Reflections

Leaving or rescuing the (story) map? – commentary to Saxinger, Sancho Reinoso and Wentzel

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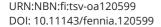
This paper reflects on some issues raised by the reading of Saxinger, Sancho Reinoso and Wentzel essay (published in the last issue of Fennia) and their theoretical and methodological concerns on how to conciliate geographic information systems (GIS) ontology with the representation of spatial-fuzzy qualitative data emerging out of ethnographic research. Recalling the intense debate between cartographers, GIS scientists and human geographers on the limits and failures of cartographic representation, the counterfactual doubt raised by Pickles in his book *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-coded World*, published in 2004, resonates strongly: "What if, after all, cartography and maps were not what we thought they were . . . or at least not only what we thought they were?" (page 194). Restoring such a question for the sake of this commentary is a way to rework the issue in an era of pervasive digital mapping, not by replacing the "quantitative" map with the "story" map – the dialectical model that has accompanied the critique of geographers during the 1980s and 1990s – but by multiplying the theoretical perspectives on the humanistic potential of maps, moving beyond the narrowed normative focus on "effective" storytelling as put by the recent The ESRI Story Map.

Keywords: cartographic humanities, story maps, post-representational cartography, anthropology, geography

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Introduction

In recent years, story maps – online software and applications that allow the integration of interactive cartographic content with texts, images and audio-visual components – have gained central stage both in the digital humanities and in online cartography market narratives. Story maps are often celebrated as creative, widely accessible, and narrative panaceas against the most technicist, quantitative and anti-humanist nuances associated with most institutional digital mapping tools. In

this regard, it is worthy of appreciation as an ethnographic project, like the one described by Saxinger, Sancho Reinoso and Wentzel (2021), which aims to engage with digital cartographic storytelling as an outreach medium by considering its limits and potentialities.

As a geographer broadly interested in cultural cartography and cartographic humanities, as well as concerned with examining the position of the map in social sciences and the humanities and the various ways maps and mapping have been retheorised over the past thirty years, the reading of this paper was salutary in reflecting on two correlated issues. The first concerns the perception of geography from outside, which usually overlaps with cartography as an utterly positivistic and empiricist discipline, naturally confident in making and reading maps. Indeed, it is common for geography to still be perceived as *a locative repository of descriptive facts* about the world rather than *an intellectual and critical perspective* about the world, a discipline that should rightly belong to the humanities. The second issue, which somehow follows the first one, reflects on the potentials and limitations of digital cartography in visualising qualitative, ethnographic – let's say "carnal" – data. It does so theoretically, as a move to appreciate the work that maps do beyond their perceived technical representation, and practically, as an invitation to "pluralise" the software. Such considerations can be mutually discussed since map scholars have produced rich literature, which is helpful to refine the above-mentioned argument beyond a focus solely on technical and positivistic concerns. This means, of course, situating ourselves theoretically: where do "we" speak from when we speak about mapping? In which sociocultural disciplinary context are cartographic theories and practices inserted? In which paradigm and through which theoretical coordinates is it necessary to explore cartography, maps and mappings today?

Another map to tell

More than thirty years ago, Wood and Fels (1986, 72) argued that "[t]he anthropology of cartography is an urgent project". This bold statement was made from the perspective of map designers who wanted to understand why and how people use maps. Seeing social anthropologists' *emic* perspective on the limits and potentiality of cartographic storytelling has been an opportunity for me to know more about their "mapping culture" (Roberts 2012). In their historical and theoretical considerations on cartography, ethnography and narrative, Saxinger, Sancho Reinoso and Wentzel (2021) acknowledge that maps have not only been widely used as research tools by anthropologists, but such use (and related critique and frustration) mirrors the similar ambiguous relationship that social and cultural geographers had with what Edney (2019) has defined as "the cartographic ideal". For many aspects, the various paradigms that cross the field of social and cultural anthropology find more than a resonance with the historiography of human geography. The map, in fact, has long been a contested icon of desire and apprehension for geographers. Although it is widely accepted that "maps and cartography comprise a primary part of the geographer's technology, methodology and language" (Bradshaw & Williams 1999, 250), with the dismantling of the neopositivist paradigm and in the aftermath of the cultural turn, cartography has been decreed by cultural and critical geographers as a dead science and has been increasingly removed from their primary research activities.

Why, then, are cartography and geography still perceived in close conjunction? Perhaps because of the political and material conditions that affected the structuring of geography as a discipline. For a long time, geography has been considered ancillary to history (and indeed – among geographers, at least in Italy – it was used to jokingly say that those who do not go down in history, go to geography!). For geography to exist as an academic discipline, geographers did not have to step on the toes of historians and anthropologists, which is one of the reasons why geography had to deal exclusively with the *locatedness* of things and the classification of places (e.g., classical cartography) but not with the much more difficult-to-grasp relationships between human beings and places (e.g., human geography). Italian geographer Dematteis (2008, 14) defines this traditional perception of geography – "geography of bones" – as a locational knowledge to which contemporary geographers should oppose a "geography of the flesh of the world", thus pushing for a substantial theoretical work of deconstruction and de-objectification. In this respect, when the authors admit that many members of their research group had little or even no training in using ArcGIS and digital story maps, this

revelation does not really surprise me, because many cultural and social geographers, particularly in Europe, could confess the same.

As a young scholar, when listening to numerous stories and anecdotes about the material detachment of many geographers from cartography and, in particular, from the alleged technological revolution inaugurated by GIS, I usually perceive both a sense of loss and victory. On the one hand, the loss of technical skills that would have allowed human geographers to critically and creatively produce and use cartographic tools without relying on the work of other professionals (who, more often, lack a critical theoretical background, and for this reason it is easier to feel the pleasure of contesting them). On the other hand, the critical detachment from tools traditionally linked to the discipline has allowed, especially for cultural geographers, to practice a geography free from a rigid methodology and ready to explore new and different ways of conceiving and practicing the relationships between space, places and subjectivity.

It is this difference that needs to be stressed further. In the wake of critical cartography, looking differently at maps for anthropologists might mean "to understand that telling a story in maps is not a new phenomenon and, moreover, has always been political" (Saxinger *et al*. 2021, 12). However, as Bruno (2002, 207) rightly contends, "to persist in this position is to risk producing a notion of mapping that is restricted, placed wholly in the service of domination. What remains obscured are the nuanced representational edges of cartography, the diversity of cartographic practices, and the varied potentials of different mapping processes".

In fact, from the vantage point of cultural geographers, who have already gone through such an epiphanic deconstructive and critical phase, a different look on maps would entail taking – or even restoring – a more humanistic view of them, valuing their potential as triggers of memories, life stories and introspective and relational spaces. This theoretical inclination falls within the broader idea of maps as mapping, where the force of mapping as an enabler of movements of different kinds is highlighted rather than generalising about its political power or even mere situational power.

A map possesses a narratological character by dint of the fact that it may allow humans to move, discuss and feel about something beyond the actual content of its representation. However, while for writers, artists and adherents to humanities, historical cartographies have always been considered forms of narrative, contemporary digital cartographic storytelling is still mainly addressed as a technical representational concern; thus, only questions and problematics related to design are discussed, leaving out any possibility of experiencing mapping as a creative and critical process. This does not mean that we can bypass the problem of representation. The consideration at stake, however, is not that representations are always inadequate or partial, as critical scholars often acknowledge, but that mapping performances themselves are not thoroughly representational. In fact, we cannot expect that a specific frame (i.e., a photograph, a text or a map) can in reality *contain* everything we think is related to nuanced and humanistic conceptions of space and time. Our knowledge is always partial and so are our research tools (whether a diary, an interview or a map), but they all participate in (with what we think are limits and affordances) and construct *our* reality.

However, since this argument is quite well known in the humanities and social sciences, I would avoid centring the discussion on a dialectic between qualitative and quantitative data. In this respect, there is a large amount of literature on critical, qualitative and humanistic GIS that focuses on ontic (Agarwal 2004), anthropological (Crampton 2009) and post-phenomenological (Zhao 2022) GIS conditions that suggests going beyond a positivistic understanding of it (Leszczynski 2009a, 2009b). Since I believe that many of the topics addressed in contemporary discussions of mapping, GIS and Big Data often rely on earlier debates, modes and metaphors circulating in the late 1980s and 1990s, we need more theoretical and practical effort to tell another map. It is always more beneficial to have a reading that extends beyond these rigid schemes and allows us to see things differently! In this sense, there are diverse ways in which cartography can be thought of as a narratological tool. The use of maps in interviews or focus groups, not just as the communicative result of a project, may be seen as a form of storytelling. Moreover, I can see how the (even digital) map elicitation method can serve as a method of ethnographic research that has been used for instance in many contexts, such as migration (Buckle 2020). An original take on narrative mapping is provided by Peterle's (2019) idea of carto-fiction, and Rossetto's (2019) book offers unpredictable

ways to do justice to the narratological character of cartographic objects. In the end, there are many connections between cartographic storytelling and ethnographic mapping, and this is a strong statement that needs to be further explored.

Nonetheless, I would share all the other critiques that authors do of the ArcGIS Story map. However, ArcGIS (and the ArcGIS story map app) does not cover the entire universe of digital mapping. In this respect, we should better distinguish the limit of our own use of the software and of the software itself from all the other available software. Are all digital forms of cartographic storytelling a mere replication of the conventional Euclidean map? Or the digital can actually offer – if the right skills and knowledge are applied – more possibilities for representation, movement and storytelling? I leave this as an open question. As Bennett (2010) suggests, it is crucial to make visible both the negative and recalcitrant power of things and their productive and positive value. In other words, the aim of "a geography of the flesh of the world" (Dematteis 2008, 14) is to deploy a composite arsenal of theories and methodologies, as well as of actions and emotions, which is able to readdress the power of maps in less reductive terms.

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