



THE OCCUPIED TIMES OF LONDON

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Editorial

The 2015 general election, and electoral politics further afield, have dominated much of the last few months. As various political parties clamour for our attention, hoping we might grant “permission” to lay hands on the mechanisms of governance, it can be difficult at times to get below this surface noise and enquire with greater clarity into the broader reality of the contemporary state. What holds such a configuration in place? And how can we define and scrutinise its composition; its logic, manifestations, institutions and boundaries?

Disciplinary mechanisms bombard us from all sides, forming borders across territories, bodies and forms of life, wherein a cruel game of accusatory agency is staged, plays out, unfolds: the cult of work, enforced by ritual humiliation at the jobcentre; the housing crisis, micromanaged by local councils whose housing offices place unlawful barriers between people and their homes; the National Health Service, which moulds and punishes psyches deemed unproductive and/or subversive; the Border Agency regime that brutalises migrants who have often simply followed the trail of inherited dispossession back to the colonial heartland - many subjected to indefinite detention and deportation without access to care and support; and the police, always on hand to ensure total violent compliance to prevent a “Breach of the Peace”.

Beyond the immediate encounter with the nation-state, we can broaden the sense of our subjectification under the influence of numerous discursive or institutional tendencies and structures, themselves often emergent via social and cultural reproduction. Oppression has a way of finding roots in many structures and (sub)cultures, even those formed in opposition - and we include here organisations and movements that seek to define themselves as progressive or alternative. Consideration must be given to the distinct formations of differential modes of thought and being, as the concerns with statehood and subjectification are equally apparent across often smaller or more nuanced ‘proto-states’ of differing scales and magnitude; wherein oppression takes on different qualities and appearances; the party form, patriarchy, misogyny - how often we see these qualities emerge beneath the banners of the alternative.

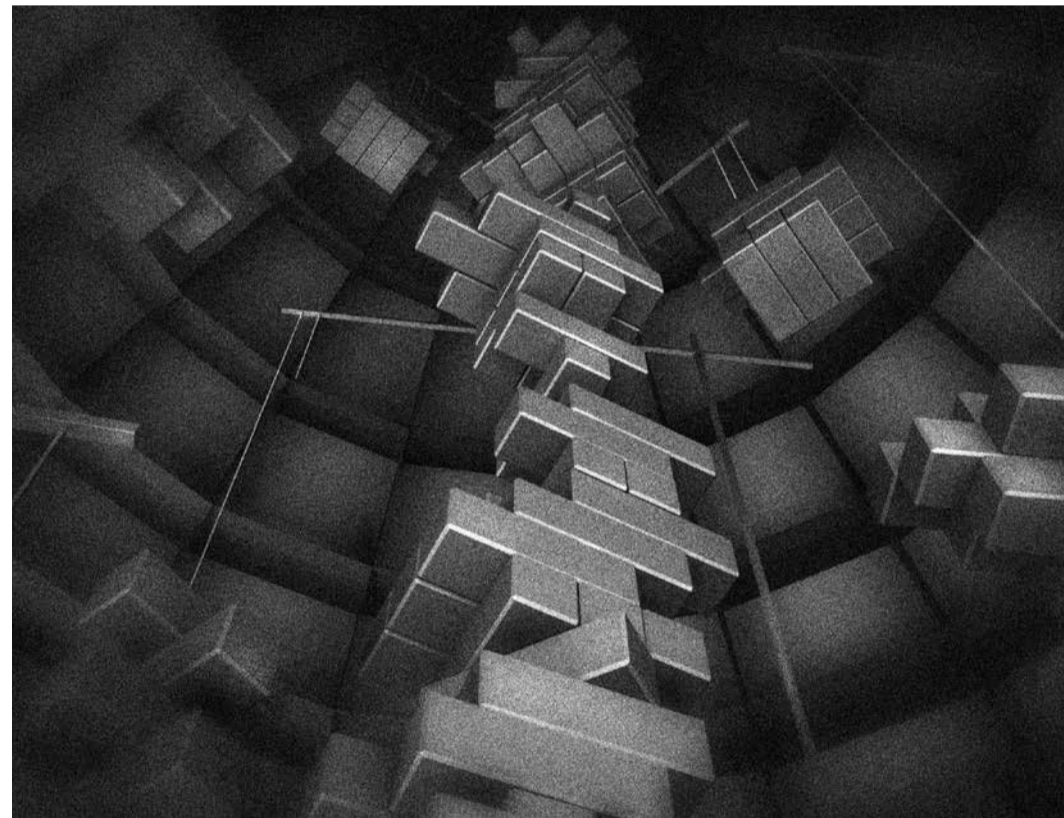
Not only are we confronted with boundless configurations, we also face the similarly

abundant conceptions of establishment, especially with forces such as the UK state: long, bloody histories of conquest, colonialism and oppression - and all the guises these have worn. If we wish to articulate our opposition to the everyday imposition of state oppression, we may be in a stronger position in considering its composition not as edifice, but rather as a logic.

The contemporary UK state provides effective management on behalf of capital, instituting strict frameworks of private property - not to mention the reproduction of racism, misogyny, heteronormativity and other violences - and implementing heavy discipline upon its subjects, including in areas of colonial rule. As capital attempts to navigate new horizons beyond the limits it encounters in its endless quest for accumulation, so the state’s logic and representation must adapt to serve and survive beneath this force: after another boom-bust cycle almost seven years ago, “austerity” was the lie given to the process of devaluing the UK working class to poverty wages and, through the coalition government’s Big Society ideals, the state has been willing to outsource some of its less desir-

able affordances onto already struggling community enterprises, justifying this with the language of responsibility, civil society and efficiency.

The solutions are apparent, and as many state provisions attached to notions of welfare - itself a vestige from the previous limits of capitalism - evaporate, people are coming together to attempt to reimagine production beyond, or beneath, the state. We can see examples scattered across the globe, from the health services provided by volunteers in Greece during the imposition of their harshest cuts, to the collective organising in response to Hurricane Sandy. Closer to home, a growing number of groups and individuals are working together to provide a more fervent culture of care across London. The desire to counter the logic of the big states - capital’s states; nation states - was perhaps best articulated by Aut Omnia, a member of the Out of the Woods collective at a public discussion earlier this year who, paraphrasing Frantz Fanon’s work on colonialism, suggested: “We shouldn’t be interested in ending the state, but rather the end of the world in which the state makes sense.”



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CRITICAL CARTOGRAPHY

by Rhiannon Firth

Most of us use maps on a day-to-day basis as practical tools to help us find our way around. Not too long ago we would have used Ordnance Survey maps, or pocket-sized city maps. Increasingly people are drawn to using Google Maps on smartphones. We rarely reflect on the ways in which our use of these maps might actually structure our experience of the world and our relations within it, limiting our imagination and possibilities for activity.

A critical cartography is the idea that maps – like other texts such as the written word, images or film – are not (and cannot be) value-free or neutral. Maps reflect and perpetuate relations of power, more often than not in the interests of dominant groups.

It is fairly easy to think of some ways in which maps embody power relations. One need not dig too deep within the history of mapping to see that they are intricately tied up in the history of nineteenth century colonialism and imperialism. Cartographers drew – and continue to draw – boundaries that separate people and resources. As another example, it is a fairly well-known fact that the commonly used Mercator projection of the globe is an inaccurate representation, because when cartographers ‘flatten out’ the spherical earth, they need to make certain choices: Size, shape and distances cannot all be maintained in the process. In the Mercator projection, the global North is vastly expanded at the expense of the South and Europe is placed squarely in the centre. As a further example, we may find it relatively easier – using an Ordnance Survey or Google Maps – to find a recently built supermarket than a longstanding squat, autonomous space, social centre or other radical space, or perhaps the site of the Battle of Hastings rather than the site of a historical radical struggle or riot. This does not just have practical implications for finding a space. Maps structure and limit our knowledge of the landscape, affecting our perception of what is important, the relative sizes and relationships between objects and spaces and where it is possible or safe to travel.

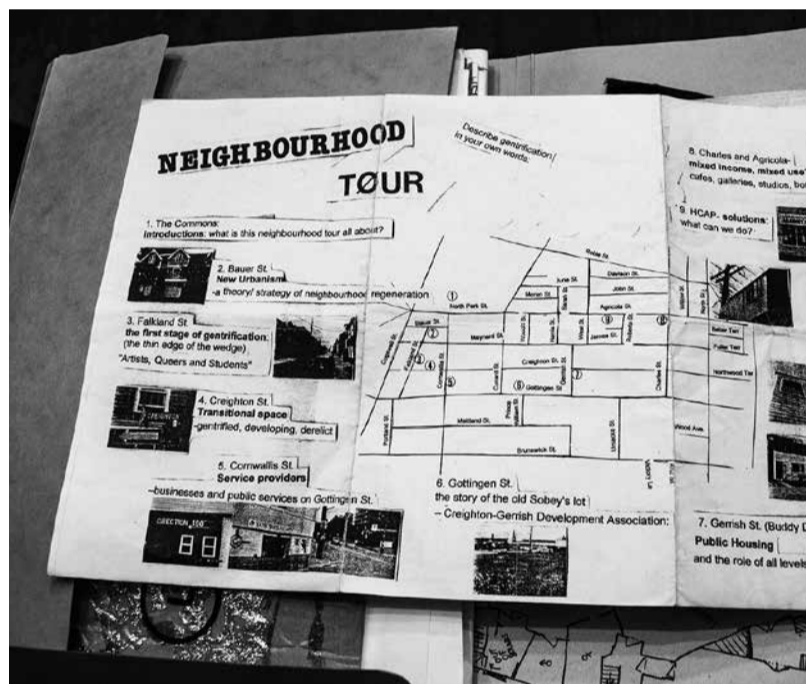
Critical Cartography is therefore, in the first instance, interested with theoretical critique of the social relevance, politics and ethics of mapping. The assumption that this is even a possibility – that maps are not simply neutral tools but rather strategic weapons that express power – leads to a second, practical, aspect of critical cartography. Groups and individuals at a grassroots level can also use mapping for a variety of purposes. Maps can be used to make counter-claims, to express competing interests, to make visible otherwise marginal experiences and hidden histories, to make practical plans for social change or to imagine utopian worlds.

It is important to note that maps are expressions not only of power, but of desire. Maps themselves can be objects of desire – some people enjoy looking at maps, or collecting historical ones. Maps also project our desires onto the landscape, they can map our hopes for the future, what we desire to see and that which we wish to ignore or hide. The process of mapping can also bring new ways of being and relating into the world, for example, we might experiment with new ways of organising and making decisions, such as non-hierarchy and consensus.

Academic literature tends to be fairly light on sketching alternative practices. There is a relatively large literature about ‘counter-mapping’, a practice which involves organisations such as NGOs and charities enabling indigenous communities to chart their territory in order to make land claims or protect resources from the encroachments of capital. These practices are undoubtedly progressive, but they have also been subject to criticism. They can involve representing communities’ sometimes multiple and conflicting desires as a single representation, ignoring power differentials and exclusions within communities. This can be a necessary strategic act when attempting to

make rights or resource claims to hierarchical entities such as states or trade organisations, yet can also help to perpetuate and legitimise such structures.

This is not to say that alternative mapping practices do not have a place in anarchist and non-hierarchical movements and studies. Social movements already use cartographies as ways of producing and communicating knowledge, yet these have rarely been studied in academic work. Examples of groups using counter-cartography include Bureau D’Etudes (<http://bureaudetudes.org/>) who produce huge geopolitical maps with massive amounts of information, highlighting for example links between corporations, financial institu-



tions and arms trade companies, on a global scale. Other examples include the 56a infoshop in London, which hosted a ‘festival of mapping’ in 2005 (<http://www.56a.org.uk/map-festtext.html>). The infoshop still has a huge archive of radical maps which can be visited by members of the public (I would highly recommend it!) and members of the infoshop still host radical mapping workshops and activities throughout London, the UK and worldwide.

Why is mapping a useful process for radical activists? Critical cartography can be a process of knowledge production and transformation. It is not just the ‘final product’ maps that are important; the process itself can involve learning together and producing new knowledge by bringing together multiple perspectives, by connecting different personal maps, or by creating collective maps through rotation, negotiation or consensus. Collaborative map-making can be a way to democratise knowledge-production. Mapping can also emphasise relations to institutions, landscapes, wildlife and environments, leading people to reconceive their relation to invisible structures or the natural world. More fundamentally it involves a reconfiguration of relations to space, dis-alienating one’s relationship to space through the application of imagination.

My own approach to mapping workshops has tended to resonate with the old Free Party slogan: “bring what you expect to find.” I’ve facilitated several mapping workshops with groups such as the academics at the Anarchist Studies Association annual conference, activists at the Occupy encampment in Nottingham Market Square, an Autonomous feminist group in Nottingham, participants in a week-long ‘Free Skool’ at the 195 Mare Street squatted social centre in Hackney. Rather than positioning myself as an expert, I try to draw out and critically examine people’s existing knowledges and relationships to maps and mapping. Usually my approach is informal: I begin by getting people to think critically about mapping and alternative possibilities for mapping, using some of the ideas and

examples listed above. I then try to facilitate the group in thinking through what kind of maps would be useful for their particular groups, and how they think it would be best to go about the process of mapping. I try to problematise some common dynamics that emerge – for example that people often veer towards wishing to map individually, yet one would hope that in a radical movement there would be some merit to mapping collectively.

Participants also often tend to parody traditional ‘street map’ styles and conventions, so it is sometimes worth thinking through the ways in which other environmental features which are often missed off conventional maps might be shown, or thinking about mapping

non-visible aspects of the environment such as relationships, emotions or pollutants. It is also worth noting that maps need not be drawn on paper, nor need they be two-dimensional. Indigenous practices show possibilities for mapping such as textile pattern weaving, orally narrated storytelling and mythological maps, or maps that communicate using notches in sticks. The existence of multi-modal and braille maps for blind people also point to some of the exclusionary aspects of visual mapping and possible alternatives.

The possibilities for mapping and map-making are as multiple as the people who choose to make maps. I have included below a brief list of questions that might function as a useful starting point for anyone interested in some map-making:

THE PROCESS

- Who will be mapping, why and for what purpose?
- Does the group have common interests, values or desires?
- Is there a pre-decided theme, or will it be worked out as part of the process?
- Who and what will be invited and included, or perhaps implicitly excluded, and on what grounds?
- Is the space physically accessible to everyone who might attend, and can childcare be included if necessary?
- Are there any formal or informal hierarchies in the space, and how might these be addressed?
- Does the process itself produce any emotions or affects? Is it psychologically transformative?
- Who is the intended audience of the map?

THE MAP

- What will be mapped and why is this important?
- What materials or technology will be used?
- What will be made visible, or hidden, and why?
- What will be drawn, in what style, what colours?
- Are there any practical considerations for the map’s intended use; e.g. should it be waterproof or capable of duplication?

THE LIFE OF THE MAP

- How will the map continue its life outside this space?
- How might the map function as a tool? Does it have any practical use?
- Who will be able to access, or might be excluded from using it, and how will it be used?
- What kind of knowledge is produced?
- Might the map trigger other cycles of learning/critique/mapping elsewhere?
- What are the political/ethical/social implications of these decisions?
- What changes or desires might the map bring into the world?