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Critical cartography 2.0: From "participatory mapping" to authored visualizations of power and people

Annette M. Kim

Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California, 650 Childs Way RGL 305, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0626, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Reviews the current state of critical cartography.
- Discusses the use of spatial ethnography for generating alternative knowledge claims in a non-participatory political environment.
- Proposes the authored map as an alternative modality to the participatory map for critical cartography.
- Presents case study map projects of sidewalks and street vendors in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the state of "critical cartography" which is being experimented with exuberance in a number of disciplines and arenas: geographers, community development activists, artists, and new media innovators, to name a few. The promise and possibilities of debunking and retooling cartography are significant: by opening up who can make a map and the kinds of maps that are made, overlooked phenomena can be reclaimed, different perspectives can be made apparent, and new knowledge constructed. However, the conditions under which the emancipatory potential of critical cartography might be realized need to be investigated. This article critiques the claims that current new mapping practices increase participation and democracy and outlines four issues critical cartography needs to further develop in order to increase its potential: 1) greater reflexivity on the critical cartographer's own position and influence of the project, 2) acknowledgement of the choices made of what not to include in the map, 3) greater consideration about the politics of aesthetics, 4) expanded search for deeper social engagement with new mapping projects. The article also discusses these issues through a case study map project of street vendors contesting the use of sidewalk space in Ho Chi Minh City. It explores the qualities a non-participatory, authored map project might engender critical visualization through processes of spatial ethnography.

1. Introduction

Critical cartography is a relatively recent phenomenon being explored not only by academics but also by many other enthusiastic participants: community development activists, artists, and new media innovators, to name a few. While the explosion of radical/counter/feminist/neo/DIY/participatory/indigenous/you-name-it map projects (Wood & Krygier, 2006) are so diverse they are difficult to characterize, the "critical" term implies that they intend to challenge power dynamics in some fashion, whether it be through humor or provocation. I find it helpful to think of this proliferation of activity as falling into two basic types: testimony mapping and visionary mapping. Testimony maps challenge our understanding of what is the status quo through re-presenting situations, often injustices or overlooked phenomena. Meanwhile, visionary maps present alternatives of what could be instead of what current institutions presently support.

Planners have been creating both types of maps for some time. Visionary maps have been the bread and butter of planners and architects whose professions propose construction and interventions. One could view planning's history as a series of utopian ideals such as the city beautiful, the garden city, the modern city, the post-modern city, and new urbanism (Buder, 1990; Chase, Crawford, & Kaliski, 2008). But, these were largely the personal visions of elites rather than emanating from a democratic process. In the west, resistance to the violent impacts of top-down planning and bulldozing eventually led to a legislated norm of convening

E-mail address: Annettek@usc.edu

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stakeholder and community meetings and charrettes that are supposed to shape more inclusive urban design and development. And so progressive visionary planning and mapping often includes more socio-economic and political considerations in addition to architectural and design matters (Davis & Hatuka, 2011; Dennis, 2006; Sanoff, 2000). More recently there has been a growth in DIY urbanism maps and interventions flourishing outside of the public planning institutions. These populist endeavors seek alternative ways to use urban space, often with a flavor of "fun" and whimsy as a critical stance. One can trace precedents to the Situationists' maps of non-instrumental, non-capitalist modes of being in the city (Krygier & Crampton, 2006) and artists like Matta-Clark's critique of real estate gentrification (Kastner, Najafi, & Richard, 2005).

As for testimony maps, community development organizers and planners have also been using mapping projects for some time. For example, asset maps document a community generated definition of its own assets as an alternative to real estate valuation maps (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) and indigenous maps chart alternative land claims as a counterpoint to private property rights, etc. (Pearce & Louis, 2008). More recent map projects include coding concerns that do not provide a counterpoint to conventional planning maps as much as bring to the fore phenomena absent in planning discourse such as the fear of women in the city, surveillance, police harassment, and auditory and olfactory senses (Brauen, 2006; Kwan, 2007; Lauriault & Lindgaard, 2006; Paglan, 2008; Théberge, 2005).

2. Critiquing critical cartography

However, scholars have started interrogating the unrealized emancipatory claims of critical cartography (Ghose & Elwood, 2003). This article reviews the strategies of contemporary critical mapping practices and outlines four issues for the next generation of critical cartographers to address in order to further develop its potential.

2.1. Acknowledging authorship and reflexivity

The fact that people who are not formally trained in cartography are making maps and taking liberties with its conventions is a radical departure given the history of state-sponsored cartography (Krygier & Crampton, 2006). Many current critical cartographers assume a social position of being less powerful and a part of resistance to hegemony. However, criticality by definition requires a greater reflexivity on the part of new cartographers or orchestrators of cartography projects about their own power positions in society and therefore how they influence the critical map project. For example, "indigenous" or "community asset" maps are not simply visualizations of what the community already knew. Rather, it is usually the result of a process or conversation between a subset of people in the community and outsiders, with the latter often being the map project instigators (Burgess, 2011). These groups navigate multiple spheres and scales of knowledge and influence. As they come together and interact to produce a map, how they made their epistemic and cartographic choices is key to understanding what we are seeing in a critical map. Similar to the discussion about the subaltern in postcolonial theory (Briggs & Sharp, 2004), by making a "map" which pre-conditions ideas about space, region, city, etc. we would want to know how the map instigator and those being mapped interacted and how well it served the aspirations of those being mapped. At least, properly attributing authorship in maps should be standard practice, and so should the discussion of the relative power positions of the map instigator to the subject and map viewer. However, most current critical map projects do not practice the reflexivity of acknowledging the confluence of perspectives in the map.

2.2. Acknowledgment of choices and what is absent in the map

Furthermore, in order to be truly critical and deconstruct power, neo-cartographers should acknowledge the choices they made in what to map and how they influenced the mapping project. For example, the most basic choices in making maps, such as the scale of the map and the extent of its boundaries will by definition make some phenomenon apparent and others invisible. It is inevitable since maps need to make selections and abstractions in order to be legible. Therefore, neo-cartographers must also privilege some phenomena and silence others. With the proliferation of locative technologies such as GPS, there is a danger of uncritically choosing data that are easily detected and triangulated onto Euclidean geometry (Kwan, 2012). This is particularly true when using secondary, remote data from government and corporate entities that have already made primary choices in what to record (Crampton et al., 2013; Elwood & Cope, 2009; Zook & Graham, 2007). The irony could be that critical maps further privilege these entities' meta-choices. Critical cartography needs to find a way to be mindful of what is absent and not locatable on the map, and especially to acknowledge the choices they made of what to not include. Acknowledgment of what has been deliberately not mapped, or was unable to be mapped, is uncommon.

2.3. Politics of esthetics

Increasing reflexivity includes considerations about the politics of esthetics and representation. While architectonic, digitally generated images are most common, critical cartography has also employed visual strategies as part of their critique such as the parody of cartographic traditions or the challenging of those traditions with blatantly un-professional and/or non-technocratic systems of representation. However, most critical maps have not considered the systems of representation they choose nor its relationship with the audience that will be viewing it. For example, some have noted that some feminist maps ironically resort to deploying assumed universal symbolism (i.e. red must mean heightened emotion and anger) rather than maps as culturally constructed forms (Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Since critical cartography projects often seek to communicate publicly and to provoke, consideration about the mapping and visual tradition within which they are embedded and how they visually communicate to society is needed (Drucker, 2008). Therefore, especially in critical map projects that cross cultures, whether domestically or internationally, a consideration of its esthetic choices may be needed. This also implies that the wider the public it intends to reach, a critical map project would either require multiple maps for different audiences or multiple reads of the same critical map.

2.4. Engagement with society and institutions

In addition to the interface between map and society, the relationship between the mapping *process* and society requires further elaboration. In particular, the often made claims to a critical map project's participatory nature are suspect. Often, these projects are initiated by outsiders and fizzle when the external funding ends (Ghose & Elwood, 2003). What kinds of mapping practices engender deep and empowering engagement is under-theorized (Ghose, 2007). That is because participatory mapping endeavors usually focus more on the creation of the map rather than on what happened because of the map. The social position of the new map and how it engages institutions is key. In other words, it is not enough to just put a map "out there." While visualizing new knowledge claims

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