

A Critical Study of Mediterranean Cartography

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Abstract:

Cartographic studies of the Mediterranean area (CSMA) has been dominated by an original sin which led cartography towards a profound act of cultural misdirection. CSMA have too often used an idealized conception of mapping which did not take into account the countless ways in which people map their territories. This study wants to shed new light on the history of Mediterranean cartography.

I will focus my research on four fundamental historical phases: the Middle Ages, the expansion of Arabs in 1500s-600, the Enlightenment in Europe and the fascist period in Italy, in order to answer the following question: Why during these periods the level of cartographic production changed regardless of the progress of science and technology? Answering this question means opening up to a series of questions which have not been seriously addressed in scientific debates. In this study I will limit myself considering just a few.

This research focuses on 4 Case studies:

Case Study 1 and 2 will focus on the role of religion in the production, circulation and diffusion of maps.

In **Case Study number 1** in the Middle Ages the paradigm shift in a branch of the Catholic church favored a more private relationship with God. In order to adequate to this change, the believer for its prayers started to use the book of hours, a little book filled with maps meant to bring closer the individual to God. The images served as vehicles to facilitate the relationship between God and the individual.

In **Case Study number 2** another book was important, the Quran, through which the relevance of the “qibla” (the sacred direction”) was revealed to the believer. The qibla was the only true and valid direction for muslims that could bring the believer to God and so maps were created with the goal to facilitate and orient believer’s paths towards Mecca, the holy city of Muhammad.

In Case Study number 3 and 4 I will take into account the role of the state in the production, circulation and diffusion of maps.

In **Case Study number 3** I will analyze in detail the role of portolan charts — during the 1600s and the Enlightenment — in the establishment of a universalized knowledge space. Due to the nature of portolan charts — “devices of resistance” towards the scientific modern science and the state control, — the establishment of modern cartography was challenged and the production and diffusion of maps slowed down.

In **Case Study number 4** I will analyze the way in which the fascist regime exploited cartography in order to legitimize its foreign expansion and furthermore I will explain the reasons behind the incredible production of maps during this period. I will also tackle other fields exploited by the regime in order to justify its political programs such as art, showing what cartographers borrowed (or not) from artists at that time in order to create in the viewers of the maps an intense sense of “hypnosis”.

The perception that the CSM seems to suffer from a profound act of misleading is visible in the study of those who consider maps all-encompassing devices regardless their social, historical, political and economic context. To give an adequate response to this, it is necessary to overturn the classic research question. Map scholars must stop asking what is a map and focus instead on the study of the nature of cartography conceived embedded within spatial discourses. This shift can give us the possibility to grasp why a society represented itself in specific way.

Even if maps share some semiotic conventions they are part of different geographical discourses that represent spatial and human complexity in different ways. Indeed maps are an interconnected aggregate of texts. In all their forms they

are products of the multiplicity of mapping processes and to be studied they need a methodology that does not ignore the historical, cultural, social, political and the economic driving factors that guided their production, circulation and consumption in history.

The objective of this study is to elucidate the multiple mapping processes and their driving forces in order to understand the different levels of production and circulation of Mediterranean cartography.

In order to give relevance to these type of phenomena and to better appreciate their political, social and economic consequences it is important to bring an hypotheses of a research question into the debate: *Is there a critical theory of cartography able not to consider maps as totalizing devices?*

In this work I adopt a processual approach meaning that first I will show the existence of a multiplicity of cartographic practices and second I will demonstrate that spatial images are, at a semiotic level, stable only within particular spatial discourses. These two steps will easily allow me to show how much is important to focus on the processes underneath map production. This means contextualizing them in their historical periods and understanding how they favored or stall the machine of map production and how they diffuse or hinder specific spatial discourses.

I will rely on Foucault and Derrida's theories of discourse, language and power in order to explain how the field of cartography is embedded with power relations. These power dynamics — that changed over time — I argue are exploited by maps but at the same time exploit maps too in order to diffuse space perceptions — such as the concept of proxemic space, deep-rooted in the Mediterranean area, which created an anthropological communicative realm in constant movement.

It is precisely about this type of space that the maps considered in this study deal with. Over the centuries, the proxemic Mediterranean space has been able to create and develop a flow of perceptions, ideas, cultural belongings but also political, economic and social bonds that have made the Mediterranean a social sea. The content of this stream gave rise to different maps, with often distinct organizations and perceptions of space, contrasting political projects and economic drivers but all of them with a shared element in common: rendering the Mediterranean sociability.

This research is not a comprehensive study but is part of the broader history of cartography. My expected result is to show the limits of considering the unity of cartography, addressing different modes of mapping. I count on explaining the intertwining mechanisms between the social, cultural and the technical, challenging the supposedly unitary processes whereby cartography became more and more scientific. In this sense I hope to be able to challenge the values of objectivity and precision of maps in order to no longer consider them as intrinsic principles of cartography but only as conventional labels affixed by habits or old fashioned academic needs.