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Jerusalem online: critical cartography for the digital age

Carraro V., Palgrave Macmillan, New York,
NY, 2021. 143 pp. Type: Book (978-9-811633-13-3)

Date Reviewed: Mar 14 2023

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While cartography studies the making and using of maps, this book focuses on a specific case study of critical cartography, that is, when power relations and differing understandings of reality and politics change or shape the making of maps for a given location or community. The case of study looked at here is one of the world's most contested and historical cities: Jerusalem.

The author presents the power struggle in Jerusalem, taking a clear stand as a sympathizer of the Palestinian side--a view that shapes the whole book. She starts by explaining how cartography has been used as a means of political determination and domination throughout history, and reviewing the history of modern map making in Jerusalem in particular. The book then focuses on three specific cases of how cartographic computer applications clash with the reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Given the advancement of computer-based tools, map making is no longer the sole realm of governments, and map consumption is no longer an activity seldom done by the inhabitants of a given geographical space. Both private companies and individuals have now become data providers, and mapping applications include those used daily by local populations for finding the most efficient ways to travel among changing conditions. A common scenario: users want to avoid traffic or obstacles that make following a well-known route suboptimal. Thus, maps change in real time; they are no longer static, but rather dynamically and constantly adapting to a changing reality.

For this book, the author presents three case studies:

(1) Algorithmic navigation in the Waze routing application (it digs into the "avoid dangerous areas" feature, which effectively presented routes avoiding Arab-majority neighborhoods);
(2) The effects of a glitch in Google Maps (an error in July 2016, where for reasons never acknowledged it stopped showing labels for Palestinian features, and how this quickly triggered a campaign for Palestinian visibility); and
(3) The reality of how power dynamics are projected in the supposedly open and egalitarian OpenStreetMap mapping community. The author presents several hypotheses as to why, if OpenStreetMap data is provided directly by its users, Palestinian sympathizers have not provided a better level of mapping; how it relates to contested land when following the "on-the-ground" rule; and how not naming streets works as a political tool for both sides.

The book is not a technical work, neither for computing nor for cartography. It instead tackles a very complex political issue via computer-based mapping tools. It is interesting and clear to read, although some people will find it too heavily biased to a specific viewpoint. It is deeply personal, presenting the author's experiences as a foreigner living in East Jerusalem.

Reviewer: Gunnar Wolf   Review #: CR147561

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