Hiding Borders, Skewing Perspectives and Reversing Time: Possibilities for a new generation of historical atlases

Li Narangoa, Australian National University
Robert Cribb, Australian National University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_cribb/26/
Hiding Borders, Skewing Perspectives and Reversing Time:
Possibilities for a new generation of historical atlases

Li Narangoa & Robert Cribb
Australian National University

In this paper, we discuss new developments in the making of historical atlases. Advances in computer hardware and software have put into the hands of working historians an unprecedented opportunity to draw their own maps to illustrate and explain their texts. It has also enabled them to experiment with presenting past geographical and historical consciousnesses in new and exciting ways. These opportunities do not arise out of the development of Geographical Information Systems (GIS), which use mapping as a store of information and as a tool for statistical and quasi-statistical number-crunching. Rather the new opportunities arise from computer graphics programs such as CorelDraw, which we use, and Adobe Illustrator which also has many supporters.

As a genre of historical presentation, historical atlases have been around for nearly two centuries now. For much of that period, although their contents have changed with the

---

1 This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

2 On the development of historical atlases as a genre, see Walter A. Goffart, Historical atlases: the first three hundred years, 1570-1870 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); on the later development of historical atlases (though without the highly schematic generational schema we have
changing demands of their audiences, the broad format remained much the same. Traditional historical atlases were large volumes, often with multi-coloured maps (though often in subdued shades). The maps they offered were generally crowded with detailed information, so that users had to pore over them in order to extract specific information.


Traditionally these atlases contain very little text in association with the maps (where text exists, it tends to be on separate pages, far away from the maps and, on the whole, to be fairly unexciting. These traditional atlases are also generally very expensive, so that they are mainly to be found in institutional libraries and in the collections of a few cartophile historians.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, a new generation of historical atlases began to appear. Typified by the Penguin historical atlas series, these atlases took a smaller much less expensive format which suited them for use as textbooks. They commonly used only black, white and one other colour, and offered readers a page of text facing a map page. Many of them used a single base outline for all or most of the maps and varied the detail provided according to the topic of the facing text. The maps themselves were much less detailed than those of the 1st generation. These maps were often clear and sharp. They were easy for readers to comprehend at a glance and did not demand or encourage poring over like their predecessors. Being much cheaper than the 1st generation, they could soon be found in their suggested here), see Jeremy Black, *Maps and history: constructing images of the past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
tens of thousands on the bookshelves of students and poor academics. Traditional atlases remained a gold standard, admired for their beauty and their detail, but the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation dominated the marketplace.


Neither of these two generations of atlas had a place in the mainstream of historical work. The first generation were seen as rich compilations of data but the lack of text gave them little scope to offer anything except implicit analysis. The second generation typically covered long periods of history in the safest and most conventional way: even if they were based partly on original research, in the eyes of their users they represented textbook summaries of accepted knowledge, rather than contributions to academic thought. Both generations were much used but seldom cited.

Later in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, new publishing technology permitted the emergence of a 3\textsuperscript{rd} generation of historical atlas in which maps, text, pictures and tables were much more closely integrated into an aesthetic and thematic whole. Colour and beauty became a feature of historical atlases once more. This generation of atlases drew from the design insights of popular magazines to locate maps in a highly appealing setting. The price paid by this advance, however, was often fragmentation. The beauty of each two-page spread tended to work against the integrity of the atlas as a whole, leading to a volumes that consisted of historical highlights and turning points, rather than making the claim to completeness that earlier atlases had implied. This fragmentation and the popular magazine-like format meant that the 3\textsuperscript{rd} generation of atlases was taken as serious research even less often than the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, despite the often considerable research that lay behind them and despite the detailed data that sometimes appeared in maps and tables.\footnote{A sub-genre within this third generation is represented by successive editions of \textit{The State of the World Atlas} (1st ed.: London: Pan Books, 1981; 7\textsuperscript{th} ed.: London: Earthscan, 2003), which consists}
The second and third generations made historical atlases accessible to the purchasing public, but the production of atlases remained a skilled and specialized craft. Few working historians could imagine the practical steps needed to recruit the additional expertise needed to bring a historical atlas into being. With computer graphics programs like CorelDraw, however, and with online programs such as Mapmaker which will generate map outlines with varying degrees of precision and according to more than a dozen projections, the making of beautiful maps is at last within the grasp of the ordinary working historian. In practical terms, to mention the proverbial exchange rate, the cost of a picture is now less than the cost of a thousand words. It is possible to create colourful and effective maps in just a few hours. For instance, the map at the top of the following page was the work of just four hours; for most of us, a thousand words would take considerably longer to produce. By way of comparison, the XXX maps of Schwartzberg’s monumental *Historical Atlas of South Asia* took a total of 88 person-years, or XX person-weeks per map.


primarily of a series of schematic maps of the world on which are presented comparative national data on topics as diverse as migrant labour, defence spending, the legal status of abortion, share of the authorship of scientific articles, and official language(s).

4 http://life.csu.edu.au/cgi-bin/gis/Map
The modern production cannot be compared to Schwartzberg’s work for detail, but the speed of production and the clarity of the final result are a definite advantage.


The challenge for us all is to decide how we are going to make use of that challenge.
In a project we have just begun, to prepare a *Historical Atlas of Northeast Asia*, we aim to pioneer what we hope will be a 4th generation of historical atlases. The distinctive characteristic of this generation will be that it blurs the border between research monograph and historical atlas in new and creative ways. Perhaps the single most important fact is that the new technology allows inexpensive experimentation. One can sit at a computer for a few hours and toy with possibilities, perhaps coming up with something new and worthwhile, perhaps producing only drafts that have to be dumped. But the cost of this experimentation is tiny in comparison with the investment of time and resources in employing a cartographer to draw a conventional map. Almost as important is the flexibility of the new technology: every map can be adjusted, whether in tiny detail or on a massive scale, or even taken as a starting point for some different map. We have identified three ways in which this new mapping technology opens up intellectual possibilities for working historians.

First, the new technology allows the graphic presentation of difficult or unexpected information. For instance, the maps below brings to life the extent of the destruction in Hiroshima in a way that complements the use of photographs and written text:

![Map of Hiroshima explosion effects](image)

*Prepared by the authors*

It is even possible to create maps with irregular projections that show specific information which might otherwise be hard to present, such as the maps below, which compares the populations of several regions in Southeast Asia in 1930 and 1990:
The second important role of the new mapping technology is its capacity to enhance historical consciousness. As historians, one of our important roles in intellectual life is to remind social scientists of the uncomfortable fact that things were not always as they are now: rivers and coastlines, borders and roads may all have been in different places in the past. Entities such as ‘China’ and ‘Indonesia’ did not necessarily exist; ‘Japan’ did not always include either Hokkaido or Okinawa. Maps are a particularly vivid way of drawing attention to historical difference. The new technology helps us to shake the hegemony of contemporary borders and coastlines over past times.

The most exciting opportunity opened by the new technology is the opportunity it gives us to bring to life the imagination of people in the past. For all their many virtues, the first three generations of historical atlas were generally remote from the people that they described. Those atlases could present borders and lines of communications as they were known to have been, but were generally ineffective in bringing to life the aspirations of the people who lived in times past. The Historical Atlas of Indonesia, which pioneered several of the techniques which we are using in our Northeast Asia atlas, failed dramatically when it came to conjuring up the emergence of the Indonesian nationalist movement, as is apparent from the following map:
The new mapping is especially suited to bringing alive people’s sense of space and perspective. Although we are familiar with terms such as ‘tyranny of distance’, it is hard to conjure up the changing meanings of distance without maps to express those meanings. Cartoonists have sought to achieve this goal, by caricaturing such mindsets, as the *New Yorker* did memorably on its cover of 29 March 1976:

Others have been less charitable:

---

Now, however, with a simple skewing of a standard map, the historian can conjure up a sense of proximity and distance in northeast Asia as it may have been experienced by policy-makers and members of the public viewing the world from Tokyo.

A different skewing gives is the comparable perspective from Moscow:
Here is a way of making graphic the different mindsets of different historical agents today and in the past. This approach reverses the standard insight of post-modern theory, which portrays maps as primarily a tool of power and authority, intimately associated with ‘discovery’ and subjugation. One of the common tropes of the post-modern critique of maps, for instance, is the way that white space is used to indicate insignificance or Otherness, as in this Dutch map showing the British-held Malay peninsula as an almost empty space in contrast with the crowded, and Dutch-controlled, island of Sumatra:


Maps, as we are all aware, were also a tool of administration, enabling governments to control and extract surpluses from subject populations.

The new mapping technology, however, gives us an opportunity to depict alternative, subaltern and dissident visions of space. In particular, it gives us an opportunity to escape from the teleology of national history and to depict alternative visions of the kind of state structure that might have developed if different people had had their way. In the first half of the 20th century, for instance, Mongols juggled with many different possible political structures for the Mongol lands, based partly on their sense of the opportunities which might arise from playing off the region’s three great powers – Russia, China and Japan – and partly from their sense of what opportunities for social change or cultural continuity might arise in different frameworks. The following map was drawn to show the extent of the Mongol lands.
– Inner and Outer Mongolia – and to highlight the different combination of territorial units that was imagined by different Mongol leaders during that turbulent time⁶:

Prepared by Li Narangoa

We can also use maps to explore the plausibility of vague ideas about the future, for instance the political shape of the Indonesian archipelago if Java were to obtain independence from the Indonesian Republic⁷:

Prepared by Robert Cribb

In this respect, the new mapping is profoundly democratizing. It puts into the hands of everyone a capacity that was once restricted to a few scholarly and political authorities. It is, we suspect, especially important for indigenous peoples, because it gives them the scope to create maps of landscapes which belong to them using flexible techniques that more readily

---
⁶ Narangoa, Iwanami
reflect their knowledge of the landscape. For urban dwellers, too, faced with cityscapes whose constant change sooner or later turns them into migrants in the cities where they were born, access to this kind of mapping places in their hands the capacity to create maps which reassert their belonging to sites and urban features that have long since disappeared.

The implication is that maps in the future will become less an authoritative statement of fact and more a means to present ideas and perspectives. A key change in the future will be to think of multiple maps of the same things from different perspectives. It will become possible to visualize the world (and parts of it) from different social, political, ethnic and ideological points of view. In this way, we will both bring to life the sense of historical possibility in the past and encourage a sense of the possibilities of the future. It will no longer be possible, to assume that everything was bound to turn out as it did and Fukuyama’s End of History will seem like a beginning.

---

8 Mapping and power