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PERCEPTION |
GEOGRAPHY
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ideological cartography of America

hegemony
convention
power
isolation

Latitude:

The four cardinal points are three: South and North.

— Vicente Huidobro, *Altazor*

The continent called America goes far beyond the boundaries of the country so-called America. Martín Waldseemüller, who first depicted it as a piece of land separated from the rest of the world, surrounded by water and consisting of two main extensions of land united by a thin string, was well aware of the continuity of this territory he named after one of its first and most prominent European explorers. Not too long after him Mercator's cylindrical projection of the world was crystallised in the imaginary of every sailor and navigator of the northern hemisphere; it seems it was a commonsense decision to orientate the map to the north. To them we owe this convention and fundamental structure of the world that sometimes appears to be the natural condition of the planet. Every continent and territory, especially in western culture, started to be defined according to this new set of relationships. America was, of course, no exception.

The iconic shape of the continent illustrated in these early maps has developed over the centuries, but its main characteristic of duality has remained intact. Furthermore, history has made out of this dual relationship between north and south a leitmotiv: two cultures in opposition. The map's simple logic of north and south, up and down, has grown into a much more elaborate and subjective interpretation of reality: developed and undeveloped, free and bound, modern and primitive, even good and evil.

Attempts have been made to subvert the hegemony of western cardinal points, and to question the domination of north on top. Joaquín García-Torres was probably one of the first to transform this questioning into a radical critique through the explicit language of drawing; *América invertida*²— South America 'upside down', a simple outline of the continent with a big S on top. *Ameréida* continued García-Torres's rebellious critique in the form of a long collectively-created poem that tells the story and destiny of a continent 'seen from the earth, from the underneath said in a different way, from where Dante comes and the dead reside'.³

The north pointing down, the south pointing up: the popular culture of America's Backyard has its own way of thinking and referring to the north; 'empire' is the most common word. And beyond the geographical expanses and limits, we have come to realise through Hollywood that for 'America' the south is further than it really is or could be, and the north is just a far away country that dissolves into the arctic.

The continuity of the land depicted in the maps is fading away, and the thin string that unites the north and the south seems to be getting thinner and thinner with time.

¹ Vicente Huidobro, *Altazor*, 1931. Wesleyan University Press, 01-01-2003. www.vicentehuidobro.uchile.cl/altazor.htm

² 'I have said School of the South; because our north is the south. There should not be north, to us, but by opposition to our South. That is why we set the map upside down, so we can have a precise idea of our position, and not how the rest of the world wants it.' Joaquín García-Torres, *Universalismo Constructivo*. Poseidón, 1944

³ Written after a long journey through America by founders of the School of Architecture of the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso (Godofredo Iommi, Alberto Cruz, Fabio Cruz, Miguel Eyquem, Michel Deguy, Edison Simons), *Ameréida* was first published in 1967. Spanish version can be found at: www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0047461.pdf

Longitude:

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'
— Lewis Carroll, *Through The Looking Glass*

If maps work as a linguistic sign, the same way as words do, we could suppose that the question is also not about the meaning of these signs, but about 'who masters them'.

The superficially neutral and objective characteristics of maps have been shown not to be so. It is instead the physical relationship we establish with the map, as an object that offers a rationalisation of space, that seduces us into thinking and perceiving this language as being a perfectly accurate presentation of any given territory. By this remarkable capacity of abstraction and objectivation happening at the same time, maps can become a powerful tool for ideology, or at least something incapable of being absolutely neutral. It is only within a certain context of technical possibilities, cultural views, political conditions and economic relationships that a map can arise and become a standard. And at the same time, ironically, it is this quality of free and abstract construction of language that allows mapping to be a critical practice.

Whether it is through technology, its democratisation, the urgency and rise of critical theory and practice of map making, or the interdisciplinary development of cartography, we are now capable of giving new limits and possibilities to the representation of the territories we inhabit. For the first time in a few centuries, we are able to question the formerly unquestioned structure of the world that shaped our relationship with the territory and with ourselves.

Is it possible to use mapping as creative force to depict the hierarchical relationship of dominance that exists between these two parts of the same piece of land called America? Can a map illustrate the way Latinos think about this parted America? Or maybe the way the northern part of America silently fades into the arctic? Or even the way the country so-called 'America' sets itself far away from everything and at the centre of everything? Each constructed territory with its own strong identity, forming a whole, relating to each other, being part of a social superstructure, determines the way we understand reality and the measure of space.

We are confronted with the task of mapping to reveal what is hidden in America, to unveil the internal relationships of dominance that are keeping us away from understanding and embracing the real continuity of the land we live in. It is definitely not up to cartographers, urbanists or architects alone to redefine, through maps, the shape of this new America: 'Interrupting my train of thought, Lines of longitude and latitude, Define and refine my altitude', as the band Wire used to sing, might give us some hints about our position and how to move. □