

Research and Mapping in Area Studies

Exploring Theories, Methodologies, and
Future Directions

Presented by

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Introduction

Area studies emerged in response to global geopolitical changes after World War II, driven by the United States increasing international interests, such as the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan.

This new academic field arose to address the inadequate knowledge of global peoples and regions, with strong institutional backing from bodies like the **Social Science Research Council** and the Carnegie Foundation.

Purpose and Challenges of Area Studies

1. Filling Knowledge Gaps: • Area studies aim to provide in-depth research and education on **specific regions of the world**. However, there is concern about the risk of these studies being appropriated for **political purposes**, rather than remaining focused on purely academic objectives.

2. The Risk of Instrumentalization: • The field faces the danger of becoming **a tool for geopolitical or imperialistic agendas**, much like earlier German Geopolitics. • To prevent this, area studies must maintain their academic integrity and avoid becoming mere **extensions of Western social sciences** applied to foreign regions.

3. Need for a Theoretical Foundation: • Area studies must develop a **robust theoretical framework**, similar to how nuclear physics offers novel concepts. • Without distinct theoretical contributions, area studies could fragment and lose significance, reduced to being practical **tools for “backward” areas** rather than an insightful academic discipline.

Specific vs. Generic Regions

Generic regions are characterized by a single defining factor (e.g., climate), studied through generalization and the formulation of laws.

Specific regions are unique due to the interplay of multiple factors, such as cultural, political, and social dynamics, making them less amenable to broad generalization.

Generic studies emphasize similarities, while specific studies focus on the particular configuration of multiple factors that geographic context creates.

The comparative approach in area studies is enriched by the interplay between generic and specific region analysis.

While generic comparisons help identify broad patterns across different regions, specific region comparisons focus on the complex, dynamic interactions of multiple factors unique to each area.

Social Field and Cultural Influence

The Social Field

- Adapted from Ratzel's "life-space" or **"lebensraum"** for social dynamics.
- Emphasizes **Gestalt psychology** and the total situation of group operations.
- Integrates biotic and cultural factors, distinguishing from purely ecological studies.

Culture Areas

- Concept from anthropology, highlighting cultural complexity and **boundary challenges**.
- Cultural areas expand through cross-cultural exchanges as societies evolve.

Space, Time, and Social Change

- Regions studied through both geography and space-time perspectives.
- Social change and dynamic equilibrium drive regional evolution.

Functional and Interdisciplinary Approach

- Area studies emphasize **multiple causation in social fields**, rejecting single-factor explanations like environmental determinism.
- Societies must be understood as dynamic systems where **physical, cultural, and historical** elements are intertwined.
- Area studies advocate for **cooperation across disciplines**, bridging gaps between sociology, history, economics, and anthropology.
- This integrated approach is essential for a comprehensive understanding of specific **regions as unique, cohesive systems** rather than isolated parts of broader theories.

Criticisms of Area Studies

- **Generalization vs. Specificity:**
- Critics argue that area studies **lack generalizability**, a key scientific tool. However, proponents highlight that generalizations in traditional social sciences often stem from narrow, culturally specific contexts.
- **Kantian Perspective:** There is **a need to balance** “logical” classification (isolating general concepts) with “physical” classification (situating phenomena in time and space) to fully understand complex social realities.
- **Restoring Balance in Social Sciences:**
- Area studies challenge the **over-specialization** within traditional social science disciplines, which often ignore the specific cultural and historical context of non- Western societies.
- They emphasize the importance of studying **regions as unique systems** with their own internal logic and dynamics.

Multi-disciplinary Nature of Area Studies

- **Draws Tools from Several Disciplines**
- Disciplines like history, linguistics, anthropology, and geography have **inherent overlaps** with Area Studies.
- Theories from these fields can enrich both **regional and broader** scholarly understanding.
- Disciplines such as political science, sociology and geography align well with area-specific studies when **focused on interpretation** rather than rigid methodological frameworks.
- **Importance of Local Perspectives**
- Understanding a region requires insight into how its people perceive their world, shaped by **cultural meanings** and visualisation within their material frameworks.

Institutional Aspects of Area Studies

- Institutional Crisis: Decline in **academic hiring** of area specialists, threatening the future of Area Studies as a field.
- Importance for Policy: Loss of area expertise can lead to **culturally biased decision-making**, making area knowledge crucial for global policies.
- Proposed Solutions: a **hybrid model** combining disciplinary and area expertise, supported by funding.
- Comparative Literature Model: Using Comparative Literature to enrich Area Studies, **breaking away** from essentialist views.
- Methodological Critique: The field should embrace **flexibility and multi-disciplinary approaches**, avoiding the search for a region's "essence."
- Mobility and Interconnectivity: studying regions as **dynamic networks** of interactions, emphasizing mobility and global interdependence.

Towards Holistic Future of Area Studies

- The emergence of Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Globalization Studies prompted Area Studies scholars to reevaluate their methodologies and frameworks.
- 1. Constructivism: People's **perceptions shape** their actions. The social world is distinct from the natural world. Focuses on cultural models and their political relevance (Thomas Theorem).
- 2. Relationism: Studies **interaction between agency and structure**. Networks are key to defining an 'area'. Agency and structure influence socio-political realities.
- 3. Historicism: Integrates **history into contemporary studies**. Analyzes historical and contemporary factors, avoiding anachronism.
- 4. Attention to Scale: Political, economic, and cultural processes **differ by level** (local, regional, national). Regionalism and localism are important post-state socialism.
- 5. Focus on Informality: Formal and informal **structures coexist** in societies. Informal networks shape political and social realities.

Understanding the Language of Maps

The Politics of Writing Global Space

Geo-Power and History - Geography has always been **intertwined** with power.

Geography is a **product** of power dynamics, not a neutral representation.

Empires and Geography- Classical empires like Greece, Rome, and China used geography to assert **dominance**.

Geography helped empires organize and **control space**.

Centralizing monarchies imposed **geographic knowledge** to extend control. Conflicts arose between central authorities and local lords.

Ongoing Struggles Over Space

Displacement and genocide remain a critical issue.

Refugees and internally displaced people highlight the continuous battle over space.

Border conflicts reflect broader cultural and political disputes.

Borderlands are marked by advanced control mechanisms.

Territorial identities and its contests.

Fear and indeterminacy of neighbourhood.

Map as Language of Spatial Critique

- Critique in cartography and GIS **challenges** the assumption that knowledge is universal or neutral.
- It reveals how knowledge **production is influenced** by specific historical and geographical contexts.
- Power relations shape what is accepted as true, opening **space for alternative** ways of knowing and mapping.
- Critical geography is diverse, incorporating perspectives such as antiracism, feminism, and Marxism.
- It questions **representation politics**—who's included/excluded in geographic knowledge.
- Challenges oppression and dominant **imaginaries and imageries**.

Evolution of Critical Cartography

- Historically marginalized but now recognized within mainstream discourse.
- Pushes back on maps being purely objective or scientific.

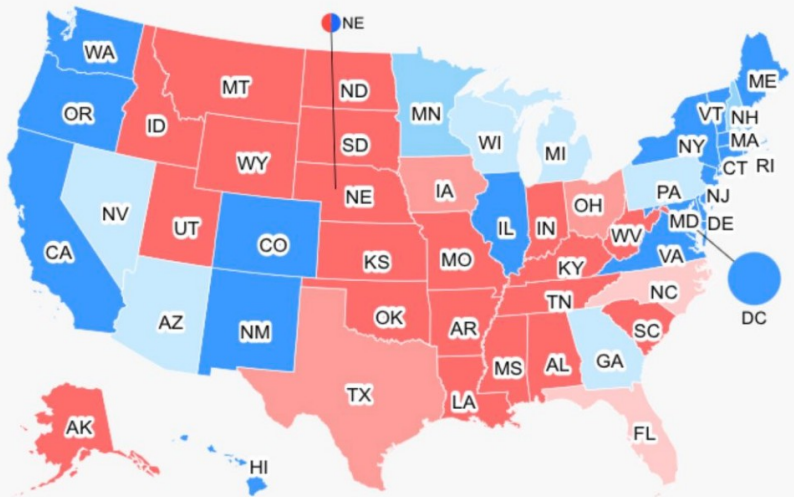
Four Principles of Critical Cartography

1. Maps produce knowledge, not just reflect reality.
2. Mapping varies historically and culturally, challenging universal practices.
3. Maps are political documents, shaped by social forces.
4. Activist mapping challenges power structures, such as community-based GIS.

Maps as Instruments of Power

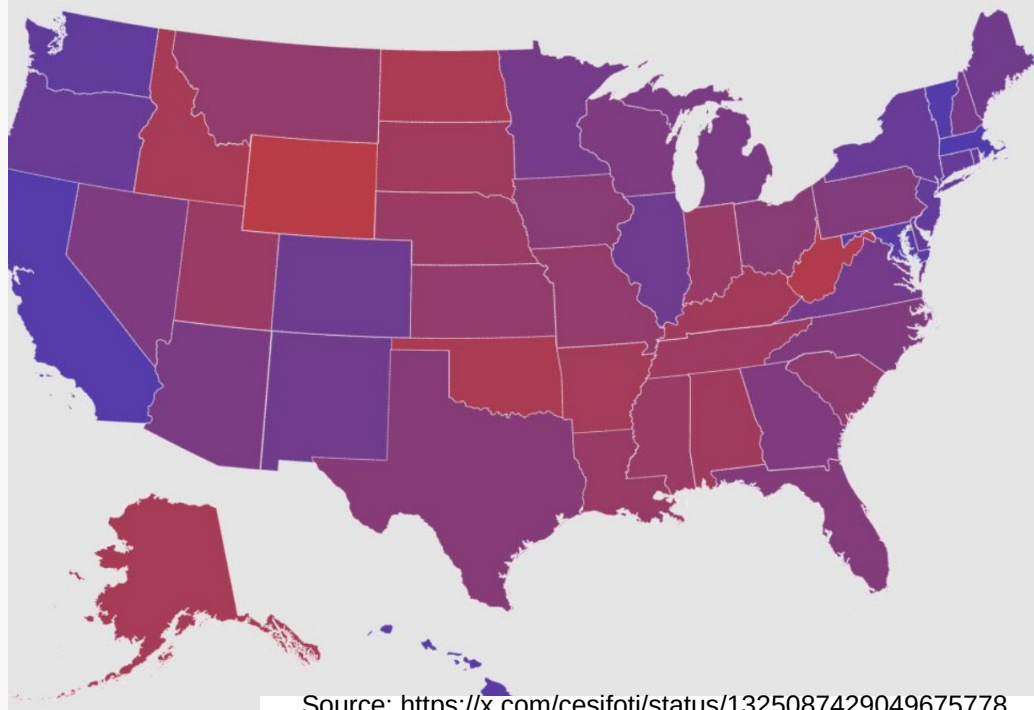


Maps inscribe power, reflecting specific groups' interests

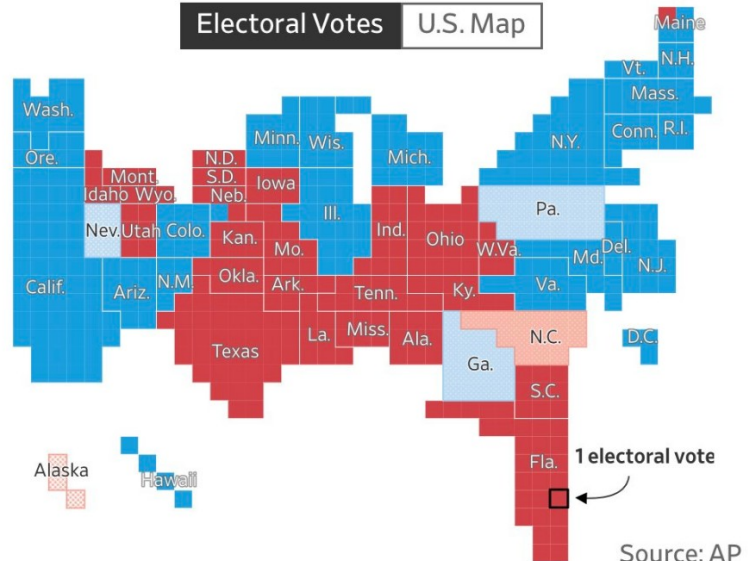
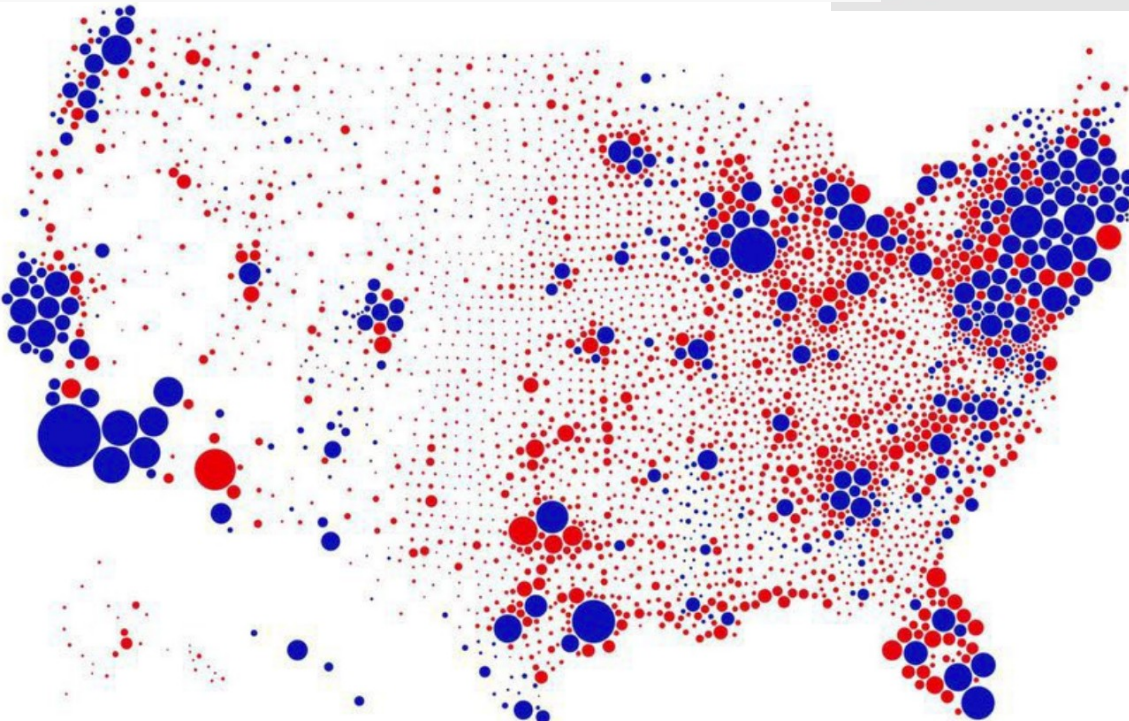


Who's Leading

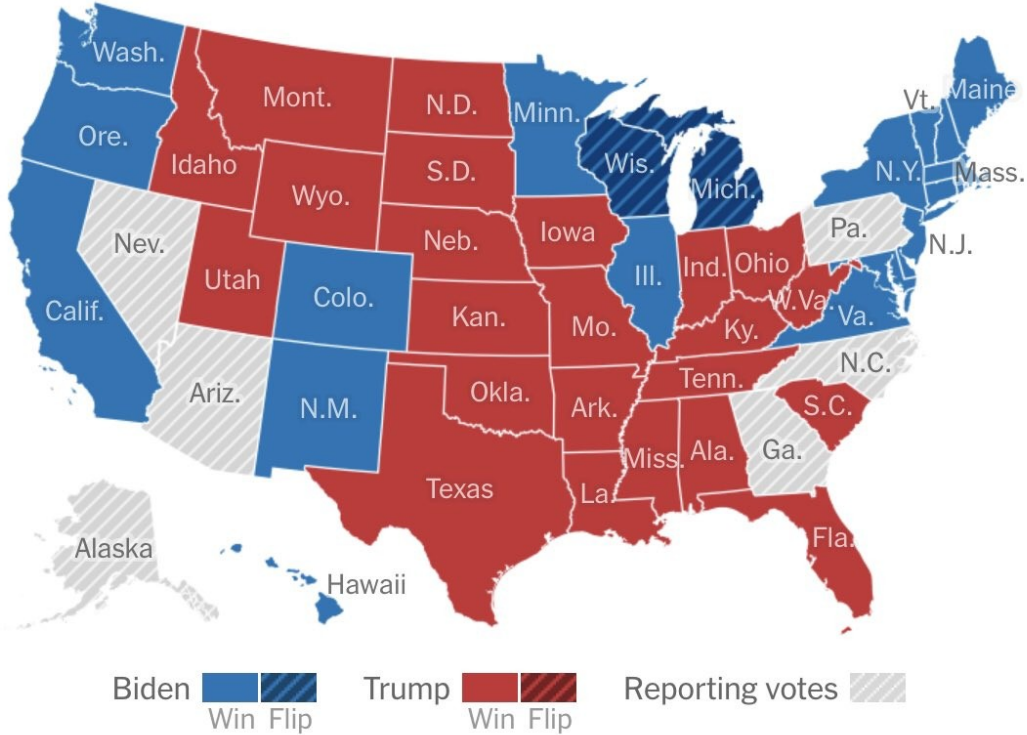
Updated 02:44 a.m. ET, Nov. 7



Source: <https://x.com/cesifoti/status/1325087429049675778>



Source: AP



A map like this can be misleading in two accounts:

The statement suggests that such maps can create a false impression in two ways, the first being tied to population density.

"The first one is variations in population density (people vote, not land)": Many election maps give the same visual weight to all geographic regions, regardless of how many people live there.

This can be misleading because large, sparsely populated areas may dominate the map visually (e.g., rural areas), while small, densely populated areas (e.g., cities) might look insignificant.

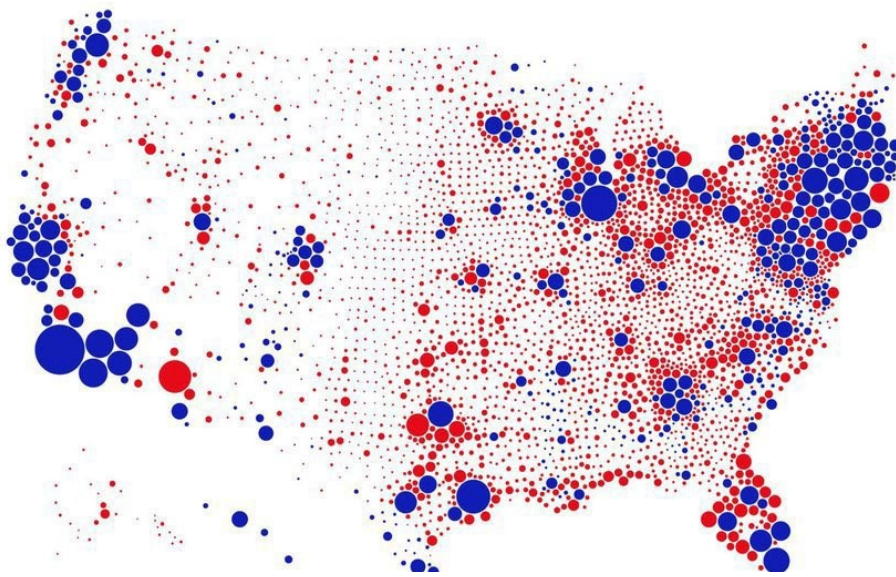
However, in reality, the number of votes cast in densely populated areas is much greater.

This leads to a skewed perception of political dominance based on land area, not the actual number of voters.

<https://x.com/cesifoti/status/1325087454085439490/photo>

Although the US is built on the idea of double majority representing people & land (eg house & senate): This points to the US political system, where representation is a mix of population-based (House of Representatives) and land-based (Senate) systems.

In the Senate, each state, regardless of its population size, gets equal representation. In the House, representation is proportional to population. This balance is intended to ensure that both the people (through population-based representation) and land (through state-based representation) have a voice in governance, reflecting the unique federal structure of the US.



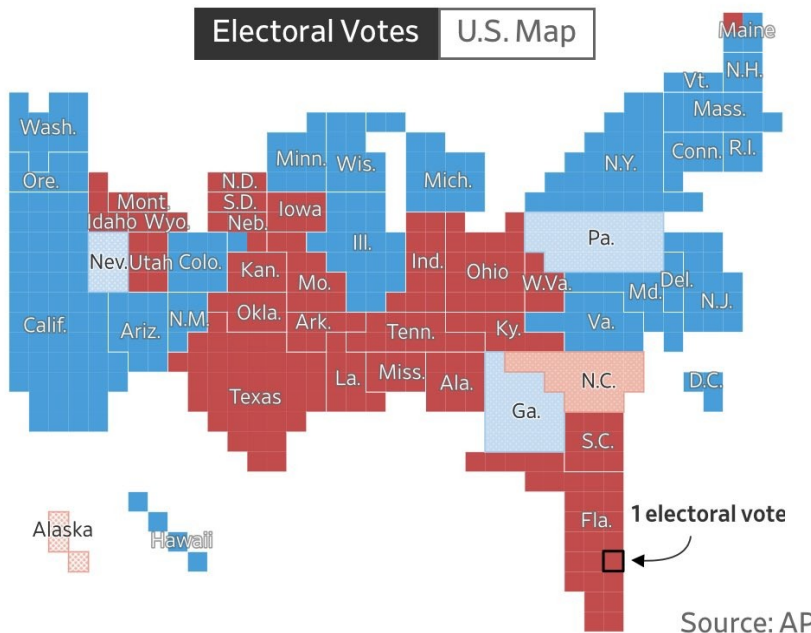
Los Angeles County is a highly populated area where, although the majority might have voted for one party (e.g., Democrats), a significant number of people still voted for the other party (Republicans).

However, on the binary map, the county would be coloured entirely blue (Democratic), **hiding the fact** that nearly a million people voted Republican.

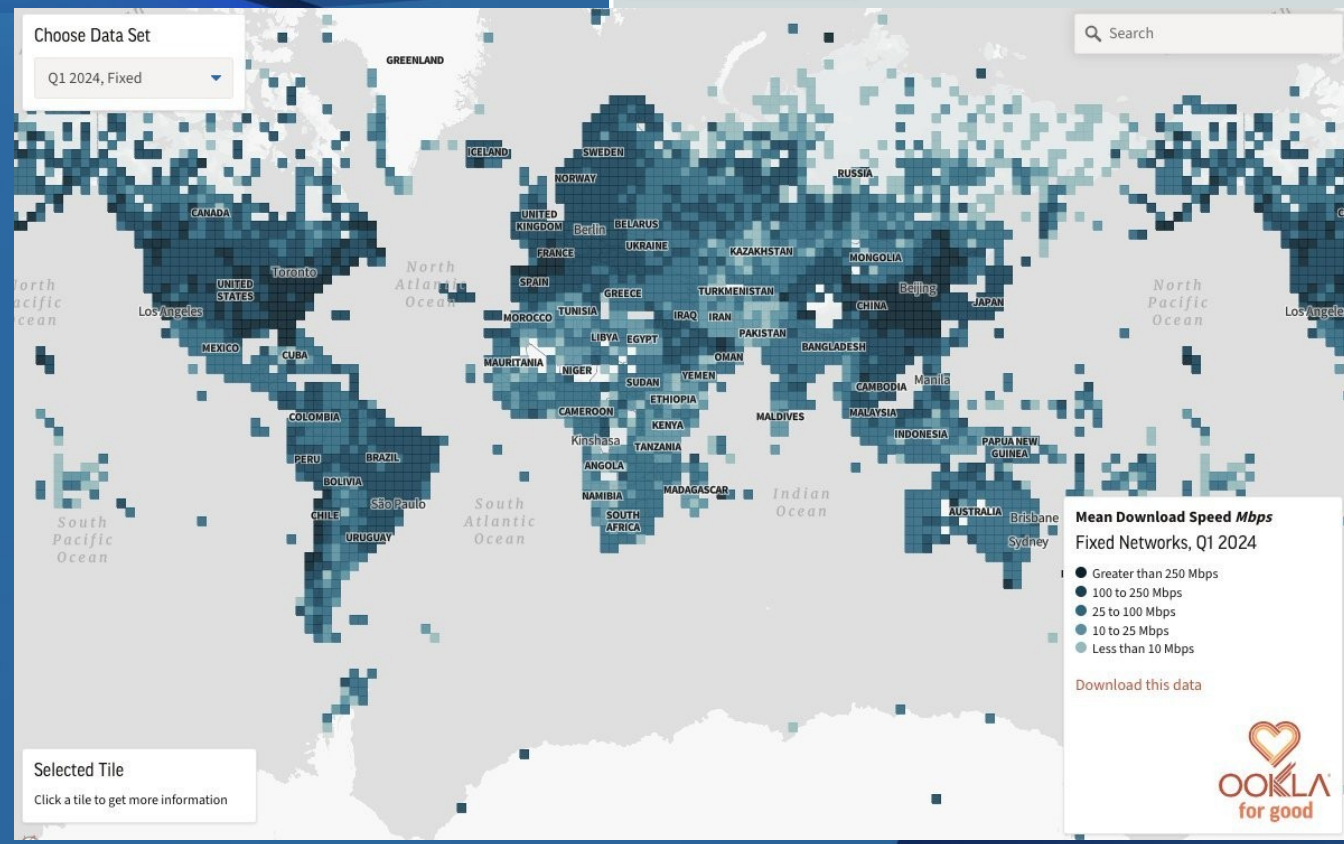
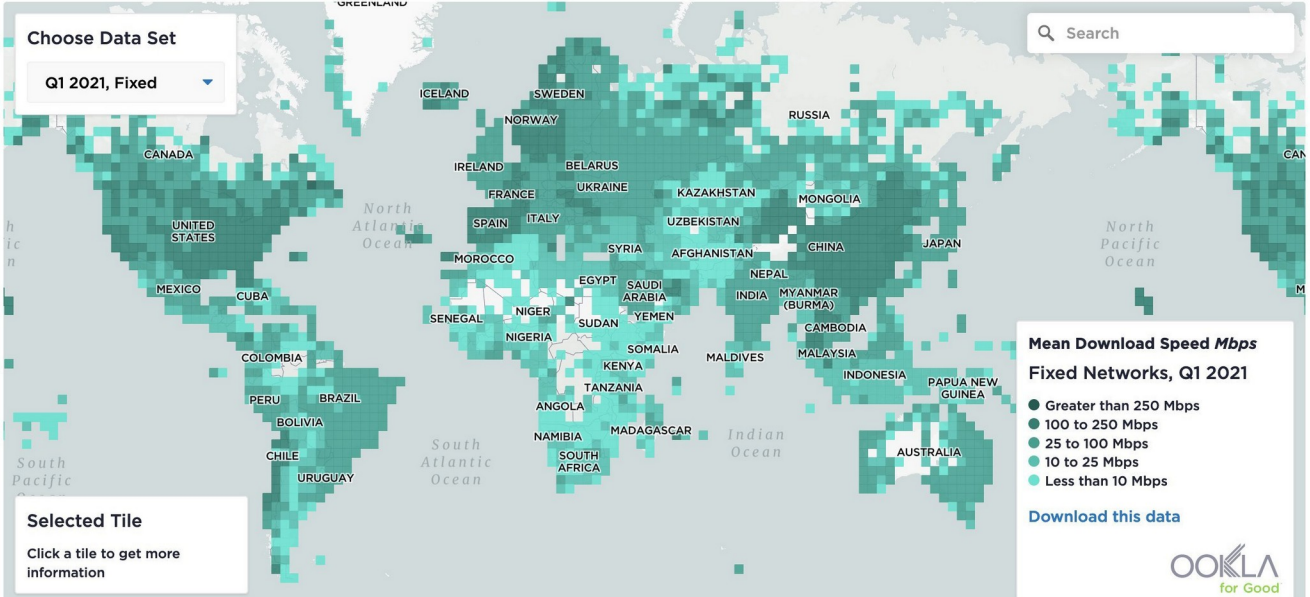
This oversimplification masks the true diversity of voter preferences within the region.

If all of the red votes from these sparsely populated regions were visually combined or represented in a different way, they would have a stronger presence on the map. However, because they are shown in their geographically accurate locations, they are "diluted" or spread across large areas, reducing their visual impact.

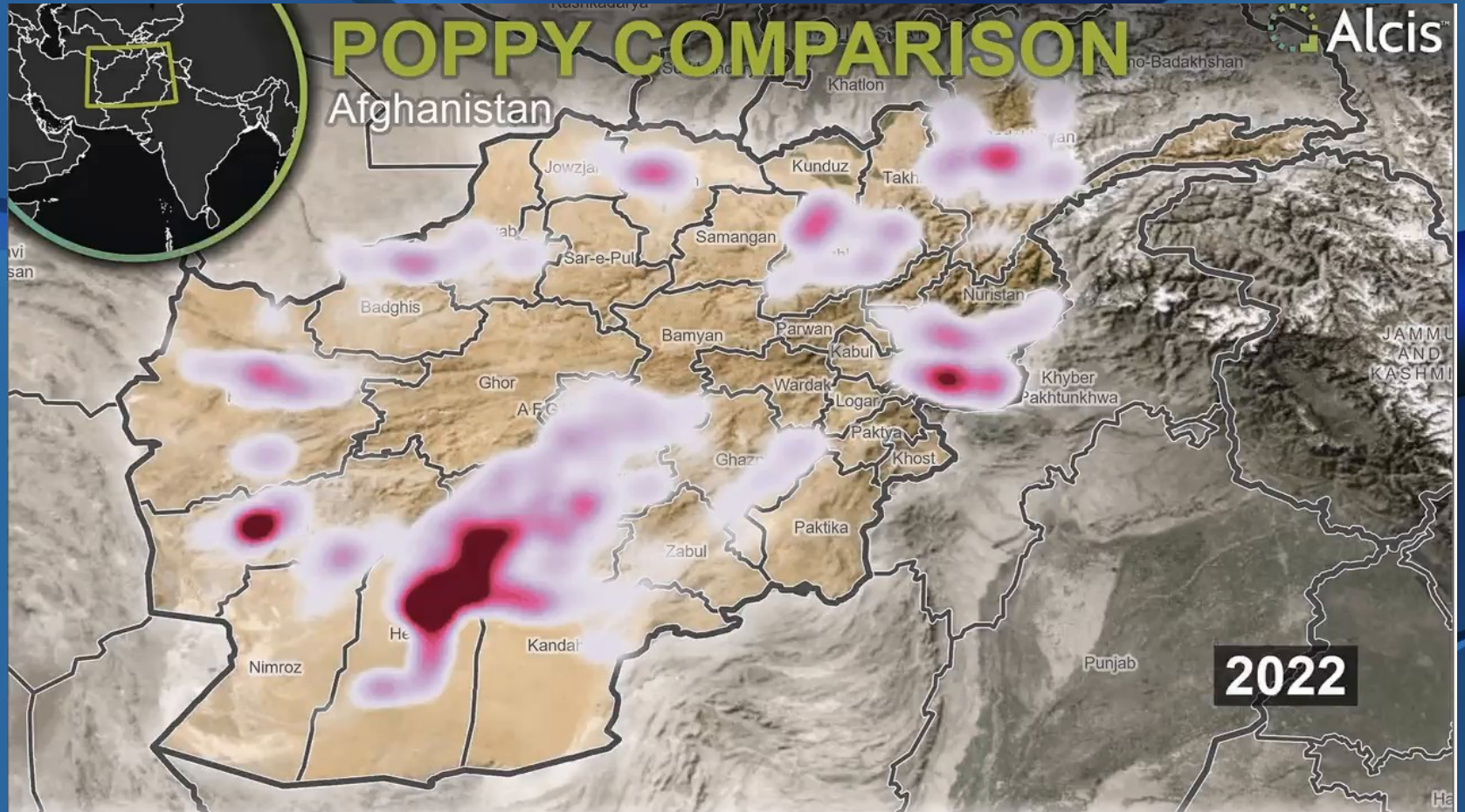
This Minecraft style map from the WSJ using one square per electoral college vote is good at condensing the less populated mountain region of the US. Still it is an **all red or blue map**.



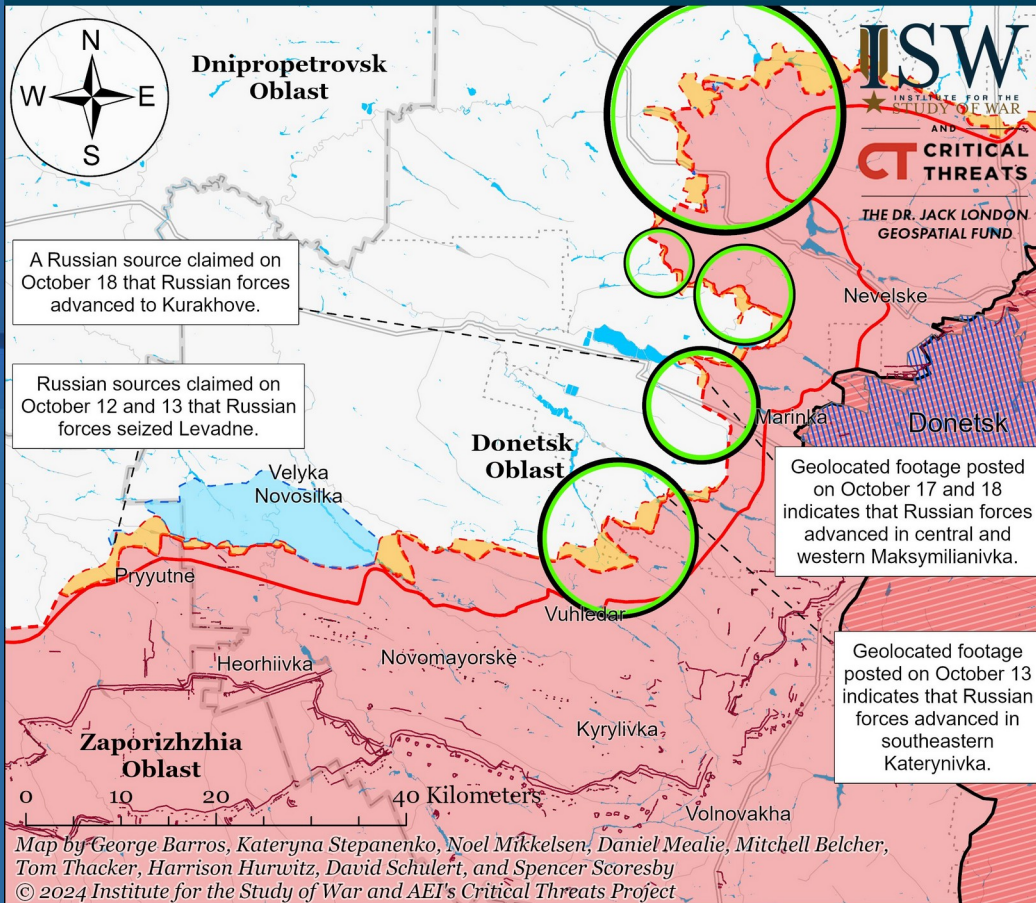
The Cyber Democracy Maps



The Dynamic Maps



Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Donetsk Oblast as of October 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



A Russian source claimed on October 18 that Russian forces advanced to Kurakhove.

Russian sources claimed on October 12 and 13 that Russian forces seized Levadne.

Geolocated footage posted on October 17 and 18 indicates that Russian forces advanced in central and western Maksymilianivka.

Geolocated footage posted on October 13 indicates that Russian forces advanced in southeastern Katerynivka.

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Russian Field Fortifications
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

OPINION

By Hamish de Bretton-Gordon

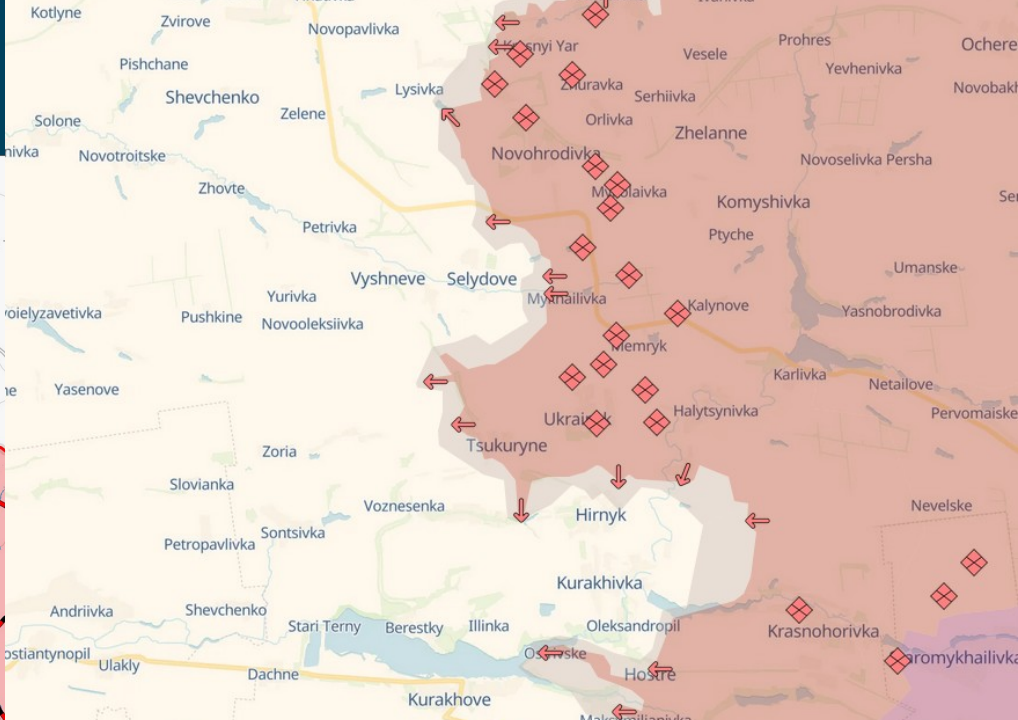
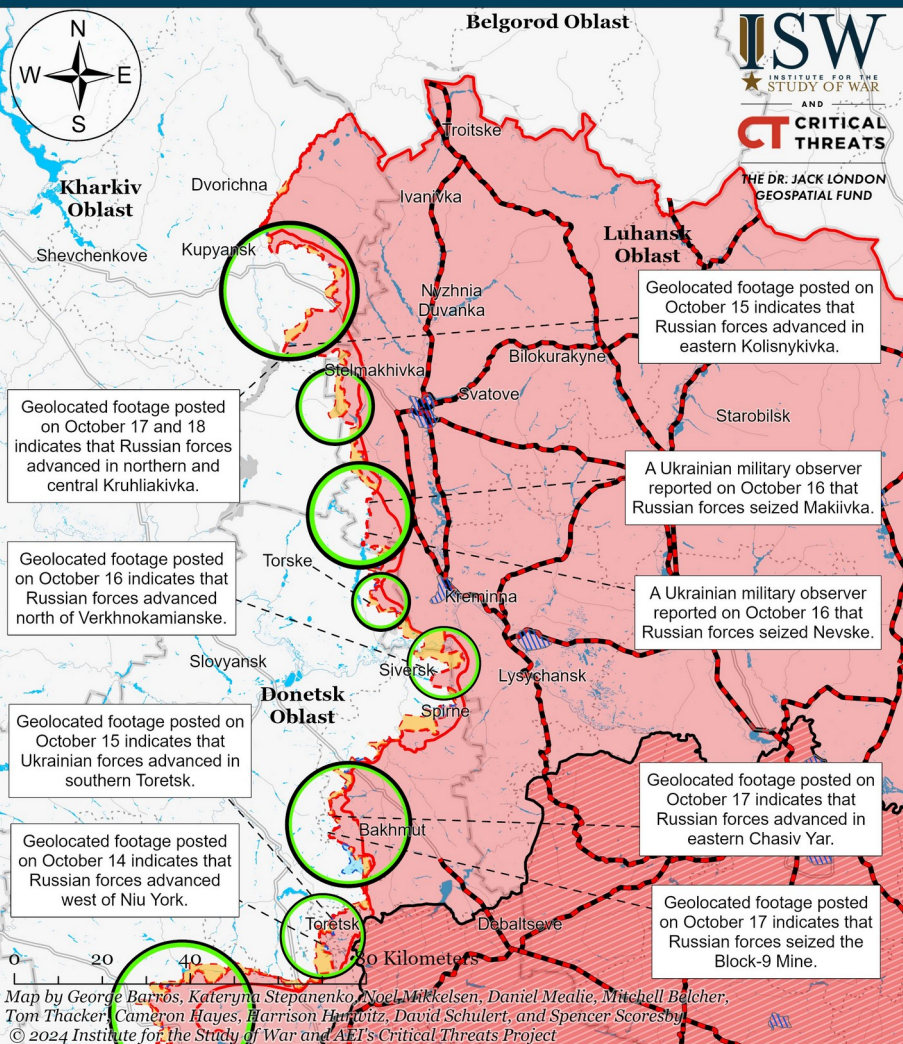
Russian morale is collapsing – now is the time to help Ukraine put the boot in

Putin's special military operation has run out of steam

September 22, 2024 3:44 pm

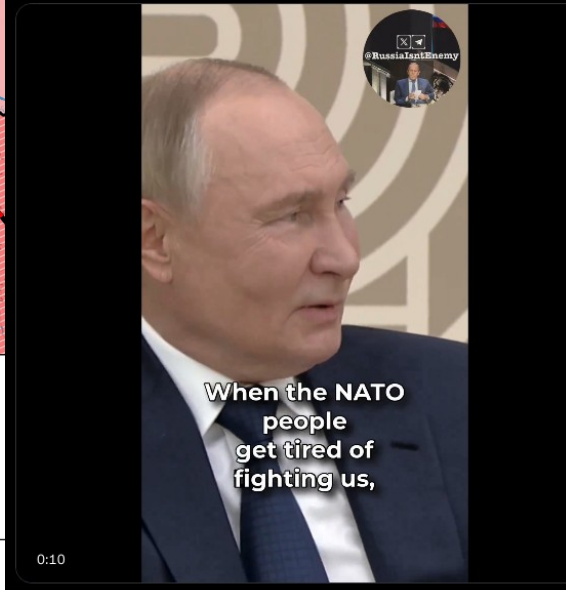


Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of October 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



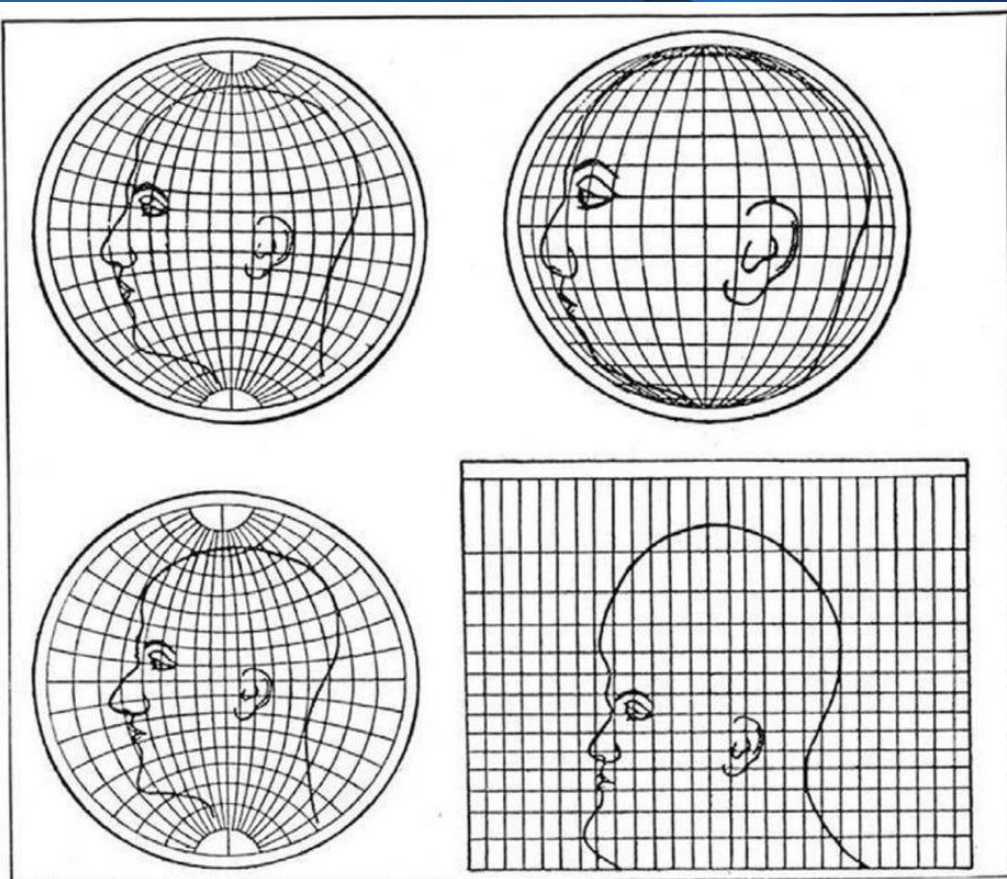
Russia is not Enemy @RussiaIsntEnemy

“Ask the NATO when they will get tired to fight us. We are ready to carry on this fight, and victory will be ours” – President Putin.



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
 - ▬ Russian Ground Lines of Communication
 - ▭ Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
 - ▭ Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
 - ▭ Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
 - ▭ Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
 - ▭ Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
 - ▭ Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- * Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Mapping - what it takes?



Upper left: Globular. Upper right: Orthographic. Lower left: Stereographic.
Lower right: Mercator

What four commonly used projections do, as shown on a human head

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Anyone can make a map—but it takes skill to create an effective one. 🗺️

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esri.social/k11q50TJcy0

A network map of the United States showing major cities and their connections. The map is color-coded by region and includes labels for DC 1 through DC 7. The map shows a dense network of connections between major cities across the country.

Spatial Ontologies and Cartography

Cartography relies on the **assumption that the world** has an objective spatial structure. Maps simplify and represent real-world entities (e.g., cities, countries, landscapes) but assume these entities exist independently of human representation.

Maps abstract real-world objects, creating a simplified, visual depiction. The underlying belief is that these spatial entities, even when altered or abstracted, have a real **existence outside the map** itself.

Realism acknowledges both the **mind-independent** physical features (mountains, rivers) and **socially constructed** aspects of space (political borders, urban development). Even though human activity shapes space, its existence is independent of our perceptions.

Cartography is rooted in a realist view of space. Even though human activity alters and organizes space, the **commitment to realism** ensures that maps serve as reliable tools for real-world navigation, planning, and geographic analysis, representing both natural and constructed features accurately.

Map & Area Studies

Mapping spatial mechanisms (like environmental forces or social structures) that **produce observable effects** on the landscape.

Spatial and cartographic models can benefit from **recognizing causal mechanisms** that are not immediately observable but still real—such as the geological forces shaping landscapes or the socio-political factors influencing territory.

Maps, from a realist perspective, should not only represent spatial phenomena (e.g., borders, terrain) but **also consider the mechanisms** (e.g., tectonic movements, human interventions) that generate them.

Spatial phenomena often involve multiple **levels of reality** (e.g., physical geography, human society). Emergence theory in ontology suggests that higher-level phenomena (e.g., human settlements) cannot be fully explained by lower-level mechanisms (e.g., geological formations), although they are interconnected.

Cartography must account for this by **integrating multilevel explanations**—showing how spatial structures emerge from, yet are irreducible to, their underlying components.

Retroduction in Spatial Methods

1. **Starting with an Observation** (Unexplained Spatial Phenomenon):
 - Example: A city experiences rapid urban sprawl in one direction but not others, without any clear environmental or economic explanation. The observation may be surprising given the uniform terrain or zoning regulations across the area.
2. **Inferring a Possible Cause** or Theory (Hypothesis):
 - Spatial scientists might propose various hypotheses to explain the observed phenomenon. For instance:
 - There may be hidden geological factors (e.g., soil stability, flood risk) that influence construction patterns.
 - Historical land ownership patterns or legacy agreements may favor development in certain directions.
 - Unseen infrastructure projects (e.g., underground utility lines or future transport routes) could make certain areas more attractive for developers.
3. **Assessing the Hypothesis** (Most Plausible Explanation):
 - Scientists would gather and analyze evidence to test the proposed hypotheses. They might examine soil studies, land-use records, or consult planning documents. Through mapping tools, satellite imagery, and statistical analysis, the most plausible explanation is identified:
 - Perhaps historical land ownership or upcoming transport routes have indeed influenced the direction of urban expansion.
 - Even if all hypotheses aren't conclusively proven, the goal is to arrive at the most credible explanation based on the available data.

Thanks