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CHAPTER 23

Illustrative Geographies

Introduction

Researching and writing any historical geography involves envisioning and (re)presenting in the present a particular world from the past. In accessing that past, we use various forms of evidence to narrate the historical geography at the heart of our inquiry. Frequently, this also involves an attempt to illustrate that geography by using a contemporary map, sketch, image or other visual signifier. Visualization is after all 'at the heart of geographic practice' (Aitken and Craine, 2005: 251). However, it is not just in the *depiction* of the past that visual representations can be used; they can also be fruitfully utilized as *sources* in their own right to deconstruct the same diverse geographies that are typically divulged from analysis of conventional documentary archives (see also the 'Evidence and Representation' chapter). This chapter explores the use of visual sources in the production of historical geographical research. By thinking broadly about *illustrative geographies*, the aim is to signal the diverse visual mediums through which historical geographies can be envisioned and represented before reflecting on appropriate visual analytical techniques.

Maps and map-making in the cartographic tradition

One of the most important sources of visual representation is the map. As Chris Perkins (2003: 344) notes, the 'ability to construct and read maps is one of the most important means of human communication, as old as the invention of language'. The emergence of geography as a university discipline in the late nineteenth century

coincided with cartography playing a central role in the envisioning and mapping of western colonialism. In the age of high imperialism, leading geographers such as Halford Mackinder in England and Freidrich Ratzel in Germany were active players in the project of imperial science that underpinned and supported colonial expansion (Livingstone, 1992; Heffernan, 2000; Driver, 2001). The geographical tool of the map 'provided the European imperial project with arguably its most potent device' (Heffernan, 2003: 11; see also the 'Imperialism and Empire' chapter). It is important, therefore, to not see cartography as historically merely a discursive method of knowledge accumulation and display but rather as a key practice that facilitated what Said terms 'acts of geographical violence', through which spaces were 'explored, charted, and finally brought under control' (Said, 1993: 271). Contextualizing the original use of maps can tell us much about the society, institutions and ideologies that produced them. In other words, maps are 'not just artifacts' because 'mapping is a *process* reflecting a way of thinking' (Perkins, 2003: 343).

Traditionally, the *positivist* tradition of making and reading maps reflected a Cartesian belief in the human ability to objectively mimic the *real* world in its *representation*. The work of Brian Harley in the 1980s, however, brought about a sea change in the discipline of cartography, with his critique of positivism bringing maps into much broader debates in the arts, humanities and social sciences about discourse, power and knowledge (Harley, 1988, 1989a, 1989b). Drawing on the writings of Erwin Panofsky, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Harley divulged cartographic representations as socially constructed *images* with historically specific *codes*. Grounded in semiotics, his work outlined the shortcomings of the perception that

cartography can 'mirror accurately some aspect of 'reality' which is simple and knowable and can be expressed as a system of facts' (Harley, 1989b: 82). Instead, he demonstrated the various modalities of power and authority that function cartographically to script particular social relations of imperialism, race, gender and so on (see also: Wood, 1993; Dorling and Fairbairn, 1997; Perkins, 2003). For Harley, the father of *critical cartography*, maps are ultimately a 'teleological discourse, reifying power, reinforcing the *status quo*, and freezing social interaction within chartered lines', and any analysis that ignores the political and cultural connotations of cartographic representation is in effect 'ahistorical' (1988: 302-303).

Harley's focus on the deconstruction of the political and cultural symbolism of cartography has been instrumental in the broader problematization of all forms of geographical representation. Aitken and Craine (2005: 254) recently observe, for example, that the 'interpretation of geographical representations provides insights into how society and space are ordered and how the construction and representation of that space is manipulated by powerful groups through cultural codes that promote dominant ideologies' (Aitken and Craine, 2005: 254). Others whose work in critical cartography has had a significant impact in historical geography include John Pickles (1992) and Denis Wood (1993). Pickles has made excellent use of hermeneutics to offer a textual analysis of propaganda maps, while Wood's exploration of the communicative power of maps has emphasized the 'importance of understanding the signs and myths which are embodied in cartography codes' (Aitken and Craine, 2005: 240).

In more recent years, *historical geographic information systems (GIS)* have been used in the study of historical geography in a variety of contexts (see, for example, the special volume 33 of *Historical Geography*, which includes work by Wendy Bigler, Don DeBats and Mark Lethbridge, and Paul Ell and Ian Gregory). In historical GIS, source data is typically converted from archival analog form to digital format, and, as Anne Kelly Knowles (2000: 452) points out, the accumulation of digital spatial databases is creating various opportunities for 'GIS analyses of the recent past, particularly in urban, transportation, business, and environmental history' (see also Ell and Gregory, 2008). Knowles' plea for the importance of historical GIS in historical geographical research centres on the contention that '[m]apping data reveals dimensions of historical reality and change that no other mode of analysis can reveal' (Knowles, 2000: 453). Several anxieties, however (concerning the same issues of authority, power and knowledge that need to be considered when using conventional cartography – as outlined above), have been expressed about the unproblematic use of GIS in historical geographical research (see, for example: Gregory, 1994; Curry, 1995; and Pickles, 1995).

Visualizing landscape

One of the key areas of research in historical geography is the study of past cultural landscapes. The remnants of many historical built environments are often still present in the contemporary landscape, but overlays of newer structures typically limit the extent to which we can access and interrogate them. In building back up a picture of a specific space in a particular time in the past, then, contemporary representations – written or visual – provide key lenses through which we can envision. In envisioning

landscape, a variety of *visual sources*, as outlined by Iain Black (2003: 487), are all valid archives to be fruitfully engaged:

Paintings, sketches, engravings and architectural drawings are all valuable in the essentially archaeological practice of recovering the symbolic geography of past landscapes.

Over the last two decades or more, landscape studies in historical geography have seen a move away from the atheoretical and largely descriptive nature of the Sauerian school of landscape interpretation (see the 'Landscape and Iconography' chapter) to more contextualized and theoretically situated forms of interrogation, where the landscape is seen as a *text* to be *read*. As Aitken (2005: 241) argues, rather than simply seeing landscape as a given, geographers now acknowledge that 'places are actively produced and struggled over', and it is the interrogation and deconstruction of that process that holds a key to understanding any given landscape and its multiple contexts. To this end, new forms of *textual analysis*, relying upon *literary metaphor* and *iconography*, have come to the fore (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Cosgrove and Domosh, 1993). Denis Cosgrove (1993), for example, has used the work of Italian architect, Andrea Palladio, to interrogate the visual production of cultural meaning through landscape. In his examination of the *envisioning* of landscape in sixteenth-century northern Italy, he asserts that 'to understand how human groups come to terms with and transform their material environments [it is necessary] to pay as much attention to the intellectual forces and

spiritual sensibilities that empower those groups as to the economic, social and environmental constraints with which they subsist' (1993: xiii).

Using images in historical geography

The use of visual sources is not just confined to historical work on landscape; images are a rich mine of knowledge in the study of historical geography more generally. Key sources range from historical posters, postcards and photographs to diagrams, sketches and woodcuts. They also include tele-visual sources such as cartoons and film, and it is important to recognize them as archives that need to be interrogated with the same care and systematic assessment as is expected when using more conventional written sources. As Gillian Rose (2007: 262) argues, '[p]recisely because images matter, because they are powerful and seductive, it is necessary to consider them critically' (Rose, 2007: 262). In our image-saturated world, no visual imagery is ever *innocent*, and therefore contextualization is of paramount importance (Rogoff, 2000; Schwartz and Ryan, 2003; Mirzoeff, 2005). Analysing images must not concern itself with merely *how images look* but in addition *how they are looked at*.

Visual images *affect* us in myriad ways and play key roles in the discursive networking of power and knowledge, and the envisioning of social categories and hierarchies (Hall, 1997). As Gordon Fyfe and John Law (1988: 1) argue:

To understand a visualisation is […] to enquire into its provenance and into the social work that it does. It is to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, to detect the

roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalizes.

Since the 1990s, various historical and cultural geographers have highlighted the neglect of the study of the social and power relations embedded in visual archives – such as advertising, artworks, photography and movies (Cresswell and Dixon, 2002; Aitken and Craine, 2005). In more recent years, critical attention has been paid to the visual 'spaces of display and performance' of, for example, art galleries, museums and the theatre (Blunt, 2003: 85; see also the 'Performance, Spectacle and Power' chapter). Yet, despite this, as Cresswell and Dixon (2002) note in their geographical engagement with film, we do not possess the same critical faculties when reading vision as we do when reading the written word (for valuable work outside of geography on film and representation, see: Jowett and Linton, 1989; and Carnes, 1996). Rob Bartram (2003: 150) outlines the resulting key challenge:

while visual imagery has formed a dominant way of expressing geographical knowledges, our interpretation of visual imagery has sometimes lacked a critical awareness: all too often, visual imagery has been used as a straightforward reflection of reality, with no sense of how, when and by whom the image has been produced.

Bartram goes on to highlight how the interpretation of visual imagery is 'intricately linked to philosophical and theoretical debates about the production and experience of culture' and echoes calls made elsewhere for a systematic and critical engagement

with all forms of visual sources (2003: 158; Hannam, 2002b; Aitken and Crane, 2005; Rose, 2007).

Visual methodologies

So what techniques are required for using visual images? Aitken and Craine (2005) employ four types of visual images (art, photography, film and advertising) to offer four different methods of analysis: semiotic; feminist; psychoanalytic; and discourse analysis. Rob Bartram (2003) also presents a succinct and cogent explication of how to carry out a systematic examination of the relationship between *signs* and *signification* at the heart of visual imagery (for useful work outside of geography on representation and visual cultures, see: Lacey, 1998; Alvarado et al., 2000; Thwaites et al., 2002; and Croteau and Hoynes, 2003). Gillian Rose's work on visual imagery, however, is perhaps the most important reference point for historical geographers (Rose, 1996, 2007). In her 2007 comprehensive exploration of *visual methodologies* in geography, she signals the choice of techniques available in the analysis of visual materials: *compositional interpretation*; *content analysis*; *semiology* (or *semiotics*); *psychoanalysis*; and *discourse analysis* (which she outlines as two distinct forms of inquiry – one focused on text and intertextuality, with the other concerned with institutions and ways of seeing). Whatever analytical technique is chosen, she urges the development of a critical visual methodology; one which requires an acknowledgment of 'the differentiated effects of both an image's way of seeing and [our] own' (Rose, 2007: 262).

Rose identifies three *sites* at which the meanings of images are made and effected: 'the site of *production*, the site of the *image or object itself* and the site of *audiencing*' (Rose, 2007: 257). For all three sites, Rose highlights three *modalities* that can be critically read to enable a deeper understanding of any given image: the *technological* modality; the *compositional* modality; and the *social* modality:

The technological concerns the tools and equipment used to make, structure and display an image; the compositional concerns the visual construction, qualities and reception of an image; and the social concerns the social, economic, political and institutional practices and relations that produce, saturate and interpret an image (Rose, 2007: 258).

Although the distinctions drawn above are more fluid in practice (Rose acknowledges that there are many overlaps between sites and modalities), the working paradigm affords a valuable way in which to approach the use of images in historical geographical research.

In practical terms, the useful distinction of three *sites* through which an image's meanings are made allows for specific aspects of an image's (i) construction, (ii) medium and (iii) consumption to be honed in on in accordance with particular research concerns:

(i) In concentrating on the *construction* of the image – how meaning is encoded though the process of production – key basic questions include (see Rose, 2007: 258-259 for a fuller set of starting questions for visual research):

- When was the image made?

- Where was the image made?

- How was the image made?

(ii) When concerned with the image or *medium* itself – its components and characteristics – practical questions we could ask include:

- What are the image's components and how are they arranged?

- What is the vantage point of the image and how is the viewer's eye directed?

- What is the genre of the image and what are its key elements?

(iii) Finally, if the focus of research is the *consumption* of the image – how audiences decode meaning in various ways – useful questions include:

- Who were the original audience(s) for the image?

- How do different audiences interpret the image?

- What were the image's geographies of display and re-display over time?

The specific questions we wish to ask of our evidence may also of course be informed by broader theoretical concerns. If we were using elements of postcolonial theory, for example, our questions might involve teasing out configurations of colonial social binaries. If our archival work was also critically informed by feminist theory, attention might additionally be directed to issues of gendered social hierarchies.

Whatever our theoretical framework, however, a key overarching methodological concern in critically analysing visual archives should be to ask questions of the evidence that seek to historicize, spatialize and contextualize meaning.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to outline some of the key issues in using visual sources in historical geography. Visual archives are rich sources for historical geographers. They provide exciting ways in which to envision and interrogate the human geographies of the past. There are dangers of relying too heavily on visual sources. Hannam (2002b: 190), for example, points to important Marxist and Feminist critiques of abstracting research beyond the realm of material and corporeal conditions when privileging the representational and the symbolic (see also Smith, 1993 and Aitken, 2005). Addressing this issue, Iain Black cites the work of Derek Holdsworth to argue for 'the need to combine analyses of visual evidence with a wider set of documentary sources to develop a fuller understanding of the creation and functioning of built environments in the past' (Holdsworth, 1997; Black, 2003: 489). Indeed, many historical geographers use visual data in conjunction with other forms of written, oral and material sources, especially given that all research contexts are ultimately dependent on limited available evidence; a point taken up in the concluding chapter. The key concern, however, in using visual sources in historical geography is to be systematic and critical in contextualization, interrogation and representation.

Summary

- It is not just in our *depiction* of the past that visual representations can be used; they can also be fruitfully utilized as *sources* in their own right.

- In critical cartography, the work of Brian Harley has demonstrated the various modalities of power and authority that function to script particular social relations.

- In more recent years, *historical GIS* has been used in the study of historical geography in a variety of contexts.

- Images are a rich mine of knowledge in the study of historical geography; in envisioning landscape, for example, a variety of *visual sources* such as paintings, sketches and architectural drawings have been fruitfully engaged.

- In the analysis of images, there are a variety of techniques available such as compositional interpretation; content analysis; feminist analysis; psychoanalysis; semiotics; and discourse analysis.

- Gillian Rose's (2007) useful distinction of three *sites* through which an image's meanings are made allows for specific aspects of an image's (i) construction, (ii) medium and (iii) consumption to be explored.

- A key overarching methodological concern in critically analysing visual images in historical geography should be to ask questions of the evidence that seek to historicize, spatialize and contextualize meaning.

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