Timothy Barney, Mapping the Cold War. Cartography and the Framing of America’s International Power

Reviewed by Pierre Grosser
Sciences Po, Paris

For a long time, books and papers have been piling up about the history of cartography and political uses of maps. Maps were used for territorial control and appropriation, from land register to colonial conquest. Maps have been used to cut the world into Westphalian pieces, to establish boundaries, and to claim ‘national’ territorial ties. Maps have been used for the modern state- and nation-building projects. They fix the geobody of the nation, and ethnographic maps reify identities. Maps are the infrastructure of many grand public policies, designed to order, develop, cleanse, and control lands and peoples. Maps are used to conduct war, to establish networks of bases and transportation hubs, and to grab raw materials. For a long time too, propaganda studies have highlighted the uses of maps to deliver a political (biased) message. Western anti-communist maps, full of red, aimed at thrilling and alerting the public, while Soviet and communist propaganda were picturing a Soviet Union surrounded by aggressive American military bases. The ‘mental maps’ of leaders, and of whole national groups have been scrutinised since the 1980s,. We know that Churchill and Roosevelt were fond of maps during the Second World War. Journals are devoted to the history of cartography (Cartographica and Imago Mundi), geographers are studying their preferred tools, while one wonders whether it is now forbidden not to quote Foucault (Knowledge/Power) and Said (Orientalism).

Barney’s book is based on his PhD in communication studies. Therefore, readers who expect a broad synthesis on the Cold War maps (see title) or even the American side of the Cold War cartography (see subtitle) will be disappointed. Each chapter focuses on a specific kind of mapping, and its genesis is illuminated by archival research. These monographs are wrapped in general considerations and quotes from a whole range of fashionable left-wing and post-colonial thinkers, with many general affirmations barely sustained by a rigorous elaboration and fact-based arguments. The ‘vignettes’ include the US image-based internationalism of Richard Harrisson, S.W. Boggs’s role as the State Department’s official geographer after the Second World War, the production and circulation of the 1951 Time Magazine ‘Gulag’-Slavery Inc’ map, some insights on how the Third World was mapped, as a disease-ridden place or as a theatre of counterinsurgency experiments, and the failure of the Peters cartographic projection (which pictures a broad Third World, when the Mercator’s reduces its size) to gain ground, the rise of a pacifist (antinuclear) counter-mapping
during the Second Cold War in the 1980s. Surprisingly, the most expected Cold War moments or trends do not warrant a chapter. The domino theory, the uses of maps during the Cuban Missile Crisis (and in its aftermath when Kennedy was lauded for having been tough on ‘offensive’ nuclear missiles which could have stricken a major part of US territory), the nuclear targeting planning (Single Integrated Operational Plan – SIOP), US navalism and military globalism,…

We would like to learn more about geography as an academic discipline in the US, and how its agenda evolved in four decades. In the 1960s and the 1970s there was a quantitative and modelling turn, which led to a higher priority in economic data. Political geography, which was ‘too German’, was left at the margins of the discipline. The ‘minorities question’ seemed to have been solved in Europe since 1945 (and the UN Charter mentions only individual rights), and to become irrelevant in the Middle East, where strongmen were building nations from above. Only ideologies mattered, and modernisation would throw ethnic identities to the dustbin of history. Yet, in the 1980s, the ‘national’ and ‘cultural turn’ shook the academic world, whereas decision-makers discovered that Iran was a Shiite country, that the soft strategic belly of the Soviet Union was filled with a poor and fast-growing Muslim population, that Hungary was breaking the first communist border to welcome Hungarian refugees from Rumania, and that Yugoslavia as a country was not so much inhabited by ‘Yugoslavs’ as assumed. What about the transnational networks of experts? We can find some clues in the book (about the UN for example, pp. 158ff.), but this fast-growing research agenda might have challenged some parochial conclusions. Barney has a few words on the inheritances of the German geopolitical tradition (p. 67). There is nothing, however, about the impact of traditional geopolitical thinking (Mackinder), on which the containment strategy is grounded (i.e. the West European and Japanese strongpoints aimed at balancing the Soviet bloc in Eurasia)? Moreover, it is strange that the author does not anchor his book in the rich academic trend of critical geopolitics, though he pays tribute to this ‘subfield of international relations’ (footnote 17 p. 230).

It would have been useful to get more access to the geographical culture (or lack of culture) of American opinion and Congressmen. After the unproved assertion that ‘Cold War maps functioned as evidential weaponry’ (p. 109), Barney describes a few Congressional maps of alliance commitments and US aid programmes, and Soviet alleged ambitions (marshalled by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s). But did these maps change anything in the Congressmen’s worldviews, and how could the reader know if these maps were widely circulated and if these samples are representative of the Congress mapping services. The author could have used a whole range of textbooks to understand the cartographic framing of America’s American International Power. How many atlases were published in the US during the Cold War, what were their publication date, how did they evolve, and how many copies of them were sold? How did Americans discover the world they pretended to rule, and the theatres of war in which they were involved? How did they twist their allies’ arms (France in Indochina, Britain in the Middle East) to lay hands on their maps?

Frustrating too is the lack of contextualisation. The 1946 ‘Pan-American World Airways’ map should have been linked to the whole range of negotiations which began during the war, about the future international aeronautical order and the access of US companies in the whole world. The 1952 ‘World National Claims
in Adjacent Seas’ map cannot be understood without a few words about the 1945 Truman Proclamation on the Continental Shelf and its consequences. Mapping the diseases maybe ‘displays the empowerment of Medical expertise’, but the 1960s can be seen also as the beginning of a kind of global health governance anchored in a common faith in progress and modernisation. It is not enough to quote the French geographer Yves Lacoste about the bombing of North Vietnamese dams. It was not ‘countergeopolitics’ (p. 166), but one part of the realist statement ‘la géographie, ça sert d’abord à faire la guerre’¹, delivered by a Third Wordist turned nationalist and who edited an important Journal of Geography and Geopolitics, Hérodote. Pacifist countermapping did not exist in a vacuum. It was an answer to the new wave of anti-Soviet cartographic propaganda, full of geopolitical determinism (too often a pleonasm) about Soviet dreams of world domination and access to the Persian Gulf. A whole range of maps aimed to provide evidence of the Afghanistan invasion as a step to the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, Western and Chinese intelligence knew very early that it was a lie, and we know now, thanks to Soviet archives, how defensive this Soviet move was.

All in all, this is not a ‘substantial history of Cold War cartography’ (Matthew Faris, back cover page), but a useful contribution to the new cultural history of the Cold War. It is an invitation to take seriously the production and consumption of maps, without jumping to a handful of big conclusions in the shifting sands of collective worldviews. ‘Framing’ is a very complex concept. Microhistories of cartography can be illuminating, and Barney provides in his book some very interesting details and some exciting points of discussion. Research must continue.

¹ Geography first of all serves to make war (reviewer’s translation).