

The Dangers of Modern Cartography

OBSERVATIONS OF A *NON-CARTOSEMIOTIC* INTERLOPER

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It is a pleasure to join you today for this innovative international symposium, in spite of being neither a cartographer nor a semiotician, and hence someone not eligible for candidacy for the announced new status of cartosemiotician (or, perhaps, for those of us hailing from linguistics, cartosemiologist). I suspect rather that Dr. Giedrė Beconytė's gracious invitation is related to our having been partners in the construction of a series of maps for a new book, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture*, in press here in Vilnius, and having to confront some unexpected and vexing issues from the perspectives of our respective disciplines. Beyond coming from the field of Yiddish Studies in the narrower sense, it is my good fortune to be affiliated with an exciting (if small and struggling) new enterprise at Vilnius University, the Center for Stateless Cultures. This center is dedicated to five cultures which thrived for many centuries on the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its successor states. They are the Karaimic (Karaites), Old Believer, Roma ("Gypsy"), Tatar and Yiddish civilizations of the region.

Stateless Cultures must not be confused with peoples lacking political independence and craving it, on a territory they consider their own (such as Basques or Kurds, or the Baltics during occupation). Stateless Cultures are rather cultures that have no claim, and in most cases have never even thought of staking out a claim, to a sovereign territory, and have zero desire to have their own army, navy or police force. What they do want, in short, is the capacity to live in peace as loyal citizens with equal rights, to be able to pursue their way of life and the specificity of their identity, be it in language, traditions, religion, dress, mores, and the myriad idiosyncratic manifestations of culture and group heritage (not least of which is the frequent desire to live in compact communities, in other words together). Of course there is an overlap with such popular notions as "minority rights" but the differences are fundamental. Members of most minorities have a home country *somewhere* where they can visit or even emigrate, from which they can obtain books, CDs, teaching materials and much more, and a classy, formal embassy to visit in case of problems. One of the classic recurrent crises facing Stateless Cultures entails the sense of helplessness, of belonging nowhere in times of elevated prejudice, racism, nationalism, economic crisis, moods of presumed national purity, and the like. It is not a coincidence that that stateless peoples in this region were among the prime targets of mass genocide during the Second World War (local Jews, Roma and Old Believers, though the calamities suffered by the second and third of these are rarely discussed or researched or made the subject of educational campaigns). Even the worst "ethnic cleansers" think twice when the would-be victim race has its own country somewhere.

Then, in the best of times, there is the down-to-earth lack of the infrastructure necessary for a sophisticated culture to thrive: financed school systems, standardized languages and orthographies, and the myriad practical facilities and social prestige that attaches to cultures "that at least have an embassy."

But that does not mean that Stateless Cultures exist in some platonic world of ideas, or as a trendy construct of modern liberals looking for ever new causes to espouse. These five cultures of living peoples have been found in these lands for many centuries ("empirically real"), and in nearly all cases, their initial settlement here, and the possibilities for their flourishing over centuries to a degree rarely enjoyed elsewhere, is a direct product of the tolerance and (what we would today call) multicultural policies of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in centuries when so much of the west of Europe was sinking in racial and religious intolerance, hatred, and violence. Their long-term existence, patterns of settlement and cultural structures call out for cartography. But cartography at any sophisticated level is usually the turf of the culture in power: the official majority. It has rarely occurred to non-power seeking stateless peoples to seek empowerment via cartography; it's the last thing on their minds (except perhaps for the odd academic).

The map in world history was first a tool of the combatant and in the first instance the combatant against animals, the hunter and his need to envisage hunting terrain larger than the line of human sight. After that in "hunts between people(s)" (otherwise known as "wars"), the map became a first a military tool and second a trophy for the winner, a role which it plays to this very day. What successful military endeavor (offensive or defensive) that results in enlargement of a group's territory is not celebrated, commemorated and transmitted to new generations via a map? (For postmodernism, it might be strange that "bigger" always registers as "better" notwithstanding such practical concerns as the minuses and unsustainability of some overly heterogeneous states with restive population segments, economic untenability, areas hard to defend and so forth, but that is a topic for another symposium, perhaps on psycho-cartography or Freudian geo-perceptionalities, and why not?)

Projects to map out Yiddish culture in Europe, and in the Lithuanian lands in particular, reveal a remarkable geo-conceptual feature of the stateless culture that has a simple cartographic ramification. Cultures not interested in the trappings of state (the “statehead” if to speak on the model of the “Godhead”) are utterly at liberty to use their language(s) to conceptualize space and call territories precisely as they wish, and perversely, the geographic nomenclature of their language offers a kind of freedom that a military victory can’t quite buy (the winning side of a territorial dispute is generally upset that it didn’t get “even more”). Let us take a classic example from European Jewish history. Around the year 1000 AD, a number of Jewish culture areas in Europe were crystallizing, each referring to itself by a name usually recycled from the Hebrew Bible. On the Iberian Peninsula it was Sepharad; in the Slavic lands Knaan (Canaan); and in the Germanic and adjacent territories of central Europe — *Ashkenaz*. The Jewish residents in these lands were the *Ashkenazim* (singular *Ashkenazi*). Well, European history took its course. The Crusades and numerous other manifestations of medieval religious intolerance resulted in massacres and expulsions; as a result, over a period of generations, Ashkenazim were continually resettling eastward to the then more tolerant Baltic and Slavic lands, particularly Poland and Lithuania. And, guess what, their new home in the east just “became the new Ashkenaz,” and they were still the Ashkenazim, although their neighbors now spoke Slavic and Baltic languages rather than Germanic, and they were, to speak spatially, in a “different place.”

Then there are many cases where a Jewish geographic term more or less represents an erstwhile state of geopolitical reality. Over the centuries, the militarily established borders keep changing or the original state might cease to exist altogether, but this changes zero for the stateless culture’s knowledge and transmission to new generations of its own world view of the geo-cultural terrain. As it happens, the best known case is *Lita* (Yiddish *Líte*), which means “Lithuania” and whose Jews are known as *Litvaks* (Yiddish *lítvakes*). The borders of Lita are relatively congruous with those the Grand Duchy reached in the days of Grand Duke Gediminas (Gedymin, ±1275 — 1341), and it is an irony of history that Lithuanian Yiddish is the only one of its many languages common to roughly “all and only” that territory. That made for the once-famous 1919 quip by diplomat Max Soloveitchik, negotiating on behalf of Lithuania with Soviet Russia, that he would respectfully like to ask for the ceding to Lithuania of all lands the Jews consider to be “Lita” (the Russian diplomat was called Mr. Yoffe, and they held this particular conversation in Yiddish). But to the point here is that any map of Lithuanian Jewish culture must wholly disregard all those political borders that are irrelevant to it, including for example, the current Lithuanian-Belarusian border set by the Stalin regime in 1939 with adjustments in 1940. For Jewish culture, Minsk, Pinsk, Grodna and Vitebsk are all Lithuanian cities, their Jewish sons and daughters Litvaks, readily identifiably by a range of non-circular definitions, including instantly recognizable dialect, religious practices, folklore, and more. The west of Lita is *Zámet*, but the borders of *Zámet*, while related to Lithuanian *Žemaitija*, go their own way in different periods. In short, cartography is a powerful tool not only for the goals of mapping culture with cultural adequacy and, where appropriate, explanatory adequacy, it is also a way to help develop self-awareness and self-respect among stateless peoples whose progeny are often conflicted about the status and worth of their own heritage. But a cartographer and a Yiddishist joining forces to “map a culture” make for an exceedingly rare exception, not the rule. It is enough to look at how very little (sometimes nothing) exists in the way of cartography of settlement patterns, cultural specificities, geocultural conceptualizations and so forth of most of the other stateless cultures in this (or any other) region.

The successful social scientist (“humanities person”) no longer fools him or herself that there can be anything approaching absolute objectivity, and even the physical sciences are subject to cyclical revisions. The contemporary researcher who is not overcome by self-delusionary hubris, who is, say, penning a study of region x with a geopolitical, cultural, historical, economic or other emphasis, seeks to advance knowledge or an argument without claiming absolute objectivity. It is by now well understood that the very question that is asked (as opposed to another question or the same question differently formulated or posed) is a highly subjective feature. Take as a hypothetical a map about political inclinations of today’s citizens of the United States. It might show the allegiance to parties or to a general political stance as a continuum between the most liberal and the most conservative (as measured by judgment on any number of issues as well as on the performance of politicians or policies). It can show the changes over time of those allegiances. But does the map show, for example, the breakdown of political “feelings” of American citizens for other countries or regions (say Africa, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Poland and so on)? Does it generate representation of the views of the Native Americans (“Indians”) whose ancestors lived in all the land now “occupied” by the United States? Is there a historical layer showing the divisions of the Native American groupings (“tribes”) in addition to The States, or is that something the American child or student is not reared to take interest in? Some would answer that “specialists” (itself a loaded word hurled by those trying to avoid having to think about something and wanting to throw it to someone else) interested in these and other “more specific” issues are perfectly free to arrange for maps to show “facts” about whatever it is they are interested in, but that the mainstream should stick to what the mainstream wants. Maybe.

But facts are cheap in the social sciences, and larger perspectives just as hard, or harder, to come by in the age of our technological revolution. The production and successful distribution of impressive looking atlases, map books and individual maps continues to be in the hands of the “powers that be”: governments, powerful interests (such as the tourism industry), commercial publishers (catering understandably to the idols of the market), and academia-linked

institutions with close ties to the intellectual establishment, standard ideas, and not infrequently, direct or indirect government support.

Cartosemiotics in the narrower sense seems to refer to individual relationships, or sets of relationships, between signifier and signified as conceived or produced in cartographic representations. As a descriptive science, it has a promising future, not least because there are innumerable maps out there (“empirical data waiting to be studied or restudied”), stretching backwards from today to the beginnings of cartography, that call out for a critical study of the *real* intention of their “maker,” and the various strategies whereby that real intention is masked to produce the effect of “God’s Honest Truth,” in other words the standard truths that maps are usually out to proclaim as an arm of the establishment, government or otherwise. That pursuit, analytical or historical or critical cartosemiotics, is a major desideratum in the history of ideas. The supposedly objective map usually escapes the same scrutiny to which books, proclamations and earlier chronologies and histories are scrupulously subjected to. Cartosemiotics should seek to expose the semiology of the mapmaker’s mind by looking behind the semiology of the “surface representation” (what is on the physical map) to the “underlying representation” (and even the unconscious intentions of the mapmaker).

The *danger* inherent in cartosemiotics is that all the new progress — conceptual, technical, methodological — will continue to serve the Winners of History: the nation-states and their alliances, Big Business, and “whoever else can pay” for impressive, fancy maps. The first step in averting that danger is to recognize it, and to counter it by affirmative action. For example, if someone is thinking about a new atlas of Europe, how will that new atlas represent the Losers of History who have no state, or the Stateless Cultures who never wanted one, or even earlier sets of borders whose effects remain discernible for all the people who “landed on the wrong side”? In every danger, an opportunity lurks. Cartosemiotics needs to develop devices and methods aimed at countering the built-in prejudices and biases of the Powers that be and the various nationalisms, as well as devices for representing as accurately as possible the notions of the Weaker and the Other. To do so, cartosemiotics will need to research the individual and group semiology of these people(s) by bringing them into the process rather than deigning to speak “for them.” Only by grasping the nonstandard and unrepresented can the semiologist hope to then apply that knowledge to cartography. Whether the “semiologist plus cartographer” exist in one person or two is hardly relevant, the understandable excitement about a new compound discipline notwithstanding.

As Ecclesiastes said, “There is nothing new under the sun.” The temptations that faced ancient mapmakers continue to be in play in the internal maps — the minds — of mapmakers, cartographers, and now, cartosemioticians.