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## Israel, Palestine and the mapping of power

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The Guardian

February 4, 2013 - 1:00am

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/04/israel-palestine-power-maps-...> [1]

February 5, 2013

**Article Author(s):** Tristram Hunt

**Media Outlet:** The Guardian

**Date:** February 4, 2013

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/04/israel-palestine-power-maps-...> [1]

'It's almost comical. The idea of maps is to represent reality; here it represents fantasy.' So [Professor Bruce Wexler](#) [2] of Yale University [comments](#) [3] on how the vast majority of maps in Palestinian and Israeli schoolbooks omit the existence of the other entity. As a result, children on either side of the [Green Line](#) [4] are growing up with "an internal representation of their homeland, in which one does not include the other".

But since when have maps been about objective representation of space? They are about the expression and fulfilment of power. From the age of [Ptolemy](#) [5], all those lofty claims to comprehensiveness have usually succumbed to the promotion of political agendas. As the cartography scholar [Jerry Brotton](#) [6] rightly remarks: "A map always manages the reality it tries to show."

Nowhere more so than with the British empire. For in Israel/Palestine, just as in Kashmir and Sudan, postcolonial nations are still wrestling with imperialism's mixed legacy and its arbitrary lines in the sand. As the colonial unravelling continues, and as rising powers seek to exert their own dominion, the historic confusions of British map-making are fostering all manner of geopolitical tensions.

From the outset, cartography and colonialism went hand in hand. The assertion of political control over supposed terra incognita was most effectively realised by drawing up plans and plots. Maps allowed for the expropriation of existing land rights (since indigenous communities often lacked accurate measuring instruments) and an explanation of a colony's significance.

Take [Bryan Edwards's](#) mid-18th century [Map of the Island of Barbadoes](#) [7], with its delineation of the Caribbean landscape into Anglican parishes and sugar plantations. What mattered was Barbados's role in the imperial project, rather than any realistic representation of its

geography or population.

Or perhaps the most famous propagation of British colonial power, [John Colomb's 1886 map, Imperial Federation](#) [8]. It placed Britain centre stage, coloured our colonies a distinctive red, inflated the land mass of Canada, left swaths of unconquered terrain simply blank, and at its base posited a serene Britannia surrounded by icons of her Indian, Australian, and African colonies.

Resistance to official mapping became part of the story of anti-colonialism. In his 1916 novel [Ghare Baire](#) [9], Tagore has revolutionary hero Sandip ask his hostess, Bimala: "Have I not told you that, in you, I visualise the *shakti* [power] of our country? The geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up his life for a map!"

Instead of British-made maps showing the Raj's ports and cantonments, Sandip visualises an altogether different map of Mother India, made up of her rivers, jungles, mountains and peoples. It was this anti-rationalist map of India as a maternal bodyscape that would make its way into the Tamil schoolbooks of an independent India. By then, of course, the awful truth was many millions had given up their lives for a map – thanks to the [Mountbatten plan](#) [10]'s partition of India and Pakistan, based on the utilitarian, census-driven mapping of the British civil servant [Cyril Radcliffe](#) [11].

The boundaries of India still remain in contention. But today it is a rising China, rather than declining Britain, that is seeking to reshape the map of south-east Asia. New passports issued by Beijing in 2012 [counted as Chinese most of Arunachal Pradesh](#) [12], a north-eastern Indian state that sends parliamentarians to New Delhi. China's assertive cartography also infuriated the Vietnamese, by claiming ownership of disputed islands in the South China Sea.

But it is always school textbooks – those "weapons of mass instruction" – that cause the greatest furore. In 2005 [textbooks heading for a Japanese school in China](#) [13] were seized by customs officials who objected to the way Taiwan was coloured differently to the mainland and territories in the East China Sea were claimed for Japan. And there is now a real fear that, in Beijing and Tokyo classrooms, map-making is being marshalled for a revived era of tension.

So, it is no surprise that officials in Ramallah and Jerusalem are showing once again that space is power by seeking to delegitimise each other. The late Edward Said, chronicler of western constructions of orientalism, understood this more than most. In the last years of his life he published map after map showing Israeli settlements eating into Palestinian land. Because the real problem for Palestinian and Israeli textbooks is that the map keeps changing.

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- [3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/04/israeli-palestinian-textbooks-borders>
- [4] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Line\\_%28Israel%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Line_%28Israel%29)
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