

Dorling, D. (2007) Review: on Christian Jacob. *The Sovereign Map: Theoretical Approaches in Cartography through History*, H-HistGeog Review, H-HistGeog@h-net.msu.edu (March 2007) DannyDhttp://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=92111211471469.

**Christian Jacob.** [\*The Sovereign Map: Theoretical Approaches in Cartography through History\*](#). Edited by Edward H. Dahl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 464 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-38953-0.

**Reviewed by** Danny Dorling (Department of Geography, Sheffield University)  
**Published on** H-HistGeog (March, 2007)

### **The Cartographer's Mad Project**

"Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstraction's charm. For it is the difference which forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This representational imaginary, which both culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of an ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears with simulation, whose operation is nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive. With it goes all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept." [1]

In the twenty-six years since Jean Baudrillard described the cartographer's mad project in this manner, the worlds of both geography and cartography have had their gaze utterly inverted from looking out on the world to looking in on themselves. Christian Jacob did not write *L'empire des Cartes*, published in 1992, to reinforce the achievement of this. But reviewing in hindsight we can say that it was a significant force in what drove that shift of view.

To fit this book into a lineage: Christian Jacob cites the late Brian Harley as particularly influential, who in turn was influenced by writing by French academics.[2] But the influences are not all contemporary. For instance on how cartography verges with madness (a word he never uses), he draws from *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) by Lewis Carroll (definitely English, with a little Irish) (p. 103), not Jean Baudrillard. Thus the formative thinking that leads to our now-introverted contemplation has bounced around the globe, slowed only by time for publication and numbers writing, and time for translation.

In the fifteen years since this book was first written, many of its ideas have come to be accepted as the new truth (for all that Jean Baudrillard said about simulacra). Those ideas have been propounded by many others independently of Christian Jacob--although I doubt by any others in such encyclopaedic detail and based on so many concrete examples, nor so well written and translated (by Tom Conley).

Ed Dahl edited this edition and, given the book's iconic status, a good job was done in preserving the detail. The downside is that, at times, the slow reader can begin to wonder if they will ever finish the text; but read in fits and starts it is constantly rewarding. It ranges in content from

consideration of near contemporary puzzle maps, such as the world on a Rubik's cube (p. 86), to Pierre Duval's cartographic snakes and ladders type map game of 1654 (opposite p. 269).

The sovereign map is a very substantial work, its scope includes the entire temporal history of cartography, although, as its author readily admits, with a spatial bias for maps drawn north of the Mediterranean. Despite this temporal scope, reading a book for the first time that was written fifteen years ago, and which was at the cutting edge then, is an odd experience. The reader can find themselves thinking "so what" or "of course" or "why go on" to ideas that required more careful explanation when first introduced to a potentially more skeptical audience. Indeed in the preface to the current edition, the author confesses that he would not choose to write the same book now. So why read it now?

The obvious answer is because, like me, you could not read it prior to translation. A better answer is that, despite this being a long and at times tortuous read (with some passages being difficult to absorb in anything but small chunks), the book rewards the reader not just with grand ideas (albeit most now well known) but with a myriad of nuggets of priceless information to those fascinated with mapping. As an example of this, the book proper begins with a discussion of the proper definition of a map and does not actually venture one until it reaches page 98. That is still very early on its argument. For those too mean to buy the book, the definition of a map is: "It is an object likely to be materialized in many ways; an anonymous object in that it bears so many different names that do not name it" (p. 98). This definition carries on in a similar vein for one hundred more lines and there is no obvious ending to the definition.

Pretentious (moi)? Anyone who ploughs through 98 pages is not going to mind reaching a 100 line definition when they do. They might well feel cheated had they not! This is a book about changing underlying beliefs and can now be read with great current interest as a study in how that was done. As Paul Carter is quoted as saying on the back flap blurb the book, "not only charts the sovereign and ubiquitous reach of maps: it supplies the wise ways of reading between the signs, so that we might bend back the bars of latitude and longitude, escape the prison house of our imperial projections, and to begin to write the earth less schematically, more inclusively."

I could not agree more on the need to escape the imperial prison of our current projections, bend back the bars of graticule and write the earth inclusively; but what of reading between the signs? At an early point in the book, the Bronze age petroglyph map of Bedolina is deconstructed for its meaning over the course of two pages, only to end: "To go any further in interpretation would be mere extrapolation" (p. 26). However neither there, nor often elsewhere in the book, was it clear to me why ending precisely there was any better than ending the speculation a little early, or just letting rip with your imagination.

For me it is the comprehensive nature of the research involved that is most valuable about this work. Not its contribution to our current fad of navel gazing and reading between the lines in recursive obsession. For those that have time to spare (but not so much time that they can wade through the now multiple-volume History of Cartography project) this book provides a particular history of cartography as well as an excellent reinterpretation. The links that can be made to some current mental maps from some classical ones are also staggering.

Take for instance a Chinese map 2500 years old in which the center of the world is the Imperial palace, surrounded respectively by "imperial domains, the nations of the nobility that pay tribute, the zones of pacification (on the borders, where the people adapt to Chinese customs), the nations of friendly barbarians, and, finally, the nations of those who do not fall under the purview of civilization" (p. 134). Compare today the Imperial palace to the White House, surrounded by its domains (the United States), nations like the United Kingdom, France, Pakistan, and Afghanistan respectively. It is only this year that the United Kingdom stopped paying tribute to the United States (in the form of lend-lease repayments). Imperial projections and similar schematic images are no modern creation.

The book (when not too engrossed in lists) can also give a sense of pace to developments that a larger project cannot. One description that is particularly effective concerns the motives for the development of the first printed map in 1472, to Mercator's 1578 Ptolemaic publications, to the first atlas of one-hundred maps in 1654, ending with the first 3000 leaves printed in 1662 (pp. 61-73). Now there's a challenge for today's cartographers!

This is a wonderful book. I think it shows through a careful historical reading how cartography has not been a mad project to achieve the unachievable; rather it has always been both the product and the driver of the thinking in particular places and times where each map was made. The map remains sovereign regardless of how well we may think we understand it. Today's maps matter just as did those of the entire world stretched about the Imperial palace, or the small valley around Bedolina--which was slowly drawn and redrawn in rock above the Oglio River plain over the course of a millennia (1500-500 B.C.) (p. 26).

The map has always been the symbol of how we think of our world. The better we understand that, the easier it is to map in new ways. Christian Jacob has helped many along this road. Most could not know it until this careful translation was made.

## Notes

[1]. This extract, translated from the French, appears in Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), 166.

[2]. He is described as an American in the text (p. xxii); as he worked there towards the end of his life an easy error to make.