ENVISIONING LANDSCAPES, MAKING WORLDS

Geography and the humanities

Edited by
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Why America Is Called America

Franco Farinelli

The map and the coin

Agathemerus writes that Anaximander, a pupil of Thales in the sixth century BC, "was the first one who had the audacity to draw the Ecumene on a small table" made of terracotta or bronze.¹ For this reason, Anaximander was judged most impious: he dared to represent the earth from above in a way that only Gods could do. So the story goes. But as a matter of fact things are more complicated than this. For the Greeks, nature was not a combined group of things but an ongoing perpetual process; nature was movement. From this perspective, Anaximander's project appeared scandalous because it aimed to immolate Earth as a function of knowledge (of the dominion) of Earth itself. It is only because, with Anaximander, the Earth becomes a corpse that the rigor (the rigidity) of death becomes the equivalent of the rigor of science; rigor mortis allows us to measure only what was once alive but is no more. Anaximander might not have been the first one to talk about such a reduction in the Western world but he is certainly the first one to celebrate it in geometrical forms, and make it so pervasive that it comes to stand at the center of a complex Weltanschauung.²

It is such a deliberate reduction of reality into a corpse-like geometrical scheme that explains Anaximander's tragic supremacy, his role of precursor that Western tradition strangely has assigned to him, despite the fact that maps existed long before his time. Michel Serres³ writes that the difference between the Babylonian tables dating back to the third millennium BC and Anaximander's table corresponds to the difference between local and global. The tables have at their center the city and the river Euphrates; Anaximander's table, on the other hand, provides a model of the world as a whole. These reflections, however, concern merely the descriptive plane. More significant in this respect are a series of bronze and silver circular tetradrachms coined in Ephesus during the fourth century BC. On the
reverse these show a map of the city’s hilly surroundings traversed by the tributaries of the river Meander: on the recto a Persian satrap, holding an arch and the baton of command, is hurrying on; on the opposite side a series of valleys stretch amidst woody hills depicted with plastic precision. The absence of anything that would suggest human intervention, such as roads and cities or any other kind of nomenclature, is noteworthy. Precisely because of such absences it can be concluded that this coin was meant for local circulation limited to Ionia.4 However, one could object that until recently the Brazilian cruzeiro and the Taiwan dollar also carried on their reverse a map showing rivers and mountains, reminiscent of the silent maps of our childhood. The images impressed on these coins and the stories they continue to convey show that we still believe in maps just as we still believe in coins.

The map is the money

What is common to modern maps and coins is not merely a question of more or less limited circulation, rather it is their symbolic regime; this is functional to the exchange value rather than the use value of things. Whether or not the exchange value contains as much as an ‘atom’ of use value, as Marx holds,5 or whether exchange value and use value are, on the contrary, driven by the same logic, does not interest us here. What is important is the fact that the role of geographical maps at this point is not concerned with the recognition and localization of things on earth but rather with their possibility to be transformed into commodities, as the case of maps and coins devoid of any names plainly shows. This idea is clearly illustrated at the end of the nineteenth century by the author of the translation of that part of earth which we today call India into a geodetic map: on a ‘sound, square, geographical’ map ‘based on systematic measurement’ (i.e. triangulation), every point ‘on a boundary-line, every peak in a mountain system, every landmark of any importance in the country-side, has a value whose correctness can be proved just as easily in a London office as in the open field. And this value is not only incontrovertible, but absolutely distinctive, because every point on the whole world’s surface has its own special position in terms of latitude and longitude, with which no other point can interfere.7

The analogy between cartographic representation and the market, which is its realization, can be clarified by rephrasing Holdich’s assertion using the language of Marxism: natural forms become value forms, commodities show a phenomenal form different from natural forms only with respect to the exchange value these have with other commodities. Things on a map share the same destiny: despite their differences, all things co-exist one next to the other; at the same time, they also submit to the same regime which assimilates them all. Commodities have a value only because all other commodities have a value in relation to the same equivalent, that is to say an equivalent commodity excluded from the realm of commodities represented on the map.8 The map is in turn the agent that produces a general form of value. Such a general equivalent is space, intended in the Ptolemaic sense of the standard linear interval between two geometrical points,9 in relation to which each
use value, that is to say each place, is destined to disappear. In the middle of the sixteenth century the introduction of graphic scale into maps marks the beginning of the systematic use of space as the phenomenal form for the value of goods, in other words, as a universal commodity in relation to single types of commodities. In this way the map with its properties becomes the model of territory and produces the general form that stands for modern territorial value.

In other words, space and money become the same thing; cartographic symbol and money function in exactly the same way: the former in relation to the map, the latter in relation to the market. The consequence of their mutual, incessant tension toward the equivalence of all things has led to the poor generalizations that today mark our relations with the world. A few years ago, Immanuel Wallerstein wondered whether India really existed. He reached the conclusion that India existed only as "an invention of the modern world-system," in the same way as any other nation-state. Much earlier, as early as the end of the nineteenth century, the major expert of the land-systems of British India explained that India did not exist at all because no country in the world is called with this name: "within the borders of the area that is designated with this name on the maps, there are a series of provinces populated by different races often speaking different languages." What today escapes English social science was perfectly clear to the British Empire's civil servants and beforehand to Metternich, who, two centuries earlier, at the Congress of Vienna, triumphantly declared that reality is its geographical, or more precisely, cartographic expression.

The cartographic project

The above statement remains valid even when it is re-phrased in more radical terms: reality is the product of its treatment, and the latter is in turn the product of the geographical — better cartographic — expression. On the reverse of the above-mentioned tetradrachms, space does not feature yet. In its place we find the portrait of a territory delimited by money circulation, the image of the natural form of things, of their use value. More importantly the coin signifies natural data and simultaneously the potential equivalence of each element with the others and their possibility of being interchanged. This is the reason why names or representations of roads that already existed are missing; these are not significant. Such a mutual function has a two-fold preliminary characteristic. First, it consists of a simultaneous representation secured by the image itself. This is a fundamental characteristic of commodities that enables them to reveal their values in the same equivalent, that is to say, according to a general expression of values. Secondly, it coincides with the form of the vehicle of the representation itself, that is to say, the money, which is also the main agent in the market. Alfred Sohn-Rethel's reflections are useful for understanding the functional identity of map and money in the form of coins; both of these, he remarks, are Ionic inventions that can be dated to the seventh century BC. It could be objected that the invention of money occurs at the beginning of the seventh century, while the first map appears a century after. This, however,
means that the map can be defined, using the words of Marx, as an 'extended reproduction' of money, a general sign that testifies to the existence of the market, which in this period is on the point of being born. At the same time, the coin also works as an unavoidable interface between what, according to Sohn-Rethel, is already directly connected: on the one hand, the money, that is to say, the real abstraction in the exchange process, and on the other, thought in abstract form. It follows that when, for example, Kant breaks up the object in abstract substance and phenomenon, he makes a distinction between the exchange value and use value of the goods.

According to Sohn-Rethel, concepts in the intellect exist in consciousness but do not originate from the latter. It is precisely money, the expression of the abstract exchange of things, that establishes the connection between social reality and conceptual ideals of formal abstractions. These are precisely the same abstractions of modern science represented by Galileo's mathematical knowledge of nature, whose data have no direct relation to perceptions. This knowledge contributed to the destruction of the unity of mind and hand typical of artisanal production and paved the way to capitalistic production through the imposition of laws based on exchange-abstraction and money: "laws of uniformity, divisibility, of a particular kind of movement and quantification." The introduction of mathematics in the productive process — in construction and in particular in military architecture concomitant with the development of firearms — further favored the development of capitalism.

Considering all this, we can reasonably conclude that the first and main agent of the introduction of mathematics was the map rather than money. Sieges, obsidional techniques, and the use of openings for firearms required precisely drawn fortifications and the development of the geometrical image for the modern city. The isometric drawing used to represent the front of buildings — their use value — as we are accustomed to see them gives way to the geometrical drawing produced by the impassable and dehumanized vertical viewpoint and expression of their exchange value; at the same time the quality of manufactured goods gives way to issues of dimensions and measures, a mere matter of quantities. If money changes the nature of the relationship among human beings, it is the map that changes the way we think of things and, prior to that, the way we name things.

"The age of the world image"

There is a history of the invention and construction of the Orient. There are descriptions of the way the Western world is seen today by its enemies. Despite all the volumes that have appeared in the West, a real history of the invention of the concept of the West and how this appears in the eyes of those who are part of it remains unwritten. Foucault would say that there is still no complete genealogy of the Western world. This, I wish to argue, is the reason why there are still problems in recognizing the real value of geographical knowledge: its central role in molding all ideal models.
The West is geography and modernity is the latest invention of western geography. Heidegger would have been more precise had he defined modernity as the era of geographical representation rather than "the era of the image of the world." In the same way as space - the form of modernity - modernity itself originates from a grin; that same implicit and deferred grin that gives a name to America. It is known that a name is a petrified laugh, a laugh caught in the process of becoming something else, deferred, crystallized and finally made permanent. The American laugh, the name America, marks the end of the Colombian tragi-comedy, the end of the adventure of an explorer who did not realize what he had discovered, unaware of his real function to reduce the world to a map. Garry Wills is wrong when he accuses Columbus of having sailed on his adventure with "the map of the old world in his mind," a map whose image nothing would have shaken or erased. He is wrong because it is not so much a question of what is old and what is new but rather it is of the relation between the map and the world, of the subordination of the world to the map, a relation that was unknown to the ancients and which starts with the modern period. The difference between Vespucci and Columbus is the degree of consciousness that characterizes and shapes their actions.

Columbus is the protagonist in a cartographic project that is controlled by someone else; more precisely he is the unaware agent of Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli's project. Vespucci's role also is decided in the end by a cartographic act, but this occurs after everything had already happened. In both cases cartography prevails over geography, cartographic ethos imposes itself on individual will. However, there are differences between the two explorers: the first does not understand almost anything about what is happening to him; the second understands almost everything. Such a difference is shaped by their different relationships with cartographic representation: Columbus receives a complete cartographic representation and produces the prognosis that it incorporates; Vespucci, the first cartographer and the one responsible for the Padron real in the Spanish Court, constructs and produces, he does not undergo. The famous letter the Florentine sends from Cape Verde on the 4th of June 1501 to the Medici is very significant. He complains about the Alvarez Cabral expedition because it includes neither mathematicians nor cosmographers and, as a consequence, one can discuss the nature and the form of the Brazilian coast only "discontortamente" tortuously. This adverb uses a contrast, or better a negation, to highlight the new values of rectilinearity and orthogonality, that is to say, the new spatial values required and imposed by the modern cartographic image of the world to the world itself. In this respect the fortune of Vespucci is the ruin of Columbus, and their intertwined stories are in fact one single story: the story of the modern relation between reality and linguistic, cartographic sign. It is a story that right now, at the end of the era of the New World, should be reconsidered in order to attempt to shed some light on the nature of the very New World that is ahead of us. Such a reconsideration can be mapped out through the following two questions: why was it an arbitrary act to call America by this name? And if this is the case, what does this name really mean?
The name "America"

Emile Benveniste identified a contradiction in the way Ferdinand de Saussure defines the linguistic sign and the central importance he attributes to it. Saussure states that language is form and therefore the linguistic sign does not bring together a thing and a name but rather a concept and an acoustic image. He adds, however, that the sign is *unmotivated*, that is to say that it is arbitrary in relation to meaning, that it has no natural relation with reality. In this way, Benveniste says, Saussure explicitly excludes reality from the definition of sign and therefore constructs a fundamental contradiction: if language is form and not substance, linguistics should be a science of forms, centered on an understanding of the sign and not at all concerned with reality and things. Benveniste interprets such a huge anomaly as a more or less conscious homage to the historical, relativistic, and comparative ethos typical of the late nineteenth century. Such an attitude begins with the realization of the infinite diversity of cultural phenomena to conclude that nothing was necessary; it recognized "universal dissimilarity" to end up professing "universal contingency." According to Benveniste, on the other hand, the sphere pertaining to the arbitrariness of language should be narrowed: this does not concern the relation between signifier (that is, the word) and signified, as Saussure thought, but the mere fact that a certain sign is related to a certain aspect of reality. However, the relation between signifier and signified is necessary as both are harmoniously impressed in the mind of the speaker and, by so doing, evoke each other: the "mind does not contain empty forms, concepts without names." Benveniste, apparently more than Saussure, believed that the mind functioned like a map.

Let us leave this issue for the moment and return to Vespucci, or better to Vespucci's luck. Let us consider the well-known *amapamondo*, the "flat figure" (as opposed to the "spherical body") that Waldseemüller adds to the 1507 *Cosmographiae Introductio*, which bears for the first time the name of America. This, like the mind, contains forms that bear names and therefore convey concepts. The names that appear on the newly discovered continent are not many: there are names for the Antilles; a handful of toponymies mainly around the Brazilian and Florida coasts, point by point; and in the inland, together with the expression "TERRA INCOGNITA" repeated twice, north and south of the Gulf of Mexico, there are only two other names: "PARIAS" around the Tropic where New Spain is and "AMERICA" in the heart of Brazil. Local toponymies are written in small letters, all other names are in capital letters. Additionally, the last one appears to be written with letters bigger than the others, similar to the letters of the name "SPAGNOLLA" (the present Haiti), a name followed by the predicate "INSULA" written in smaller letters. As Varela has noted, the popularization of the name America happened thanks to this map rather than the text that accompanied it. Whichever might be the case, besides definite descriptions of the still unknown New World's natural landscape, Waldseemüller's map contains only two kinds of names: those which refer to points and lines (i.e., to localities, rivers, capes and mountain chains) and other names which designate whole areas. In other words, the process of nomination on the map...
follows a geometric logic organized around the articulation of a Euclidian syntax constructed on the relationship between points, lines and surface areas. There are two consequences: firstly, there are no names on the map, except proper names — when I say names here I mean those which refer (and can only refer) to one and only one of the three elements, according to a bi-univocal relation. Secondly, when names refer to surface areas, there is a relationship between the body of the printed letters and the extension of the area itself. This explains why the name “AMERICA,” the one written in the largest print and devoid of all punctual values because it refers to a wide area, becomes the name for the whole island and later for the whole continent once it is printed on the map. And the Introductio significantly confirms that this was precisely the intention of its author.

Deconstructing the deconstruction

Now we can return to semiology. As Saussure has stated,34 “the method that uses words to define things, is a bad method.” So, let us attempt to reverse this process; let us start from the map to attempt to define words. The definition of America is an exemplary case of arbitrariness (intended in an historical sense, and not in the semiological sense according to Saussure) of the linguistic sign. This is not to say, as Benveniste would put it, that this word has “no natural relation” with the reality it refers to. Rather I would like to note that the example of America shows Benveniste and Saussure in agreement, demonstrating the common cartographic roots of their thought, the very essence of their common position. On the one hand, the map is the only representation in which sign, meaning, and reality enter into a relation with one another, causing the contradiction that Benveniste notes in Saussure. On the other hand, in the attempt to remove such contradiction, Saussure reaffirms the necessity of the relation between signifier and signified that actually occurs only in the geographical image. This does not contain empty forms and anonymous concepts. For this reason, according to Saussure and Benveniste and following a tradition that dates back at least to Hobbes and Locke and stretches on to Kant, it can be considered a paradigm for the mind. If we agree that the map stands for a unique and originary sign, this idea is also expressed by Saussure, when he writes that: “it is not thought that creates sign, rather it is sign that guides thought in a primordial manner (as a matter of fact sign creates thought and in its turn provokes thought to create signs that are not so dissimilar from those that it has received).”35 These reflections can be useful in reflecting on the Galleria delle Carte Vaticane (Gallery of Vatican Maps) painted after 1580. At the top of some maps is the word “Ditio" (Ditio Veronensis, Ditio Bononiensis and so on: from the Latin word dire, which means “to say”). This is proof of the exhaustive character of a definition that only ostensibly refers to the linguistic expression, but in fact is the product of a pure and simple tabular extension. This is so much so that the borders of the thing represented, that is to say, the borders of the representation itself, have become unimportant; such borders are those of the representation itself because the thing represented has become its image and vice versa. With modernity the limits of the world become the
limits of the geographical table, which is the thing that establishes or expresses what exists on earth. This started perhaps with the Carta dell'Oceano by Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, whose copy Columbus carried with him and which, along with the map of the New World by Waldseemüller, open modernity. According to this map, the New World is not simply the fourth part of earth that had just been discovered but rather it is the whole world, including that part of the world that was already known to the ancients and which in this way acquires new meaning, existence and essence.

This has decisive consequences for the analysis of cartographic logic. In international geographical debates, reflection on the nature of maps still remains where Brian Harley had left it some years ago, that is to say, at the point at which the map acquires a textual (i.e., literary) character, which is possible to understand by way of deconstructive techniques, on the belief of the supremacy of models derived from reflections about natural language over all other models. But we have another possibility, the possibility of finding another explanation, according to which cartographic language is more important than verbal language and explains, as I have attempted to show here, the aporias of the latter, in the belief that exactly this kind of consciousness is the only and authentic reason for which Vespucci was able to understand better than others what was really happening.

Notes

8 Marx, Il Capitale, pp. 88, 93, 98-9.
16 Farinelli, Geografia, p. 163.
Why America is called America

19 Sohn-Rethel, *Il denaro*, pp. 29, 73.
34 F. De Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, p. 31.