

# Rethinking the Path of Cartographic Paradigm. A New Method in Social Sciences<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper is written in terms of reclaiming a new and somehow unpopular approach in the social sciences area, the one that utilizes interdisciplinary elements from apparently distant domains. The article is intended to provide some insight into the cartographic articulation of the societal dimension and its symbolic infrastructure through a comprehensive lens. Answers regarding the social logic of a community can be deepened by means of a subjective cartographic view into everyday life. A field study on a Romanian urban community intended to experiment such a cartographic method and research regarding how ordinary individuals act according to a mental map superposed over physical territories and networks, being involved in complex decision-making processes based on subjective criteria.

**Keywords** — subjective cartography, symbolic infrastructure, dynamic density, social capital, mental map

## **1. PROLEGOMENA**

Initially, the space beyond the known frontiers was bound to be explored (Colombo e.g.). Afterwards, it became a space of conquest by means of civilization (Roman Empire). Then it changed into a modern world system where the border was drawn between the core that was gaining wealth on the expense of the underdeveloped periphery (Wallerstein).

Nowadays, the world entered in a new stage of space meaning. The world is moving rapidly towards global cities governed by a virtual space where the complexity of the urban landscape increases the difficulty of a rationally comprehension of its dynamic and functionality (Nanjarí and Hormazábal 2009). But in the meantime, small towns are still applying the familiarity and vicinity type of sociality and nourish an entire invisible network behind the observer's glimpse.

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Cartography is no longer a restricted area of expertise, but an interdisciplinary form to both coagulate and rediscover cultural patterns, social substance and symbolic infrastructure. It evolved from a well renowned form of art or a rigid and rationally calculated science to a pretext and a method of gaining and storing knowledge from the perceived reality of the mapmaker's world. It transformed itself into a culturally sensitive model of complex understandings that has its traceable borders and managed, at the same time, to keep its original meaning (Greek *chartis* - map; *graphein* - to write).

## **2. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS, SUBJECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND MENTAL MAPS**

Though written in the context of International Relations, the words of Paul Watzlawick referring to the political analyst's calling could be easily extrapolated to other science domains: one does not operate with `absolute realities but with subjective and often contradictory representations of reality` (Watzlawick 1978, 137). The geographical and historical background, the way in which regular people, groups or elites respond to history's challenges (Arnold Toynbee) all add up to specific language, mental, cultural and civilizational structures that, by default, manifest visibly in time and space dimensions. The social representations are `the product and the process of a mental activity by which an individual or a group of individuals remodel the confronting reality by assigning it specific significations` (Abric 1995, 129). In other words, mental frames expressed through cartographic means play an important role in the social relations' dynamic and practice, thus being eligible for analysis, whatever the possible transformations may occur.

In the classical sense, urban maps revealed (to be) known paths between two or more specific locations: a point zero (source) and finality (final stop). Following the same logic, mental maps act just the same but using personalized and possibly irrational criteria (Pareto). For example, one will choose the known path home even if it is a declared longer journey than an unknown alternative. The specific subjective motivation that hides behind the actor's action, if discovered, could offer insights to otherwise inexplicable social actions or phenomena and, moreover, reveal the social esteem attached to the symbolic infrastructure called upon.

The subjective cartography may unveil the social capital's mechanisms (Putnam) and the strong ties within the community's network (Granovetter). It challenges the way we understand the quantification and qualitative data regarding the dynamic density or, in other words, the intensity of local social relations (Durkheim).

This approach method is centered on small or medium communities, where face to face interaction, personal recommendations do work, where the social space is defined by boundaries culturally shared with the others. Boundaries automatically imply marginality, no matter if symbolical or physical. Usually, the frontiers exist because of the contrasting societal logics that are put aside. Thus, it is not an ordinary type of socio-cultural or physical marginality, but it is one anatomically based on collective identity, social, economical or political discrepancies that does not block the cooperation with the outside but it clearly differentiates from it.

### **3. APPLYING THE CARTOGRAPHIC METHOD**

This particular study draws on a sociological research conducted during the summer of 2010 in Novaci, a Romanian town beneath the Carpathian Mountains. In the attempt of creating a map of the local social problems, the team conducted semi-structured interviews with various community members that provided not only personal background information but great insight on local culture and practices, too.

Regarding the subjective dimension, it aimed at the forms of the individuals` perspective of the space, community as an entity, local people or strangers; at the attitude types adopted towards the elites; the type of predominant mentality; and, finally, the effects generated by such a constellation of representations, perceptions, mental maps, symbols and images. In other words, we looked for `their ideas, feelings, aspirations, meaning all life`s spiritual contents and orientations towards the psychical, social area and, in genere, the world` (Gusti 1968, 428).

After the 1980s, the critique of cartography began by deconstructive methods of the map and reached to a conclusion, among others: the Western cartographic expressions are dominated by the space concept, rather than one of place (Pickles 2004; Tunrball 2000). Such a distinction was found on the field in cultural beliefs with strong religious roots such as the positive, negative, or neutral places. One`s path must go avoid the places with negative representation in the local collective memory or unhappy things will happen to the traveler, try not to cross to many times the neural one because luck will fade out, and include in his itinerary the positive places because of future benefits (material or immaterial) to come. Apparently, for an outsider, if a fountain with a sear tree aside (considered as a bad spot) comes its way, there is no problem in pursuing the journey – a normal and rational decision; but for a local, the rational and the only safe decision is the finding of an alternative path through which he could walk around it and still get to destination (Bernea 2005). Thus, the local symbolic and the visual styles redraw one`s map in an instance and the spatial relations depend on cultural values, specific norms and other personalized criteria.

The concepts of place, space and time have the power to lead to impressive insight that could explain, plan, predict or solve the human behavior (Goodchild and Janelle 2004). The purpose of the field research is to discover and analyze `models of mental cartography for the visualization of the behavior and spatial valuation that characterize to the residents of the city` and to `analyze the relationship which exists between the perception and the spatial distinguished behavior of population and the urban problematics, related particularly to the daily` life. (Nanjarí and Hormazábal 2009). In order to do so, the interviewed subjects during the field work in Novaci were asked to provide personal maps or sketches or to draw spontaneously on a paper, to point out each person's vision of environment and its manifestations. This will reveal individual's cognitive map deep inside the apparent social logic that will lead to the usage of the mental map and, finally, to the drawing itself (idem).

The very faults of a map (in its true meaning of the word) become, in case of a subjective cartography that reveals a socio-cultural and economic practice, its strongest points. The list of conditionalities consisted of: subjectivity, inaccurate measurements (that, in our case, would highlight the individual's social distance calculus), simplification by eliminating various objects (considered by the author unnecessary), by revealing the significant place codes and by reducing the complexity of the characteristics, the complex substance of paths (abstract, physical) and so on.

The interesting thing is that a cartographic profile of the community has been made due of the close resemblance of the drawings, no matter the age, gender, religion, profession and other indicators. In other words, we were looking for those cultural values, attitudes and actions that shape the reality into new configurations by cartographic practices. This is how we managed to create a collective map of the social activities, of the most cherished individuals and institutions, and a map of the main problems the community was dealing with.

A mapmaker could be virtually anyone that posses social skills. The mental baggage and the societal conditions transform any human being into a mapmaker. If asked to elaborate on his view and, even better, to draw himself the world he lives in by referring to the meaningful locations or persons subjectively chosen by him (abstract or physical) we might get the chance of understanding the social universe, especially its parts where there is a community involved (based on trust, order, shame, family, friendship and vicinity). It seems that the social life of small urban communities is developing according to a collective synthesis of particular (individual) mental maps.

## 4. SHORT CONCLUSIONS

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