
COMMENTARY

Myth, Artifice, Nets

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In chapter 1 of their new volume *The Natures of Maps* (2008), Denis Wood and John Fels argue that maps about nature are constructed in a very specific way. Their subtle and often radical argument traces the following path. First, maps are ideological vehicles for making ontological claims about the nature of existence. Maps achieve this through the use of semiotics, or sign-systems.

Second, maps are demonstrated by Wood and Fels to be texts, whose ideologies are conveyed by way of the “stuff” around and within the map. In this way, an “epimap” is added to a “perimap” to make a “paramap,” which fixes perception upon the second-order message of the map, not just the map itself. The early work of Roland Barthes makes an appearance here: the structural Barthes interested in structural analyses of texts, narratives, and photographs (Saper 1997).

Third, Wood and Fels situate the nature of mapping and its particular grammar within the human brain. They describe mappings as akin to neuronal linkages in the brain, the same linkages responsible for the human ability to formulate sentences with subjects, objects, predicates, and verbs. Map meanings are thus constructed from heterogeneous assemblages of grammar-like map elements. These are the facts of mapping, and, as such, they are the ontics in Wood and Fels’ argument. Ontics, the scientific facts, generally follow from a ground or horizon of possibility, which is referred to as ontology (Crampton 2003). It would seem that Wood and Fels are making this philosophical move from ontological to ontic.

Fourth, eight natures of maps are posited. The eight natures of maps serve as a framework for a categorization of maps. This categorization is deemed necessary within the perspectivist project for which the first chapter of the volume, and the subject of this review, serves as

introduction. The eight categories are a net, or a range of angles, intended to capture a nature of the “natures of maps.” The tautological nature of this argument is bested in different places in different ways, from obscure but charming (avuncular) (Koch 2001) ramblings about spelling bees to vague adumbrations about the deeper artistic values that reside within satellite photos.

My aim here is to demonstrate that Wood and Fels’s argument relies upon a set of assumptions (one for each of the four parts of their text) that do not quite do justice to the subject material, namely, the nature(s) of maps. I first outline my hesitations and disagreements. Following this initial sketch, I proceed to a deeper synthesis of my own argument *vis-à-vis* Wood and Fels’s musings by way of brief (and ultimately positive) conclusion.

Wood and Fels rely on the metaphysics of presence (Keulartz 1998) in order for their ontological claims about nature to work. They also produce a structural, semiotic argument influenced by early Barthes to produce a theory of how maps work. This theory is, furthermore, reliant upon a paradigm of linear communication that flows from cartographer to map reader. Wood and Fels’s argument makes factual claims that too quickly posit *a priori* judgments about the seat of human mapping capabilities. Finally, the eight categories of map nature are missing a ninth category I deem very important: nature as human. In this last category I would include Indigenous peoples, their activity on the land from time immemorial, and their curious erasure from cartographic accountings. To be sure, Wood and Fels have addressed this concern elsewhere (Wood 1992). If they are aware of the exclusion or “mapping out” of Indigenous people from maps, why do they so problematically recapitulate this exclusion in the present work?

The horizon of possibility for the map lies in the history of mappings, not in the human brain (Pickles 2004; Crampton 2003). Furthermore, the move to maps as power (brain-power) is, as in their earlier *The Power of Maps* (Wood 1992), too quick and too easy (Pickles 2004). Important junctures and problematizations in mapping practices are missed. Thus, Wood and Fels uncover or unmask the power of what is already there without examining how what is there got to be there (power as effect) or how what is there is proximate to what is excluded, or what is not there. The post-structuralist thought and writing of Michel Foucault (problematizations) and Jacques Derrida (challenging the metaphysics of presence) would be useful here. As Wood and Fels themselves note, we need to extend the initial (and failed) attempt of J.B. Harley himself to deconstruct the map (1989).

The “native” is alluded to as “nature wants to be just-born, the innate, the native, the naïve, the untutored, the untaught, the unsophisticated, the unpolluted, the apolitical”; in other words, nature (and the “native”) is the “noble savage.” The concept of “noble savage” is challenged by Wood and Fels, but there remains an un-teased-out knot of assumptions. For instance, later on the authors discuss ginseng culling without any reference to the people who might cull ginseng. It makes all the difference who you are when you are in a place that either allows or prohibits ginseng culling. Who is displaced by ginseng culling is another matter entirely, one caught up in many contingencies, such as the history of settlement in the area, the local race relations, and the rationale behind the creation of a park. This is the problem with metaphysics in radical ecological thinking: presence blinds us to absence, it makes us positivists all over again, despite best efforts to challenge and blur our boundaries and the grounding of our thought.

In short, the ground of possibility for an ideology of maps is cleared, but insufficiently, and in a problematic way. The ontology cannot support the ontics that follow, for the reasons outlined above.

Wood and Fels, however, do a very good job of outlining the structures necessary for creating ideology and meaning in maps. The tools of early Barthes are especially appropriate for this task (as Wood has always known), and the authors rightly point out that many of Barthes’s concepts (such as the relay) transcend the early/late Barthes distinction (see also Saper 1997 for a discussion of early and late Barthes).

However, the authors miss the specifics about humans as part of nature. Nonetheless, this is a humanist rendering of the nature of maps. Humanity has progressed, as a species, from viewing nature as a categorical threat. Nature as threat (the authors’ second category of nature) is subsumed into many other perspectives: nature as threatened (by humans), nature as spectacle, nature as

cornucopia, and many others. Humans now rationalize, and even ration, nature, both externally (in the form of parks and nature preserves) and internally (our brains are constructed as maps). The internal construction of brains as maps is fascinating, but beyond the scope of this paper. However, it would be interesting to have included a chapter on how humans are physically constructed in map-like ways. This would touch on medical imaging of brains, on pathways in the human body, and on ways that humans move (in nature). Thus nature would, again in line with post-structuralism, be envisioned as a performative, material extension of the body.

Gerald Edelman, in *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire* (1992), looks at brains as maps with layers that communicate back and forth in a way he refers to as “re-entry mapping.” What would it be like to view nature as another layer of human construction, one that we “re-enter” each time we go into a park, when we pass the sign telling us the name of the park, its history, and some of the plants and animals that help construct the space we are about to enter? These specificities are only hinted at in the introductory chapter, but the anticipation is palpable. I can’t wait to get past this entry gate, to get into the rest of the book, see its sights, hear its sounds, and experience what it has to offer.

True to their own stated aims, Wood and Fels embrace the ambiguity surrounding maps, at the same time spelling out quite clearly how that which surrounds the map (the *epimap*) contains many specificities that combine with the image of the map itself (the *perimap*) to create an overall *paramap*. This is a wonderful and very useful way of seeing maps, because it explains so much, while leaving the mystery and magic of maps intact. We don’t know with certainty what the epimap for any given map will be beforehand: it could be the library we are working in, the person who hands us the map, the paper it is printed on, or the book in which the map is contained, with its specific bindings, smells, and reflectances. But once the map is in your hands (or on your screen), your perceptions move closer in, they start work in a focused way. How does this happen? Wood and Fels apply semiotic theory of texts to maps, showing that maps and texts operate in a parallel way. It is the paramap, or the combination of the inside and the outside of the map, that fixes perception and creates ideology.

Maps are thus relational, and they include, but are not limited to, objects, images, people, and, indeed, nature. And nature is indeed constructed through, by, and around maps. People carry maps around while walking in the forest, while looking for things, even while looking for food – paper maps as well as virtual maps. GPS holds its own maps, shrinks the piece of the world we are interested in down to a space the size of a cell-phone (or slightly larger) for visualization of surroundings. By necessity, and even more in virtual map worlds, there are exclusions. It is not possible, nor is it desirable,

to see every layer that exists. Even if we had the data, it would be a mess. So there are exclusions, and they are strategic. There is only so much time to see that extraordinary site (maybe it is a red sandstone arch, maybe it is an abandoned village, it could be a waterfall) that, until now, we've only gazed at virtually, from the comfort of home. The brilliance of Wood and Fels's contribution is that it envisions all of this activity as part of the map. Neither the map nor the territory is favoured. Perceptions are fixed in multiple ways, multiple times, and in space. And it is different each time.

Mental space is indeed influenced by culture as well, as the authors note. This brief glimpse may also structure the whole book, and it may fix perception in a very North American way. North America is proud (and rightfully so, to a great extent) of its national parks, which owe much of their existence to a strong tradition of conservation among powerful (and rugged) individuals in the history of the United States. Grand Canyon National Park probably epitomizes this fact more than any other. The paramap, the fixing of perception around the Grand Canyon as it exists now, is another question entirely, and depends on whether you look at it from the north or from the south. If you've ever been there, you'll know what I mean. But the thing you notice when you're there, the thing that hits you like a sledgehammer, is how empty it is. The sheer volume of absence is overwhelming. Now think of the same thing, but place it (in your mind) in Ethiopia. It becomes something entirely different. The latter location is intensely human, and fraught with struggle that has been occurring for a very long time. That, indeed, is also staggering.

I applaud Wood and Fels for their achievement in this piece. I look forward with intense expectation to the rest

of the book. I can't wait to see these paradigms of nature before me in all their splendour, to think, to fantasize, to imagine, going there. Since I was a young child I've loved maps, in a way so deep that I can't really explain it. I can only hope, and I am indeed confident, that the writings of Wood and Fels promote that kind of deep love of maps in others. This is the kind of love of maps that gets you out there, makes you move, makes you question, allows you, almost asks you, to see things in an entirely new and wonderful way.

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