

**‘Are maps a representation of reality or a creator of reality?’: The power in naming a land and counter-mapping as an act of resistance**

To think of maps as objective is to dismiss the fact that they are a product of the social and cultural biases of its maker. The history of cartography has shown us over time that representation lies to those in power while those subjected to these decisions are often forgotten or misrepresented in the making of a nation or a map. Map historian, John Brian Harley believed that maps are authoritarian images that gave the illusion of neutrality and looked at cartography as an extension of an individual’s socio-political assumptions. As Harley noted, ‘maps are imbued with the values and judgements of the individuals who construct them and they are undeniably a reflection of the culture in which those individuals live’.<sup>1</sup> In this perspective, we can say that maps are a representation of who is in power and where is this power present. Critical cartographers and scholars have given us an alternative way to look at maps in which they are seen more than just tools for navigation but in deconstructing them, we uncover their historical depth. This essay will examine the role of maps in building a nation, how they contributed in the expansion of European colonial powers, and how they further enforce colonialism. Moreover, this essay will also examine what ‘subjects struggling against injustice do with maps’<sup>2</sup>, as we see with counter maps that spread awareness about the Israel-Palestine conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Kitchin, Rob, Perkins, Chris, ‘Thinking about Maps’, in *Rethinking maps*, ed. by Dodge, Martin, Kitchin, Rob, Perkins, Rob, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1-25 (p. 11).

<sup>2</sup> Quiquívix, Linda, ‘Art of War, Art of Resistance: Palestinian Counter-Cartography on Google Earth’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 104.3 (2014), 444-459 (p. 447).

## **The power in naming a land**

In exploring maps as a creator of reality, Benedict Anderson and his work, *Imagined Communities* gives us historic examples of how this argument is indeed valid. Anderson explains that the census, the map, and the museum were three institutions that ‘profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion- the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.’<sup>3</sup> These colonial projections of power can be seen in the history of former colonies in Southeast Asia, one in particular that this essay will investigate is the former Spanish colony, the Philippines. In 1521, the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan who was sailing for Spain claimed an archipelago in the southeast of Asia. The archipelago was then named *Las Islas Filipinas* (The Philippines), in honour of King Philip II of Spain. Anderson describes maps as a ‘scientific abstraction of reality’ that represents something that already exists objectively on its own and a map is an instrument that ‘concretize projections on the earth’s surface.’<sup>4</sup> Critical cartographers argue that maps are a vital part of how knowledge was spread among explorers, making it easier for them to ‘bring the lands back with them’<sup>5</sup> which enabled others to follow their footsteps. In this case, it is the claiming of the Philippines as a property of Spain and naming it after the Spanish King that further concretises the colonial powers of the West. The legitimisation of the Philippines as a Spanish colony through mapping and ownership enabled them to create their own reality and re-shape the structure, culture, and values of the colonised land. As scholars explain, ‘the instrumental role of Western mapping in imperial exploitation through the erasure of indigenous peoples from the colonisers’ maps provides perhaps the strongest

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, Benedict, ‘Census, Map, Museum’, in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 163-185 (p. 164).

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, pp. 173-174.

<sup>5</sup> Kitchin, Rob, Dodge, Martin, Perkins, Chris, ‘Introductory Essay: Power and Politics of Mapping’, in *The Map Reader: Theories of Mapping Practice and Cartographic Representation*, (London: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011), p. 441.

evidence of the malignant power of cartography.’<sup>6</sup> The legacy of Spanish colonisation is still seen to this day in many aspects of the Filipino culture such as their language, values, tradition, religion, and the fact that Spanish surnames are very common among Filipinos. More evidently, the fact that the people of the Philippines are called Filipinos. A reminder of their colonial ties with Spain and the origin of their national identity. Not only did Spain take ownership of the land but also took ownership of its indigenous people.

### **Counter-mapping as an act of resistance**

‘Wherever power is expressed it is met with some forms of resistance and often counter movements, yet until recently maps have only rarely been used to challenge authority.’<sup>7</sup>

In Harley’s writings, he explains that most of his ideas come from Foucault’s theory on power and knowledge. The key revelation from Foucault’s writings is ‘the omnipresence of power in all knowledge’<sup>8</sup>, particularly how power prevails in accepted forms of knowledge and truths. Applying Foucault’s power/knowledge idea in deconstructing maps gives us the ability to read between the lines of the map, to expose the reasons behind the selectivity of what is being displayed and to understand that ‘cartographic facts are only facts within specific cultural perspective.’<sup>9</sup> One of the most common misconceptions about maps is that they exist independently outside of the social or political climate of the geographical space it is representing when in reality, they are as much participants of the space that they claim to be observing from afar. In the context of the land dispute between Israelis and Palestinians, Israel is universally recognised as a country and an official state whereas the state of Palestine is recognised as an independent state by a selective few, the United Nations and a-hundred-and-

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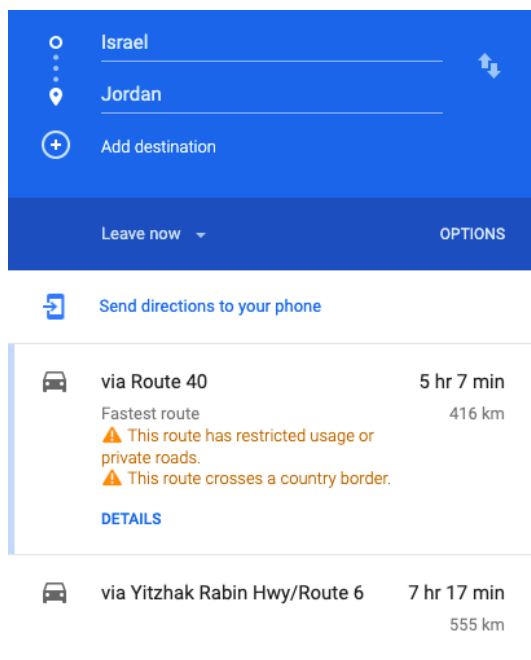
<sup>6</sup> Kitchin et al, p. 440.

<sup>7</sup> Kitchin et al, p. 443.

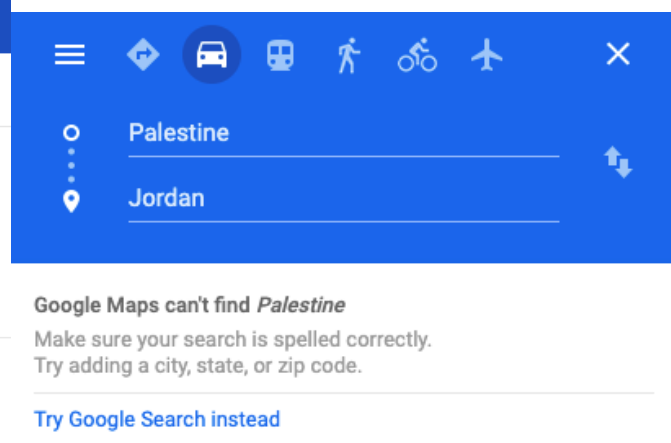
<sup>8</sup> Harley, John Brian, ‘Deconstructing the Map’, *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization*, 26.2 (1989), 1-20 (p. 3).

<sup>9</sup> Harley, p. 3.

thirty-six of its members.<sup>10</sup> The power imbalances between the two states are evident when we look at the accepted or default maps used to represent the land. It is clear that there is a specific representation and ‘truth’ that is predominantly accepted. For instance, searching for Palestine on Google Maps shows an outline of the Gaza Strip and West Bank territories, but no labels for Palestine. If you were to search the distance between Israel and its neighbouring country Jordan by car, it will give you an estimate of the distance and how long the journey would be. (See Figure 1) However, if you were to search the distance between Palestine and Jordan, it will appear that Google Maps cannot find Palestine. (See Figure 2)



**Fig. 1. Israel to Jordan**



**Fig. 2 Palestine to Jordan**

In looking at the clear distinctions between how Google Maps represents the two states or the lack thereof, it further legitimises the argument that ‘socio-political assumptions become embedded within cartographic representations’<sup>11</sup> and maps therefore are not neutral

<sup>10</sup> Cuthbertson, Anthony, ‘Did Apple and Google really remove Palestine from maps?’, *Independent*, 17 July 2020. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/palestine-google-apple-maps-removal-israel-gaza-strip-a9624251.html>> [accessed 12 March 2021].

<sup>11</sup> Schnell, Izhak, Leuenberger, Christine, ‘Mapping genres and geopolitics: the case of Israel’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 39.4 (2014), 518-531 (p. 519).

representations. To regard the map of Israel as the default representation of the land is to dismiss the realities of Palestinians residing in that land. Accepting that there is no right way to produce maps and understanding that there is no escaping the entangling of power/knowledge within spatial representations opens up new ways we can read maps, not simply as products of power but also producers of power. By looking at the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over territory, we can say that the legitimised mapping of Israel exemplifies the argument that the map 'produces and reaffirm territory rather than just describing it.'<sup>12</sup> In 1948, after the end of the British mandate, Israel declares independence and the state of Israel is established. Following its independence, the Israeli state began establishing its territory in which maps became a key instrument in solidifying their geopolitical visions. Based on the writings of Izhak Schnell and Christine Leuenberger on *Mapping genres and geopolitics: the case of Israel*, 'various governmental and non-governmental organisations used maps to solidify land claims, inscribe ethnic identities onto the land and attempt to demarcate Israel's unspecified national borders.'<sup>13</sup> During the British mandate, they introduced cadastral maps which depicted land ownership. However, according to Schnell et al, they only completed about twenty percent of the cadastre map of Palestine and consequently, the Israeli government was left in charge of completing land registration.<sup>14</sup> This enabled them the authority to manage undisputed lands and the power to create their own reality at the expense of delegitimising the existence of Palestine and the territorial boundaries between the two states. To this day, the nation of Israel continue to enforce and expand their authority on undeveloped land, including land within the agreed territories of Palestine. 'To those who have strength in the world shall be added strength in the map'<sup>15</sup> and it is only recently with new

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<sup>12</sup> Kitchin et al, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Schnell et al, p. 520.

<sup>14</sup> Schnell et al, p. 528.

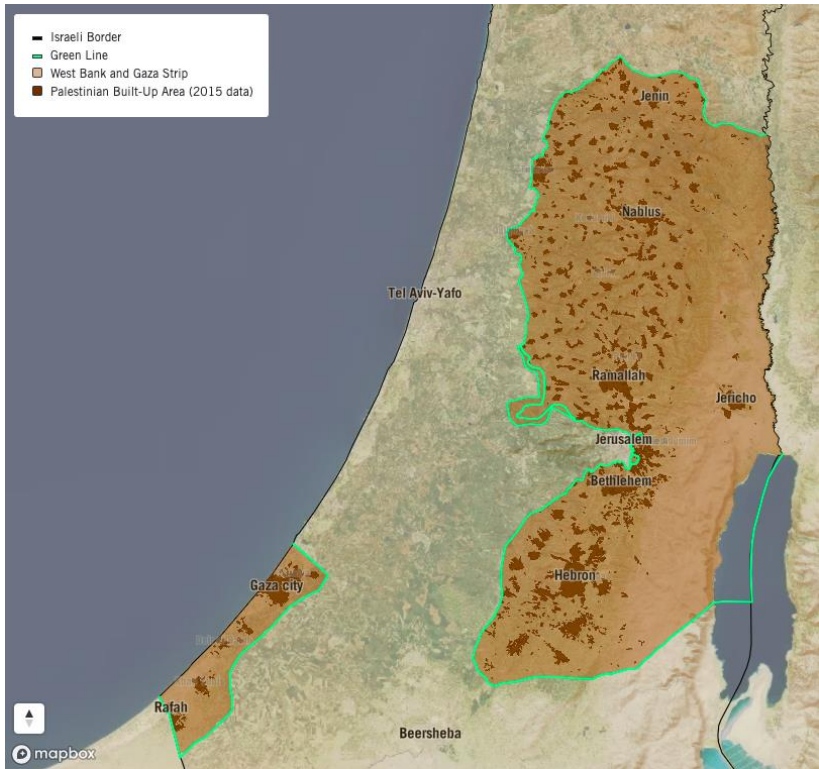
<sup>15</sup> Harley, p. 7.

mapping software becoming more accessible to the general public that these projections of power have been challenged through counter-mapping. Jeremy Crampton coined the term ‘Mapping 2.0’ in describing how new digital forms of mapping enables those in marginalised groups to create maps that depict their realities and challenging commercial maps. The main difference that marks these new form of mapping as ‘subversive’ is that they exploit the authority of cartography to ask difficult questions by mapping the types of human phenomena and landscape features that are usually deemed insignificant, inappropriate or otherwise ‘difficult’ by mainstream government and commercial cartography’ which are generally left unmapped.<sup>16</sup> These new digital forms of mapping have also made it possible to inform and spread awareness about the Israeli-Palestinian territorial conflict in a way that would have never been possible before. One research agency that this essay will discuss is *Forensic Architecture* who in partnership with the Jerusalem-based NGO *B’Tselem* created an interactive-scrolling cartography that gives a visual timeline of the gradual annexation of Palestinian territory from 1967 to present day.<sup>17</sup> Through this digital form of counter-mapping, *Forensic Architecture* helps us recognise the colonial conquest of Palestinian land and to understand that this an ongoing process rather than a single historic event. The interactive cartography presents the gradual changes in the territorial boundaries between the two states, most specifically how the state of Israel gradually projects their military and commercial power over Palestinian lands. In Figure 3, we see a map of Israel-Palestine representing what the territorial boundaries looked like in 1967 and in Figure 4, we see the map depicts the current situation in the Israeli-Palestinian territories, more specifically the realities that Palestinians are facing under the control of the Israeli state.

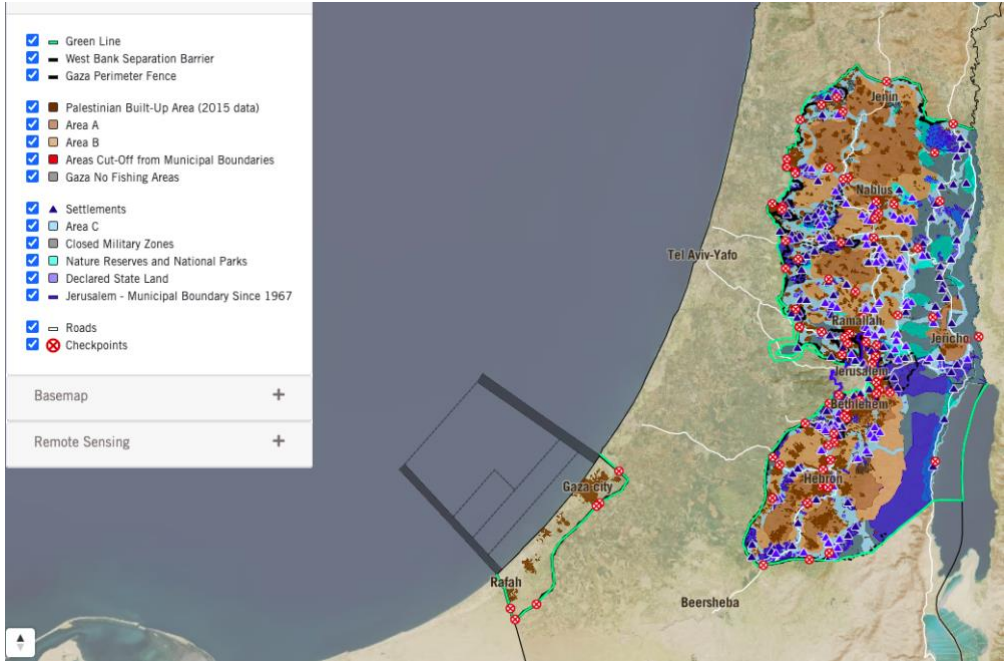
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<sup>16</sup> Kitchin et al, p. 443.

<sup>17</sup> B’Tselem, Forensic Architecture, ‘Conquer and Divide’, <<https://conquer-and-divide.btselem.org/map-en.html>> [accessed 12 March 2021].



**Figure 3. Israel-Palestine 1967**



**Figure 4. Current situation between Israeli-Palestinian territorial boundaries**

Moreover, this counter-map also mentions a plan that the state of Israel intend to implement in the Gaza Strip called the ‘five-finger plan’ to prevent dispersed Palestinian settlements in the area from connecting into one big Palestinian settlement in the future (See Figure 5). The plan



according to the counter-map is that Israel will be establishing four settlement blocs on underdeveloped land in between these Palestinian settlements which arguably can be interpreted as one of Israel's many attempts to prevent a unified Palestine in the future.



**Figure 5. Israel's Five-Finger Plan**

The work that *Forensic Architecture* has done with this counter-map further solidifies the argument that maps not only 'represent a reality but create a reality' as they are inherently bound to the relations of power and value-laden visions of spatial boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Leuenberger, Christine, 'Map-Making for Palestinian State-Making', *Arab World Geographer*, 16.1 (2013), 54-74 (p. 58).



## **Conclusion**

‘In the history of colonial invasion maps are always first drawn by the victors, since maps are instruments of conquest. Geography is therefore the art of war but can also be the art of resistance if there is a counter-map and a counter-strategy.’ -Edward Said<sup>19</sup>

Critical Cartography seeks to challenge the ways maps are accepted as a neutral representation of the world or a particular place and exposes the hidden agendas that they may hold. However, it is not decidedly against maps as Kitchin explains, ‘but rather seeks to appreciate the diverse ways in which maps are produced and used by different individuals and groups.’<sup>20</sup> Indeed, mapping 2.0 is an example of the ways commercial maps can be destabilised by giving users, most specifically users from marginalised groups the platform to collaborate and create their own alternative maps in which their existence or experiences are visible and acknowledged. We saw this with *Forensic Architecture* through their counter-map in their effort to inform and spread awareness about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Another platform that presents the beneficial aspect of mapping 2.0 to marginalised groups is Google Earth which enables users to access, interact with, and update spatial data. With these features, a Google Earth user named Thameen Derby was able to create a Nakba map that showed what Palestinian villages looked like before the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. He did this by creating a layer on Google Earth where he was able to recreate the map of Palestinian villages destroyed or depopulated as a result of the war. Additionally, Palestinians who used to reside in these villages helped create and develop this Nakba layer. Through this collaborative counter-mapping, Palestinian refugees were able to represent reality through their perspective. The contrasting realities between Palestinians and Israelis living in the two states further proves the point of cartographers that maps are a ‘silent arbiter of power.’<sup>21</sup> The purpose of critical cartography or counter-mapping

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<sup>19</sup> Quiquívix, p. 445.

<sup>20</sup> Kitchin et al, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Quiquívix, p.450.

is not to solve the problems that are exposed in deconstructing these maps, but rather they should be 'embraced and their opportunities explored.' Any facts we know about the world is not eternal, it is always subject to change as we learn from the history of cartography. We once believed that the world was flat and this was represented in the maps that existed during that period. But as humanity and new technologies developed, we now know that our planet is spherical and that the earth is not the centre of the universe. This further delegitimises the argument that maps are objective representations of the world, and further solidifies the argument that maps create reality just as much as they represent it. In challenging the structures of power in cartography that confine a marginalised group, an opportunity arises in which they may gain access to more freedom in the future.

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