Deconstructing the spatial construction of educational atlases

Philipp Meyer, et al.
p_meyer@leibniz-ifl.de
Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig

Abstract

Since the 19th century atlases have become media not only to depict political entities and borders but to compare various phenomena – human and non-human as well as their relations – for different regions and on different scales. Over the 20th century atlases and map design have become more and more standardized, establishing step by step a common cartographic language. Nevertheless, there are still differences and atlases still today are constructing different worlds and different views on global connections and on globalization.

Our project, which we would like to present, is about developing and applying a methodology that, on the one hand, allows detailed comparative analysis of individual maps from school atlases based on a variety of features such as projection, symbology used, colors and data representation, and, on the other hand, permits conclusions to be drawn about the underlying spatial concepts.

Since space is a fundamental dimension of society, its organization and perception emerge and transform due to historical changes of societies. In our case studies, therefore, we seek to identify both territorialized spatial concepts, such as the nation-state, and concepts with more fuzzy borders, such as the empire or various forms of colonial regimes, along their historically shifting representation in school atlases. Using a more analytical concept, which we call the planetary or ecological formatting, we aim to analyze how the various relationships between humans and their environment are depicted in school atlases. This relationship is fundamental not only to geographic but also to ecological thinking and is reflected in atlases in the way human and non-human phenomena are combined and related to each other.

As mentioned above, maps and atlases depict the world, the connections between their different parts and the relations between human and non-human phenomena in distinct ways. All these differences are not only related to their respective times but of course also to the place where they are published and used. Thus, our case studies focus on different world-regions and countries to explore their specific characteristics and compare, in a transnational perspective, their different visualizations of the world, globalization processes, and ecological relations. In the first phase the project examined atlases of the United States, China and Francophone countries. In the second, ongoing phase of the project, we are investigating Russia and Germany from the end of the 19th century until today.

In our presentation, we would like to show how atlases can visualize spatial concepts and therefore have the power to shape different perspectives on the world and to implement them into society. We also want to point out that atlases can include and integrate different spatial concepts –territorialized and non-territorialized– at the same time and that they can be combined in different ways.