundational unit of territory. Among the array of impacts that have emerged through the myriad uses of GPS, Rankin argues that it has allowed for a changed notion of battlefields and occupation of territory. Specific locations can be characterised as targets or non-targets; the significance of frontlines and areas held by the enemy is diminished, as enemy territory is '*always already occupied*, at least in the sense relevant to conventional military strategy' (p. 282). This notion of a 'porous, pointillist, and unbounded' form of territory is a compelling addition to Derek Gregory and Stuart Elden's work on the subversion of delineated

and even state sovereignty and territory through the military interventions of the ‘War on Terror’.⁽³⁾ In making its point about points, *After The Map* is, however, open to the same criticism that could be levelled at this strand of political geography. Although Rankin does more than Gregory or Elden to guard against the charge that he exaggerates the uniform impact of certain technologies and ways of configuring space, I would welcome for further analysis on how the repeated and conspicuous failings of the pointillist logic of ‘surgical strikes’ and ‘visiting without knowing’ have impacted conceptions of territory. This suggestion relates to one of the four questions posed in the book’s conclusion, which implies the need for attention to the variable impacts of tools such as GPS on everyday life. Rankin’s relatively grand narrative of the evolving concept of territory through the 20th century precludes such a focus in this book, but it does provide a welcome opening for future work on heterogeneous ‘local cultures’ of spatial technologies.

As discussed earlier, *After The Map* departs substantially from the theory of power in cartography and navigation formulated by the previous generation of map scholars. In its place, Rankin proposes a nuanced schema, premised on the notions that ‘all history is multicausal, and all agency is constrained’ (p. 19). He does, however, acknowledge at various points that some agents are more important than others, and marries this to his emphasis on reception through the claim that people ‘inhabiting and participating in new geographies and new forms [of] territorial power, [are] often unaware that [their] tools and assumptions matter as much as they do’ (p. 20). This line of argument sails close to the ‘critical paradigm’, and I found Rankin’s effort to tack away only intermittently convincing. In discussing the most durable project to extend cartographic grids into a functionally seamless global whole, he claims that ‘there is indeed something universal about the Universal Traverse Mercator: a universal goal, shared by states, private organizations, and individuals alike, to make geographic space continuous across borders’ (p. 198). Rankin’s consistent foregrounding of the politics of mapping should mitigate against the charge that he presents here a more theoretically sophisticated version of the ‘old’ history of cartography, in which spatial tools appear as neutral. In this instance, however, a broader perspective encompassing everyday perspectives of groups who lack access to UTM and those who fall victim to the military ventures that it enables does seem necessary in order to expose the limits to the technology’s apparent universality.

The discussion of the politics of GPS is, in my opinion, more straightforwardly compelling. Although this technology ‘is not aligned with particular institutions’, Rankin argues that it is of a piece with ‘a particular approach to governance – one that is spatially intensive but fundamentally temporary’ (p. 290). Although he says little more on the subject, here is another of the book’s important openings. Geographers might follow this lead and consider how pointillist territory interweaves with the bursts of knowledge production and equally influential blind spots that undergird structures of inequality in the age of neoliberalism. And what Rankin neatly terms ‘the politics in my pocket’ (p. 295) should also be historicised, bringing to light the political stakes of past patterns of how space is known and, just as importantly, occluded and overlooked. After all, configurations of power emanate from and are expressed through ignorance just as much as through knowledge. These, then, are just some of the ways in which scholars of cartography can respond to a work as provocatively enlightening as *After The Map*, accepting its invitation to further explore the complex webs of power and possibilities that form around spatial technologies.

Notes

1. Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, ‘Rethinking maps’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 31 (2007), 335; quoted in Reuben Rose-Redwood, ‘Introduction: the limits to deconstructing the map’, *Cartographica*, 50 (2015), 4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT, 1970), p. 30.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Derek Gregory, ‘From a view to a kill: drones and late modern war’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28 (2011), 188–215; Stuart Elden, ‘Secure the volume: vertical geopolitics and the depth of power’, *Political Geography*, 34 (2013), 35–51.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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