



Understanding Social Change

Maps and empire

Pat Jess

The British Empire is shown as the British Empire was at the, I suppose at the turn of 19th/20th centuries, drawn in such a way that some parts of the Empire – Australia and Canada notably – look very, very large, very impressive. This was on classroom walls in the, certainly in the 1950's because I can remember one, and it was all picked out in red and it looked very, very impressive. But Mercator was actually working some four hundred years before that. Mercator is a 16th century, or was a 16th century Flemish map-maker and cartographer, and among his great interests was to find a way of projecting the globe, spherical earth, onto a flat surface in a way which would assist navigators, in a way which would enable them to have a map which would show constant directions. He wasn't actually concerned to show accurately the size of the British Empire, there wasn't any such thing four hundred years before, and it's the business of how we pick up something made for one purpose – in this case Mercator's projection to show projection, and to turn it into something else, so if we're a little bit concerned about the way in which generations have grown up with ideas about the size of the British Empire, we should really be questioning the person who chose that projection for that particular purpose.

David Goldblatt

Let's talk a little bit more about the size distortion issue – what part of the maps, if you like, are bigger on the map than they are in reality, and what bits of the world have got shrunk on the map?

Pat Jess

Right. If you think about latitude which is the parallel lines which run around east to west round the globe they can stay parallel because they are stacked, if you liked, although they get smaller on an actual globe, they can be translated onto the page, but the meridians, the ones which run pole to pole, north to south, they bunch at the top, they bunch at the poles. If you're going to spread those out on a flat page, then they become, if you like, further apart, and what Mercator had to do was to compensate for that in order to keep his directions true, and this meant that the lines of latitude, the parallel lines, got stretched as he went towards the top and the bottom, the north and the south edges of the map. So as you go further north from the Equator or south from the Equator, then your areas are getting bigger and bigger and bigger. So around the Equator is relatively, let's say that's relatively in inverted commas "the right size", and as you move away from that places are getting bigger. Now, of course, there are more bits to the north of the Northern Hemisphere than there are bits to the south of the Southern Hemisphere, and the tradition of navigation and the emphasis on a mercantile society tends to put north to the top of the page in the Northern Hemisphere, our navigators navigated using the Pole Star, Polaris, the North Star, this goes to the top of the page, but it's merely a convention. So the British Isles, so called, do quite well out of it. If size were any real meaning in terms of modern par, Greenland ought to be much more important than it is.

David Goldblatt

I like it that the British Isles seems to be about the same size as India on this, seems to me to be a particularly good one. The other interesting thing about this for me is that here we have the British Isles at the centre of the map. Why is it on this projection and in fact on most maps of course, how come Britain, this tiny little post-industrial island is at the middle of everything – why isn't America at the middle?

Pat Jess

Well if you're in America I think probably America is in the middle because while latitude is fixed, if you like, by nature, latitude has got to be along the middle because that's the Equator. Longitude can be fixed anywhere. It's a convention, so if I'm making the map I shall put me in the middle. If you're making the map, you may put you in the middle, and if we're in slightly different places, then that's what goes, but I think it's an issue of power, isn't it, it's an issue of where you are, but a lot of maps, stamps sometimes show maps in that way, and if you look at stamps from other postal areas you might find that the middle of the map is different to the ones that we're used to looking at, and you might us right out on the edge, and it's a bit of a shock.

David Goldblatt

One of the other kind of aesthetic qualities of this map that is such a pleasure is the sense of a spider web because not only do we have, you know, the British Empire picked out in red, but we also have this kind of fabulous spider web of steamship routes, I presume they are, snaking out from Britain across the oceans, wrapping their way around the continent, and you have this kind of real sense, you know not just in terms of spatial distortion, but in the convergence of trade routes and communication routes, and this singular moment when Britain really was the centre of the world.

Pat Jess

Yes, it's a depiction of globalisation of that period, isn't it, really, and the other thing about putting Britain in the middle is that how else would we go West young man?