Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat
(eds)

An Atlas of Radical Cartography

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This little book of essays and maps has become something of a cult classic and a collector’s item for aficionados of the alt-mapping scene since its publication in 2008. The atlas was produced by a group of artists and academics around the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest based in Los Angeles. They published nine issues, including this one, before closing in 2015. All the issues sold out and none of them are available online (or at the British Library). This publication history suggests a vibrant cartographic subculture, influenced in this case by a heady mixture of post-structural theory and community activism, especially around environmental issues. At the same time it was a subculture which lacked the kind of social and institutional embedding that would have sustained it over and against the darkening horizon of US political culture.

The contents reflect both the geographical diversity of the contributors and their commitment to the notion of a radical cartographic praxis which combines a critical inquiry with political engagement. In their editorial, Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat define radical cartography as ‘the practice of map making that subverts conventional notions in order to actively promote social change’. There are essays and maps about squatters’ settlements in Kolkata, a project on urban waste with New York High School Students carried out by the Centre for Urban Pedagogy, a cartographic thought experiment which imagines Latin America without
national boundaries, and a project by a German architectural collective about migration into Fortress Europe.

Globalisation and its local discontents is an important theme for several of the contributors. There is an essay in associative geography by Lize Mogel and Sarah Lewison, superimposing the Panama Canal and the North-West Passage onto the Bay area in San Francisco to suggest the translocality of place identities in the global city. There are two resource maps, at very different scales, one examining the US Oil Fix in terms of global flows of production and consumption and another the intimate trajectories of the water cycle in the Los Angeles area. Finally, the counter-mapping of power is explored in Trevor Paglen’s cartography of CIA Rendition Flights and a map of police cameras in Manhattan, indicating some ‘routes of least surveillance’.

The maps come in folded form to accompany the slim volume of essays, the whole somewhat precariously held together in a rather flimsy cover. Together, the essays provide useful contextual information about the subject matter of the maps, although they vary considerably in their conceptual sophistication. Some essays are descriptive commentaries on topographical or thematic features, others have more analytic ambitions. Compared with Rebecca Solnit’s Atlases of San Francisco, New Orleans and New York (see review in LMR2), this atlas lacks the shock effect of juxtaposing different kinds of cartographic
information or the illumination that comes from bringing together different perspectives on the same place.

In some cases the maps are graphic illustrations of an argument developed in the accompanying essay. I particularly enjoyed Jane Tsong’s lyrical depictions, drawing (on) water in Los Angeles. Others are exegetical and indeed could be regarded as conceptual diagrams rather than thematic maps. A good example is the map of waste disposal processes in New York by the Centre for Urban Pedagogy. Its depiction of the space of flows both locates the political and economic interests at work in how the city authority manages waste and includes pinportraits and personal statements from a range of environmental and community activists who are concerned to reduce urban waste as part of a wider strategy to green the city. The map of the US Oil Fix is another example of this approach.

The most ambitious conceptual map is by Avery Gordon. His eponymous world map sets out to produce a comprehensive model of contemporary capitalism drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system theory, to depict the interaction between its modes of production, circulation, distribution and exchange and their contradictory impact on political, cultural and social life in advanced western countries. As he says in his introduction, the map is deliberately unreadable, you cannot take it in at a glance, nor can you, initially at least, make sense of the inter-connections it proposes. The map’s legibility is not enhanced by the dense Marxist jargon which populates it, much of it culled from David Harvey, garnished with a bit of Hardt and Negri, plus some early Manuel Castells and late Henri Lefebvre thrown in for good measure. The voluminous text is also written in very small type….

How exactly this map is meant to be read is not clear; the arrows point in what seems to be largely arbitrary and haphazard directions. If only the author had provided another map to help us find our way round this one! It is also somewhat strange, given that its date of publication that nowhere does this map, or any of the other contributions, highlight the chaotic flows of finance capital and debt speculation which led to the subprime mortgage crisis and global meltdown in the money markets.

The editors suggest that across these diverse contributions, there is a single overarching problematic: to create a cartography which renders the invisible visible, whether this is the more hidden structures of oppression and exploitation to be found in the political economy of capitalism, or the lives and voices of those who are marginalised by these same structures. To make this double rendition work in a single map requires a great deal of cartographic imagination, not to mention technical ingenuity. Laura Kurgan managed it triumphantly in Close Up at a Distance (reviewed in LMR 1). Trevor Paglen comes nearest to it in his
contribution ‘Mapping Ghosts’ with its intimations of the spatial uncanny, but otherwise, and with the partial exception of the CUP map, we have to be content with worthy, but somewhat prosaic sketches of how the personal and the political interact.

Nevertheless, as a snapshot of a particular, largely West Coast, cartographic culture, this book is a valuable addition to the counter-mapper’s library, albeit one which few, if any, readers of this journal will now be able to afford. The original print run was small and, given its current scarcity value, you can only buy it on Amazon for an exorbitant price—anything between £160 and £230. This is somewhat ironical given its radical credentials but there is a website www.an-atlas.com where you can access excerpts from the maps and short extracts from the essays, which at least gives a flavour of the thing.