Introductory Reading: Maps as Mirrors and Blueprints

Maps are a crucial source for understanding history. Most obviously, they provide historians with information about historical geography: simply put, where the events of the past took place. At the same time, however, historians can read maps as more than simple reflections of geographic reality. When critically and carefully interpreted, maps can tell us as much about the ideologies and preconceptions of the people who made them as they can about the reality of the territory they depict.

Our critical interpretation of maps begins with a famous quote from the philosopher Alfred Korzybski: “the map is not the territory.” Korzybski was speaking metaphorically about the difference between our *perception* and cognitive models of the world and the world as it actually exists. His reasoning can also be applied quite literally to the field of cartography: maps are a *representation* of space, a picture of the world filtered through the cartographer's understanding.

Far from being complete and objective portrayals of reality, maps are **selective** and **subjective** documents. Cartographers carefully pick and choose what geographical features to include and exclude from their maps and use a variety of visual techniques to emphasize or minimize the features that do make it into their work. These decisions are not “natural” or “scientific,” but instead reflect the priorities and worldview of the cartographers themselves, the people who employ or sponsor them, and the broader society and culture in which they work.

When working with historical maps, we study not just the bare-bones facts of what a map shows, but the visual rhetoric of how it presents those facts: the ways in which the map shapes and even distorts reality, thus revealing the biases and “habits of mind” of their creators. As you work your way through this lesson, it is helpful to bear in mind two metaphors for thinking about the ways in which maps balance ideology and reality: the map as a **mirror** and the map as a **blueprint**.

Let us begin with the metaphor of maps as mirrors. As a basic feature of the genre, maps reflect reality. While cartography itself is not a science, it is grounded in realities of size, distance, and position that can be studied scientifically and represented mathematically. With rare exceptions,

the historical maps you encounter represent attempts to reflect the real world – it is because of this that historians can use maps to study the *reality* of the historical times and places they depict. At the same time, all maps (to a greater or lesser degree) filter the reality of the world through the conscious choices and unconscious biases of the map-maker – these preconceptions "distort" the map just as the warped mirrors in a carnival funhouse distort your reflection. In addition to a map's contents, historians study its *distortions*, using them to make hypotheses and arguments about the ideology of the map's creators.

Our second metaphor – the map as a blueprint – focuses on maps' role as instruments of power. Maps tend to be produced by political elites: from monarchs, to nation-states, to international corporations, maps have historically been shaped by those in power. In this sense, maps are not only mirrors reflecting the world as it is, but blueprints prescribing how the world *ought to be*. Historians must be careful to distinguish between the blueprint and the finished building: where maps show clearly demarcated borders and neatly organized territories, conditions "on the ground" were often much more nuanced and complex. Once again, maps can tell us something about both the world as it really existed, and about the world as the cartographer (or, more frequently, their patrons) hoped it would be.

As you look at the maps presented in this lesson, think about the ways in which we can interpret these maps as both mirrors and blueprints. Bear in mind, however, that these are not hard rules of historical interpretation – the lenses of mirrors and blueprints are not the "right way" of cartographic interpretation, but one of many frameworks which historians can use for analyzing maps as primary sources.

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