

ASSESSING THE CONCEPTUAL “GOODNESS” OF GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS FOR FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Geographic mental maps have been called on numerous times in explaining foreign policy decisions. However, mental maps lack a serious conceptualising endeavour in order to be useful to scientific inquiry. Before we can use mental maps to understand and compare foreign policy making processes we must define mental maps and frame them in their wider intellectual context. In this paper we develop geographic mental maps as an analytical concept and assess their conceptual “goodness” so they can contribute to enriching the scope of the foreign policy analysis toolbox.

Key words: cognition, concept formation, foreign policy analysis, geographic mental maps

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INTRODUCING GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS IN FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

It has long been understood that the way individuals perceive their geographic environment is important to foreign policy decision-making and policy-making. Halford Mackinder, the pater familias of modern geopolitics, recognized almost a century ago that each era has its own particular geographic perspective:

The influence of geographical conditions upon human activities has depended, however, not merely on the realities as we know them to be and to have been, but in even greater degree on what men imagined in regard to them. (Mackinder, 1996: 21)

This view was perpetuated throughout numerous geographic treatises in the following decades. The perceptions of geographic configurations and geographic patterns of history assumed a heightened relevance for geographers in explaining the interaction between states:

It is clear that although each individual, each generation, and each government develops its own particular view of the world, as a result of geographical location and historical tradition, there are a number of major perceptions which have persisted over long periods and exercised great influence upon strategic thinking and political behaviour. Sometimes it has

been a map constructed on a particular projection that has served generations of statesmen as the basis of political and military planning. Sometimes it has been a compelling theory of spatial relationships and historical causation that has moulded the viewpoint and action of political leaders. (Kirk, quoted in Sloan 1988: 15)

Despite the continued clamour of the importance of the role of geographic cognition on policy-making throughout the 20th century, very little theoretical development and empirical evidence has been presented to endorse such claims. With the exception of a few ground-breaking studies treating foreign policy issues, the study of geographic cognition evolved along very different trajectories, leaving explanations of inter-state relations for others theorists to explain. It was only in the 1980s that a systematic effort to “operationalise” the concept of geographic mental maps¹ in foreign policy analysis (FPA) was undertaken, beginning with Alan Henrikson’s (1980) essay *The Geographical “Mental Maps” of American Foreign Policy Makers* (see Criekmans, 2009; da Vinha, 2010; O’Loughlin and Grant, 1990).

The last decades have tenuously furthered this line of investigation. Predictably, most of those who have adopted this approach have naturally been geographers. International Relations (IR) theorists have occasionally dallied with geographic mental maps but without contributing significantly to the theoretical development of the concept. While some studies dedicated to geographic cognition have been published in recent years (see Akçali, 2010; Bilgin, 2004; Glassman, 2005; Latham, 2001; Le Rider, 2008; Scheffler, 2003; Walker, 2000), most have tended to focus on regional perspectives. Other works, while more global in scope (see Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Lewis and Wigen, 1997; Sloan, 1988), have not focused directly on the way that geographic mental maps inform the decision-making processes, rather concentrating on the way geographic constructions justify foreign policy decisions.

In fact, some of the epistemological propositions stressed by the earlier studies on mental maps have come under criticism from critical geopolitics. Klaus Dodds (1994) has questioned the geographic practice of representing the political world, specifically calling on critical and post-structuralist theories to point out that “‘geography’ (or ‘IR’) as a technology or an academic discipline is not simply about ‘geographing’ or ‘earth-writing’, i.e., a practice whereby geographers simply record the already legible surfaces of the earth” (Dodds, 1994: 187). According to Dodds, discourses of geographic representations are frequently central to the legitimisation of foreign policies which fix the boundaries between “Us” and “Others”.

Critical geopolitics has thus focused on exploring how foreign policy professionals represent political space according to their position in the world². This differs from previous research according to Dodds (1994: 197) who criticizes

¹ The term “cognitive maps” has also been applied to describe geographic cognitive constructions. However, the term “mental map” will be used in this research proposal in order to avoid confusion with the concept of “cognitive map” as applied by Robert Axelrod (1976) and which refers to a mathematical model of a person’s belief system, illustrated by a pictorial representation of the causal assertion of a person as a graph of points and arrows.

² However, more recent research labelled critical geopolitics has centred its attention on “geopolitical cultures” and their commonsensical expression in television, films, novels, and newspapers, as well as in the formal education system and the customary politics of ordinary nationalism (Atkinson and Dodds, 2000).

Henrikson’s work on mental maps for having “little recognition that the observer might be implicated within these observations or that it might be reasonably problematic in assuming one could (re)present the activities of others”. Consequently, scholars committed to critical geopolitics have developed much of the work on geographic representations in foreign policy. Relying on discourse analysis and similar methods, the central assertion of critical geopolitics is “that geography is a social and historical discourse which is always bound up with questions of politics and ideology” (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1998: 79). More specifically:

Fundamental to this process is the power of certain national security elites to represent the nature and defining dilemmas of international politics in particular ways. From a geographical perspective this can be described as their power to write international political space by constituting, defining and describing security, threats and perceived enemies in regularized ways. These representational practices of national security intellectuals generate particular “scripts” in international politics concerning places, people and issues. Such scripts then become part of the means by which hegemony (in the Gramscian sense) is exercised in the international system. (Ó Tuathail, 1992: 438)

However, more recently, some research has re-turned to analysing the mental maps of particular decision-makers, or decision-making groups, revealing their world-views and the way these ultimately affect their foreign policy decisions (Casey and Wright, 2008; 2011; Henrikson, 2008). It is precisely in this context that the current paper is framed. With its focus on the discourses and representations of geographic space, critical geopolitics undeniably treads common ground with the mental map research program. Both highlight the representational dimensions of geographic phenomena in foreign policy, emphasizing the subjective and plastic nature of geographic knowledge. However, rather than focus on the discursive practices that decision-makers employ to justify and legitimatise particular policies³, my interest is on how geographic representations influence the decision-making process. In the end, we are much more concerned with how a foreign policy decision was achieved than with the resulting policy.

Consequently, several issues need to be addressed beforehand. Despite the various efforts to clarify and explain the conceptual framework underlying the geographic mental map research agenda, there still persists a good deal of theoretical bewilderment. The concept of geographic mental map has diverged considerably in its definition and numerous methodological approaches have been undertaken. A scholarly compromise has yet to be established. The mental map lacks a serious conceptualising effort. Accordingly, the geographic mental map, as an analytical concept, needs to be clarified in order to be useful to scientific inquiry. Furthermore, geographic mental maps must be distinguished from other cognitive approaches so that they are not understood as just another name for an already existing concept.

³ It is worth stating that much of the work done under the rubric of critical geopolitics has lost some of this character. According to Dalby (2010: 281) the recent proliferation of scholarly research has implied that “the focus on critique, deconstruction and strategic discourses... has been diluted and stretched as the label ‘critical geopolitics’ has been applied to numerous matters of war, politics, culture, representation, identity, economy, resources, resistance, gender, development, fear, emotional geographies and related matters”.

In the following pages we will look to examine some of these issues. To begin with, the geographic mental map will be defined as an analytical concept. This implies clarifying some of the conceptual misunderstandings which have accompanied mental maps in the last decades and make it difficult to distinguish them from other similar concepts – e.g., “cognitive geopolitics” (Criekemans, 2009), “geopolitical codes” (Dijkink, 1998), “geopolitical images” (O’Loughlin and Grant, 1990), “geopolitical imaginary” (Latham, 2001), “geopolitical imagination” (Agnew, 2003), “geopolitical scripts” (Ó Tuathail, 2002), “imaginative geographies” (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007), “metageographies” (Lewis and Wigen, 1997), and “role concept” (Mauß, 2000).

Subsequently, we will try to place mental maps in an appropriate research program. In accordance with its main attributes and characteristics, geographic mental maps will be framed in the cognitive research agenda for they share many of the fundamental postulations that permeate other cognitive approaches. Nevertheless, geographic mental maps have geography as their particular distinguishing quality. Accordingly, the third section of this paper analyses how the different geographic attributes distinguish mental maps from other analytical concepts. Finally, we will assess the “goodness” of the conceptualisation of the mental map developed throughout this paper. More precisely, we will evaluate if geographic mental maps possess the attributes identified by Gerring (1999) and which contribute to a high-quality concept.

DEFINING GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS

Despite Henrikson’s (1980) initial conceptualising effort, very little research has since been devoted to developing geographic mental maps as an analytical concept. While it is relatively effortless to encounter numerous references to mental maps throughout the foreign policy literature, they are rarely developed in any theoretical detail. In an effort to broaden its range of application, mental maps have become subject to an exercise of “conceptual stretching” which reveals no analytical precision whatsoever (see Sartori, 1970). As stated elsewhere, “the geographic ‘mental map’ is still used as a catch-all term with only very vague notions of its conceptual underpinnings” (da Vinha, 2010: 61). While I am certainly not against some explanatory leeway, a concept which is too inclusive presents a serious predicament for scientific enquiry. As Moscovici (2000: 30) has hinted, “by attempting to include too much, one grasps little”.

Concepts are fundamental elements for the development of the social sciences. Yet many scholarly endeavours have overlooked the need for proper conceptualisation and advanced to determining measurements and causal inferences (Goertz, 2005; Munck and Verkuilen, 2002). The search to uncover the “what is” question has often been superseded by the determination to discover the “how much” character of a phenomenon. This, however, has not aided in developing and promoting the research on mental maps in any way. We must recall that we can never measure or compare anything satisfactorily without first knowing exactly what it is we are measuring or comparing (Goertz, 2005; Sartori, 1970). As a result, we should proceed to conceptualise geographic mental maps in a way which can comprise the following essential aspects of concept formation (Gerring, 1999): 1) the events or phenomena to be defined (i.e., the extension, denotation, or definiendum); 2) the defining properties or attributes (i.e., intension, connotation, definiens, or definitions); and 3) a label encompassing the preceding two aspects.

This does not imply that we should discard previous scholarly endeavours. On the contrary, much gratitude is due to those who have already contributed extensive scholarly labour in developing the mental map concept for application to international politics, in particular to FPA. For instance, the Sprout's (Sprout and Sprout, 1957; 1960; 1965) work is undeniably a major contribution to the scholarship on mental maps. The Sprouts parted with the traditional realist perspective centred on the acceptance of the existence of “real world” to which decision-makers reacted. On the contrary, they proposed that “the real world may exist, but its ‘true’ characteristics are unknown or unknowable to the envired individuals” (Sprout and Sprout, 1965: 119). As a result of this shortcoming, the Sprouts argued that “what matters in the explanation of decisions and policies is how the actor imagined his environment to be” (Sprout and Sprout, 1960: 147).

Though many of the Sprout's theoretical propositions resonated with many IR scholars in the following decades, it was Henrikson's *The Geographical “Mental Maps” of American Foreign Policy Makers*, published in 1980, that first applied the geographic mental map as a conceptual instrument for FPA. Acknowledging that traditional political science has long been ill-equipped to deal with the geographic perceptions underlying foreign policy decisions, Henrikson (1980) contends that the mental map allows for a better comprehension of how individuals make sense of different spatial relationships. With the intention of providing a functional framework for analytical purposes, Henrikson expanded the conceptual knowledge of geographic mental maps, first by identifying the formational factors subjacent to mental maps – i.e., the maps cognitive base and a person's world-view (or *Weltanschauung*) – and then by describing the appropriate methods for analysing an individual's mental maps – the geographic mind and the geographic field.

Borrowing from Downs and Stea's (2005) earlier work, Henrikson (1980: 498) defined geographic mental maps as “an ordered but continually adapting structure of the mind – alternatively conceivable as a process – by reference to which a person acquires, codes, stores, recalls, reorganizes, and applies, in thought or action, information about his or her large-scale geographical environment, in part or in its entirety”. In this sense mental maps are cognitive processes that structure geographic information in order for individuals to understand their environment, relate it to their prior experience, and make it susceptible to problem-solving activities.

However, this is a rather limited definition since it reveals nothing about the function and utility of geographic mental maps as an instrument for FPA. As a result, we must advance our definition to encompass greater analytical convenience. More precisely, geographic mental maps, are useful for revealing “the awareness, images, information, impressions, and beliefs that individuals and groups have about the elemental, structural, functional, and symbolic aspects of real and imagined physical, social, cultural, economic, and political environments” (Moore and Golledge, 1976: 5). In this sense, they “refer not only to information, with its implication of truth and validity, but also to admittedly subjective beliefs based on partial, incomplete, or intentionally misleading information” (Moore and Golledge, 1976: 5). Put very simply, a geographic mental map is a cognitive representation which encloses an individual or group's beliefs about the geographic character of a particular place or places and their relationship to other places or spatial phenomena.

While clearly underdeveloped in terms of their structures and processes, geographic mental maps are commonly regarded as fundamental to foreign policy decision-making (Best, 2008; Casey, 2008; Casey and Wright, 2008; 2011; Henrikson, 1980; Latham, 2001; Sloan, 1988; Sprout and Sprout, 1965; Walker, 2000). Even while recognizing that geographic mental maps are prone to numerous distortions, few authors would contest that “the decisions that lead to political action, however, are taken in the more amorphous, nuanced world of the mental map” (Henrikson, 1980: 497). Political decision-makers have to make decisions based on information and events that are generally outside their national or even regional contexts. Therefore, mental maps are “systems of orientation” which are used for guidance in foreign policy-making (Henrikson, 1980; 2002).

To make sense of the diversity and complexity of the political world, decision-makers rely on simplified representations or mental models (Barr et al., 1992; George, 1969; Golledge and Stimson, 1997; Holsti, 1976; Sapienza, 1987). No one individual can encompass the complexity of the world in its entirety (Lowenthal, 1961). Scientific studies have established that individuals and groups have cognitive spatial constructs which they use to simplify reality and aid political decision-making (Golledge, 2002; Henrikson, 1980; Mark et al., 1999). Consequently, “the beliefs that compromise these [mental] maps provide the individual with a more or less coherent way of organizing and making sense out of what would otherwise be a confusing array of signals picked up from the environment by his senses” (Holsti, 2006: 34).

More precisely, decision-makers act with regard to their perceived geographic context, meaning “what matters in the explanation of decisions and policies is how the actor imagined his environment to be, not how it actually was” (Sprout and Sprout, 1960: 147). Accordingly, different actors can respond differently to the same event in the international environment (Bilgin, 2004; Gould and White, 1974; Jervis, 1976; Kiesler and Sproull, 1982). As a result, mental maps are essential to policy-making in the sense that they are a “critical component of general spatial problem-solving activity” (Golledge and Stimson, 1997: 239). By informing decision-makers about particular geographic contexts and relationships, mental maps contribute to the process of spatial choice inherent in foreign policy decision-making.

LOCATING GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS IN THE COGNITIVE RESEARCH AGENDA

According to the aforementioned conceptualisation, geographic mental maps should be framed within the cognitive research agenda in FPA. Recent decades have witnessed the development of a considerable amount of research applying a wide variety of concepts, theoretical foundations, subjects, and “data-making” operations, making the cognitive approach to IR an eclectic research field (Holsti, 2006). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify the central postulations that permeate the cognitive research agenda in FPA. According to Tetlock and McGuire Jr. (1999) there are two key assumptions underlying the core of the cognitive research agenda:

- 1) The international environment imposes heavy information-processing demands upon policymakers. It is very difficult to identify the best or utility-maximizing solutions to most foreign policy problems. Policymakers must deal with incomplete and unreliable information on the intentions and capabilities of other states. The range of response options is indeterminate.

The problem consequences of each option are shrouded in uncertainty. Policymakers must choose among options that vary on many, seemingly incommensurable value dimensions (e.g., economic interests, international prestige, domestic political advantages, human rights, even lives). Finally, to compound the difficulty of the task, policymakers must sometimes work under intense stress and time pressure.

2) Policymakers (like all human beings) are limited-capacity information processors who resort to simplifying strategies to deal with the complexity, uncertainty, and painful trade-offs with which the world confronts them. The foreign policy of a nation addresses itself, not the external world per se, but to the simplified image of the external world constructed in the mind of those who make policy decisions. Policymakers may behave “rationally” (attempt to maximize expected utility) but only within the context of their simplified subjective representations of reality. (Tetlock and McGuire Jr., 1999: 505-506)

From these key assumptions the authors identify the cognitive research program’s central research objective as the understanding of the “cognitive strategies that policymakers rely upon to construct and maintain their simplified images of the environment” (Tetlock and McGuire Jr., 1999: 506). They further distinguish between two types of cognitive strategies in their effort to simplify the understanding of how the different cognitive dimensions involved foreign policymaking function. The first strategy corresponds to representational research, which relies on cognitive or knowledge structures that provide the framework for assimilating new informational inputs and choosing between the diverse policy options. Above all, these studies look to explain what policymakers think. This entails understanding their assumptions about themselves, other states, inter-state relationships, the goals and/or values underlying foreign policy, and the types of policies most helpful to achieving those goals or values. Some of the concepts most readily applied to describe these cognitive structures are “operational codes”, “cognitive maps”, “images”, “schemas”, “stereotypes”, “scripts”, “frames”, and “prototypes”.

The second strategy embodies process research, with its central focus on identifying the abstract laws of cognitive functioning that clarify how policymakers think about issues. The bulk of this research looks to comprehend the rules or procedures that are subjacent to the policymaking decision process. Some of the most significant lines of research in the process strategy are on the fundamental attribution error, extracting lessons from history, avoidance of value trade-offs, the policy-freezing effects of commitment, and crisis decision-making. Accordingly, in all these cases “the cognitive miser image of the decision maker serves as leitmotif: policymakers often seem unwilling or unable to perform the demanding information-processing tasks required by normative models of judgment and choice” (Tetlock and McGuire Jr., 1999: 511).

PLACING GEOGRAPHY IN THE MENTAL MAP CONCEPT

Several colleagues have questioned us about what’s so exceptional about “geographic” mental maps? To be more precise, we have often been interrogated as to whether including the word “geographic” is not just another meaningless terminological concoction which merely retitles an already existing concept? The common reservation is “what does the geographic mental map have to offer FPA that hasn’t already been accomplished using other analytical concepts such as the operational code, cognitive map, or schema theory”? While initially taken aback by

such queries, we have repeatedly contested that the change of terminology denotes in fact a genuine change of perspective – i.e., a geographic perspective.

While the cognitive research agenda has witnessed the development of a wide assortment of models and methods of analysis and explanation, the geographic dimensions associated with cognition remain clearly lacking. When geography is emphasized in FPA it is almost always acknowledged as an essentially spatial feature. Despite the fact that there has been a recent renewal of interest in geography within IR, the discipline has yet to “develop a sophisticated understanding of the term” (Flint et al., 2009: 827). Therefore, the themes of physical distance, contiguity, location, and the physical features of the terrain continue to prevail in the majority of the academic research.

To be sure, as Henrikson (1980: 507) has noted, geography is rarely the decisive factor in determining international politics. But it would be imprudent to dismiss geography altogether, for IR scholars have long acknowledged that decision-makers act with regard to their perceived geographic context, i.e., psycho-milieu (Sprout and Sprout, 1960; see also Golledge and Stimson, 1997; Jervis, 1976; Moore and Golledge, 1976; Sloan, 1988). Nevertheless, geography’s spatial attributes have been the overriding concern for those researchers attentive to geographic variables in their studies. Of the numerous spatial attributes (or “spatial primitives”) identified by Golledge (1995), only a few have been of interest to IR scholars – i.e., location, distance, order, density, and dispersion.

Several significant studies have recently been published that buttress this point (Colaesi et al., 2007; Mearsheimer, 2007; Starr, 2005; Walt, 1985). In fact, distance has traditionally been the dominant geographic attribute for IR and FPA (Henrikson, 2002). Geographic proximity has long been considered a highly relevant factor in international conflict. Several studies applying formal analytical models have determined that “there can be little doubt that the effect of state-to-state contiguity on the occurrence of war is quite strong” (Bremer, 1992: 327). When considering the main factors contributing to international threats, Walt (1985: 10) has reinforced this conviction by supporting that “because the ability to project power declines with distance, states that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away”.

There is no denying the importance of the spatial attributes for IR and FPA, but the scope of geographic mental maps surpasses this narrow analytical dimension. They inevitably must focus on all the geographic dimensions. Ultimately, this implies defining the object of geographic research – an endeavour that has spurred controversy since the dawn of the discipline (Claval, 2006). Though this task clearly exceeds the intentions of the current paper, a few considerations must be made in order to truly comprehend the scope of geographic mental maps and their value for FPA.

Accordingly, we can only benefit from geographic knowledge when we approach geography from a holistic perspective. This implies that we cannot submit to partial perspectives in geography. If it is impossible to reach a consensual definition of geography, it is however possible to identify three core concepts which have permeated geographic thought throughout the ages – i.e., space, place, and environment (Massey, 1994; Matthews and Herbert, 2008). As pointed out above, the concept of geographic space has long been embraced by IR. Even the vastly multifaceted concept of environment has been gaining considerable terrain in IR and FPA, namely through the ecopolitics and critical geopolitics research agenda.

Yet the concept of place has not been central to IR research. Indeed, “place” is as disputed a concept as you can find in the social sciences. It is in the context of Human Geography that the concept of place is usually attributed great significance, and for “many geographers, place and the difference between places are the stuff of Geography, the raw materials that gives the discipline its warrant” (Gregory et al., 2009: 539). Defining place is certainly no easy undertaking. Staeheli (1993) identifies five conceptualisations of place – 1) place as physical location or site; 2) place as a cultural and/or a social location; 3) place as context; 4) place as constructed over time; and 5) place as process. In the first approach, place is featureless point of reference that locates one position in relation to another. In contrast, place held as cultural or social location suggests that the local cultural, social, economic, and political networks help shape people’s identities. In a similar fashion, place as context attributes identities to particular places and spaces, rather than people. As opposed to identity-in-place (as in the previous conceptualisation), the contextual perspective favours identity-of-place. Another conceptualization further develops this reasoning, introducing the factor of time. Accordingly, in this perspective place is a dynamic concept which is subjected to the historic layering of human activity. Finally, when place is conceptualised as a social process it breaks with the prior perspectives of place as a product. As a result, the emphasis is on the process of social construction of place, namely those operating at different scales. Accordingly, place is perceived as “intricately binding locales with broad processes and with other locales” (Staeheli, 1993: 163).

Despite the peculiarities inherent in each approach, the dominant feature underlying the different conceptualisations presented by Staeheli (1993) – with the exception of the first – is the unmistakable attribution of meaning to place. In each of these conceptualisations place is imbued with symbolic social significance. Ultimately, the use of place “provides a context for the formation of political identities and the identification of political interests” (Jones et al., 2004: 99).

These conceptualisations do not deny the existence and value of the physical landscape. Rather, they imply that “a landscape has no meaningful shape and significance until it is accorded place and identity in the social and cognitive worlds of human experience” (Helms, 1988: 20). Moreover, the conception of place as a social process is particularly important for international politics and FPA. The allegedly fixed, unchanging nature of geography has been one of its main attractions for scholars subscribing to traditional geopolitical theories (Gray, 1999; Kaplan, 2009). However, due to its social structure, we must recognize place’s fluid and volatile nature (Flint, 2005). Consequently, understanding the distinction between space and place is essential for grasping the true potential of geographic mental maps for international politics and FPA.

Space is associated with abstractness, quantitative modeling (the spatial approach), freedom, movement, formality, and impersonal location; while place is associated with familiarity, security, home, intimacy, historical tradition, social-cultural relations, context, and geo-sociological effects. (O’Loughlin, 2000: 133)

In effect, by focusing exclusively on space we risk missing out on a great deal of information and knowledge that is useful for appreciating foreign policy. Most notably, human agency, with its emphasis on spontaneity and creativity, is side-tracked (Ley, 1996). Human agency is an essential element of geography.

Individuals socially construct and are socially fashioned by geography. As Flint (2006: 4) has suggested “Since places are unique they will produce a mosaic of experiences and understanding“. From this perspective, our milieu contributes to our understanding of the world. However, the social construction of place is equally important to grasp. In other words, individuals actively contribute to the construction of place by providing images and narratives that portray and explain them and their relationships to other places. This is precisely the strength of the traditional geopolitical theories. Flint (2006: 13) claims that “Geopolitics creates images: geopolitics, in theory, language, and practice, classifies swathes of territory and masses of people“. Therefore, geopolitical representations associate spatial attributes, such as geographic location and configuration, with the cultural attributes of a place.

In fact, research on mental maps has demonstrated the predominance of the human dimension in geographic knowledge. For instance, studies of students’ sketch maps of the world have revealed that a “factor common to almost all maps, [is] the predominance of human over physical features” (Saarinen, 2005: 151). Likewise, Schulten (2001) has confirmed that various means of conveying geographic information, such as maps, atlases, and geographic journals, generally placed great emphasis on human traits. For example, late 19th century atlases combined physical and human aspects of geography creating distant, homogeneous, and underdeveloped places ripe for colonial modernization. In fact, the non-cartographic pages conveyed as much information as the maps, if not more:

As a result we find an emphasis on “quantifiable” information such as industrial production, ethnic breakdown, and religious association. Though apparently idiosyncratic, the information generally related to the human rather than to the natural world. These atlases framed the world as a racial hierarchy by highlighting the unified relationship between race, climate, and “progress,” and in the process created an ethnographic world that functioned according to certain laws. (...) As a result of cartographers’ treating the nation as a product of both the physical environment and the racial constitution of its inhabitants, race and nation – sometimes race and continent – became conflated. (Schulten, 2001: 33)

We need not look so far into the past to encounter such evocative representations. Contemporary society is replete with similar examples. Skimming over the more than one thousand pages of the recently edited *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Asia and Oceania* (West, 2009) we can encounter literally hundreds of “informative” and “enlightening” descriptions of the different “peoples” of the regions of Asia and Oceania. For example, we are informed that, while among the poorest citizens of the former USSR, the Tajikistanis “are peaceful, but prosperity is still a long way off for most” (West, 2009: 770). Similarly, whilst the Aeta “are all small in stature, dark skinned, with curly dark hair and dark eyes”, resembling some African communities, recent genetic research has demonstrated that “they are as removed from African gene pools as the rest of the population of the Philippines” (West, 2009: 23).

However, these sorts of representations are not restricted to encyclopaedic works. On the contrary, many policy oriented texts in journals of reputable stature also develop similar reasonings. Consider, for instance, Robert Kaplan’s (2009) recent acknowledgment of the importance of geography for the future of

international politics. While admitting that ideas are important in foreign policy, they are nevertheless geographically determined:

The wisdom of geographical determinism endures across the chasm of a century because it recognizes that the most profound struggles of humanity are not about ideas but about control over territory, specifically the heartland and rimlands of Eurasia. Of course, ideas matter, and they span geography. And yet there is a certain geographic logic to where certain ideas take hold. Communist Eastern Europe, Mongolia, China, and North Korea were all contiguous to the great land power of the Soviet Union. Classic fascism was a predominantly European affair. And liberalism nurtured its deepest roots in the United States and Great Britain, essentially island nations and sea powers both. Such determinism is easy to hate but hard to dismiss. (Kaplan, 2009: 100)

This deterministic outlook allows Kaplan (2009: 101) to identify that the “Eurasia of vast urban areas, overlapping missile ranges, and sensational media will be one of constantly enraged crowds, fed by rumors transported at the speed of light from one Third World megalopolis to another”. The same logic underlies the prediction that “the plateau peoples of Turkey will dominate the Arabs in the 21st century because the Turks have water and the Arabs don’t” (Kaplan, 2009: 105).

In sum, the object of geographic knowledge is quite vast. IR theories have not benefited from the full potential that geographic knowledge has to offer. By merely acknowledging the spatial attributes inherent to geography we fail to understand how geography actually affects decision-making, particularly with regards to foreign policy. More precisely, a geographic outlook implies we proceed to

... study the specifics of the world, not just where Pyongyang is but what are its characteristics. “Characteristics” may include weather patterns, physical setting, the shape of the city, the pattern of housing, or the transport system. (...) Understanding a place requires analyzing how its uniqueness is produced through a combination of physical, social, economic, and political attributes – and how these attributes are partially a product of connections to other places, near and far. (Flint, 2006: 2).

It is difficult to understand this disregard for place considering the territorial state is crucial to IR scholarship (Agnew, 1994; Flint et al., 2009). As cultural geographers have stressed in their research program, identity and space are usually coalesced into a unitary object. This is especially true when we consider nationalities which are “seen as both fixed object, passed from generation to generation, and as territorial where the space of the culture becomes imbued with ethnic or national ideas” (Crang, 1998: 162). The involuntary denial of this holistic perspective has led to discarding the geographic mental map as a useful analytical concept for understanding foreign policy decision-making. Nevertheless, we are certain that a better appreciation of how geographic factors influence our beliefs can aid in comprehending foreign policy decision-making.

ASSESSING THE CONCEPTUAL “GOODNESS” OF GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS

We have argued that while concept formation is never an unproblematic enterprise, at minimum, an effort should be made to develop the geographic mental map as rigorous an analytical concept as possible. How to properly

develop concepts has been open to debate for quite a long time (see Collier and Mahon Jr., 1993; Gerring, 1999; Goertz, 2005; Sartori, 1970). Nevertheless, Gerring (1999), though recognizing that there is no single “best” solution to this problem, identified a series of criteria which can help determine the “goodness” of a concept – i.e., familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility, and field utility. Accordingly, we can evaluate the conceptualisation of the geographic mental map above in order to verify if it exhibits all the criteria of conceptual “goodness” presented by Gerring.

The first criterion – i.e., familiarity – is one of the major strengths of mental maps for FPA. According to Gerring (1999: 368), “The degree to which a new definition ‘makes sense,’ or is intuitively ‘clear,’ depends critically upon the degree to which it conforms, or clashes, with established usage – within everyday language and within a specialized language community”. The use of mental maps as a metaphor for the cognitive representations of geographic space has been widely cited (Golledge and Stimson, 1997). In fact, mental maps hastily lead to thoughts of internal cartographic-like representations that individuals possess⁴. The frequency with which we encounter references to mental maps in the scholarly and non-academic literature testifies to the familiarity of the concept, as well as the second criterion – resonance. The simplicity and common-sensical quality of the allegory of the mental map is precisely responsible for its generalised, though under-conceptualised, usage.

The definition of mental maps presented above also guarantees parsimony. Considering that a concept “is an abbreviation” (Gerring, 1999: 371), by defining mental maps as a cognitive representation encompassing an individual or group’s beliefs about the geography of a particular place or places we have avoided saturating the concept with endless attributes. Also the concept reveals coherence in that all of its attributes and characteristics “belong” to one another. In other words, none of the attributes of mental maps here defined are in contradiction with each other. Rather the core features are effortlessly identified and consistently associated: i.e., cognitive representations and geographic places.

Especially important in this conceptualising effort is the process of differentiation. One of the major denunciations of the traditional application of mental maps in FPA is the difficulty in distinguishing them from other similar concepts. By defining them and highlighting their geographic quality we can differentiate between other related concepts, namely those associated with the cognitive research agenda. For example, while sharing many resemblances with operational codes, these centre on the philosophical and instrumental beliefs of decision-makers. They say nothing about the geographic character of those beliefs. By focusing on the geographic representations underlying decision-makers beliefs we are able to examine and evaluate an entirely different set of variables at work in the decision-making process. Accordingly, a good conceptual enterprise simultaneously identifies what a concept is as what it is not (Gerring, 1999; Sartori, 1970). An additional criterion – depth – is also achieved with the above conceptualisation. While depth may seem in disagreement with parsimony, Gerring (1999: 379-380) clarifies that it is necessary to “group instances /characteristics that are commonly found together so that we can use a concept’s label as a shorthand for those

⁴ However, the mental map has no literal correspondence with physical maps, for we do not necessarily have map-like representations in our head.

instances/characteristics”. Therefore, by acknowledging the notions of geographic space and place we can offer greater analytical depth to mental maps without losing focus of our principal research objective.

More importantly, by conceptualising geographic mental maps we give them a truly analytical value, for concepts are crucial to most theoretical undertakings. As Sartori (1970: 64) pointed out, concepts “are the central elements of propositions, and – depending on how they are named – provide in and by themselves guidelines for interpretation and observation”. By delineating the conceptual underpinnings of mental maps we can then proceed to develop the theoretical framework necessary to explaining how geographic mental maps affect foreign policy decision-making. As noted above, we have witnessed considerable causal inference regarding the role of geographic variables in foreign policy decision-making without establishing the theoretical propositions underlying such conclusions. Until this conceptualisation is accomplished we are walking an empirical tightrope without a net.

The last criterion is field utility. Gerring (1999) has suggested that most conceptualisations are in fact reconceptualisations and that their redefinition has implications for adjacent concepts. As a result, “any change in the original definition involves changes in these relationships” (Gerring, 1999: 387). Achieving such a correspondence between meanings is a taunting feat. We feel however that the initial paucity of any conceptualising effort of geographic mental maps has avoided this predicament. Not only were geographic mental maps underdeveloped conceptually, but many of the concepts used in a synonymous fashion have also lacked clear conceptual development.

Accordingly, we believe the conceptualising exercise provided in the preceding pages contributes to a superior understanding of geographic mental maps. Above all, we trust that the present conceptualisation allows for a better and more consistent application of mental maps in FPA. While there is certainly a great deal of scholarly debate and research to proceed with, we are certain that any such discussions and investigations must begin from a solid point of departure. In our view, this implies first and foremost clarifying the basic assumptions of what we are looking to study and understand. Without this, we share the risk long recognized by Sartori (1970: 1033) and which cautions to being “a wonderful researcher and manipulator of data, and yet remain an unconscious thinker”.

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