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## THE PETERS PROJECTION AND THE LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE OF RE-COLONIZATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *In 1973, German historian Arno Peters unveiled the “Peters projection,” a map that challenged the Eurocentric Mercator style by redrawing the so-called “Third World” to appear more prominent on the global landscape. The projection sparked intense debate among cartographers about the overt use of ideology in mapping, while simultaneously championed by international groups (from the UN to church organizations) as a corrective against the marginalization of developing nations. This essay addresses how the Peters map became a rhetorical emblem for an internationalist identity within the contentious spatial conceptions constraining the Cold War. Ultimately, the Peters projection, despite its radicalism, constituted a “recolonization” that supported logics of Western liberal development in the Third World.*

**KEYWORDS:** Cartography, International Development, Decolonization, Peters Projection, Visual Rhetoric

In May 1973, a little-known West German socialist historian named Arno Peters called a press conference in Bonn. Amongst a group of 300-plus international academics, journalists, government and NGO representatives, Peters unveiled what he and his publishers would later tout as “the greatest single advance in map-making in over 400 years” (Peters, 1983). Peters’ map used an equal-area projection that rectified latitude lines at the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel. And indeed the map startled with its stretched shapes—Europe is now significantly smaller than in the famed Mercator projection, with the Southern hemispheres elongated, and Africa as a defining center of vision (Figure 1). According to *The Guardian* (1973), Peters stated bluntly at the conference that, “Mercator presents a fully false picture, particularly regarding the non-white-peopled lands. It over-values the white man and distorts the picture of the world to the advantage of the colonial masters of the time” (p. 15).

This “radical” map itself was by no means innovative—in fact, Peters was replicating a long-forgotten 1885 projection by a Scottish pastor and “gentleman scientist” who was dabbling in cartography (Gall, 1885). But the new appropriation of this simple map *was* innovative, as its makers and circulators placed it into a charged context of tumultuous decolonization and Cold War tensions over the development of the so-called “Third World.” Rather than an academic/technical innovation, the Peters map is noteworthy as a rhetorical event, challenging its diverse audiences to conceive of cartography as a provocative and powerful communicative medium for change, not simply as a representation of space. In the process, Peters ambitiously and self-consciously attempted to change the way a global audience envisioned their place within the world through an explosive mixture of ideology, science, and social advocacy (Peters, 1976).

The “Peters projection,” as it came to be known, took on an active life and had a staying power that even the relentlessly self-promoting Peters could not have anticipated. A diverse array of religious and charitable organizations, transnational policymakers, and schools all embraced the map. By 2002, at least 83 million copies of the Peters map had been estimated in international circulation, becoming in Crampton’s estimation (1994), “the best-known map in the world, excepting only the Mercator” (p. 22). Due to its simple science and unabashed ideological stance, the Peters map was unique in its ability to incite equal vitriol and praise (Maling, 1974; Loxton, 1985; Sriskandarajah, 2003). Cartography’s disciplinarians were particularly upset: Canadian geographer Thomas Wray (1978) wrote that the projection and its campaign were a collection of “half-truths based on muddy thinking,” (pp. 28–29) while the German Cartographic Society (1985) made an official edict against the Peters map, deciding that it “completely fails to convey the manifold global, economic and political relationships of our times” (p. 110). It was the kind of map that was condemned in the United Nation’s *Secretariat News* (“...it is not

advisable for the United Nations to adopt the Peters map for any publication, let alone endorse it”), while simultaneously printed and distributed by the UN Development Programme in its 115 international offices (Robinson, 1985, pp. 110–11). Peters commented that “public discussion was such as had not been known in the history of cartography. I attribute this to the fact that the debate over my map was in reality not a struggle about a projection as such but over a world picture. Clearly, ideology had entered the struggle” (Kaiser, 1987, p. 2).

The Peters map’s complex function as a vital ideological struggle over a “world picture” is the entry point for this essay. During the era of anti-colonial national independence, the Peters map stridently critiqued traditional Cold War, East-West geopolitics, and radically politicized “Third World” area. However, I argue that, by assuming many formal conventions of the very maps the Peters projection attempted to indict and through its appropriation as an icon, the map created a *recolonization* of the Third World built on a new set of powerful interests—those of Cold War development. Discourses of international development were primarily directed by Western elites hoping to secure an uncertain post-WWII landscape for control and surveillance by the First and Second World. The Peters map justifies that control by adhering to Western ideologies of liberal re-distribution, and equality and upholding a three-tiered world where developing nations are continually “becoming.”

In this process, the rhetorical practice of cartography itself is implicated—while Arno Peters sought to indict the colonialist origins of world maps, the visual conventions and the ensuing reproductions of (and debate over) his map still cast the emergent “South” as a repository of Western interests and structures. This recolonization may have lacked the brute force of old-style European colonialism, but it still favored a system of civilizational hierarchies and elites (in this case, the liberal, expert cartographer and enlightened, humanitarian

policymaker). In Walter Mignolo's terms, colonialism may have ended, but the "coloniality of power" did not fade away (2002, p. 62). Thus, even in a radical, anti-colonial map such as the Peters projection, cartography struggles against its own imperial, colonizing history.

Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde (2002) have emphasized the importance of "historicizing" the modes of communication by which the international, post World War II landscape was articulated, and particularly how "institutionalized knowledge" in the era was "always subject to forces of colonialism, nation, geopolitics, and history" (251). This essay situates the institutionalized knowledge of cartography as a vital mode of communication for critiquing the historical shift when the de-colonizing nations of the Southern hemisphere became newly "colonized" subjects of a worldwide program of development. If we accept Shome's claim (2003), for example, that space "functions as a technology—a means and a medium—of power that is socially constituted through material relations that enable the communication of specific politics," then communication scholars can and must contextualize and critique the very documents, artifacts, and even visual practices that construct and maintain these spaces of power (p. 40). This essay does just this by attending to the unique artifacts of development's mediation *in their own contexts*—and by emphasizing that a "recolonization" of the developing world takes place only through specific rhetorical practices. Not only did the Peters map as cartographic icon shape and organize a particular viewpoint of the world, the actual circulation of that visual representation of space over the course of 30 years perpetuated such powerful imaginaries of the world. In this way, the notion of recolonization suggests to postcolonial communication scholars that the very tools of colonialism, like maps, can also be appropriated as new forms of subjugation, even as they try to transcend their imperial histories.

To make such a contribution, I analyze the visual conventions of the Peters map closely, while also evaluating the circulation of the map against the international forces that perpetuated such an eventful rhetorical life. In the first section, I begin by contextualizing the Peters projection within both the movements of decolonization and international development, in order to demonstrate how the rhetoric of modernization enacted new forms of control. Then, I discuss the dual function of the map's display and circulation through the following themes: 1) the subversion of form in the Peters projection's rhetorical display, particularly in its politicization of *area* and its choice to use liberal "equality" as its corrective standard; 2) the context of the map's circulation as an icon for internationalism and development; and 3) the map's sparking of a disciplinary crisis in cartography as a whole, particularly in the debates around both positivism and radicalism in mapping during the Cold War. Through each of these themes, I advance the central argument that the Peters map's form and circulation complicated its bold, anti-colonial message by advancing frameworks of liberal Western modernization and development, thereby introducing a recolonization of the Southern hemisphere. Overall, the essay confirms how cartography articulated anxieties over the representations of North/South in the Cold War and located the ideological struggles between colonialism, anti-colonialism, and international development in both latitude and longitude.

### **The Three-Tiered Cartography of the Cold War**

The notion of a "recolonization" recognizes, through a post-colonial lens, that the demise of European colonialism and its aftermath was far from a natural progression of self-determining nations progressing toward more modern and liberal social economic development—in practice, this narrative of dependency and difference between South and North needed to be crafted, protected, and perpetuated. The story of the need for Western-led progressive development in the

Cold War, in other words, became naturalized through hard rhetorical labor, and a widely circulating international icon like the Peters projection was instrumental in shaping that process. Before actually analyzing the visual conventions of the map and its eventful life, this section briefly provides the necessary context out of which the Peters map emerged, in order to trace how such a powerful narrative came to be. I engage with this context by a) tracing the discursive tensions between the North and South in the wake of colonialism's demise, and b) engaging with cartography's role as a colonizing mode of communication within these tensions.

The "Third World" itself is both a fundamentally spatial and Cold War-centric concept. From its conception, it was continually contested and redefined, and it operated as a classification serving a variety of interests (Randall, 2004). The term itself has been attributed to French economist Alfred Sauvy in 1952 when he used it to demarcate "developing countries" in contrast to the two major Cold War power blocs (Pletsch, 1981). The idea of developed and undeveloped nations was not new. But in the early Cold War, the existence of two international economic systems at such loggerheads was new and thus the "third bloc" became a geopolitically significant, abstract space where the United States and the Soviet Union vied for influence (Berger, 1994). After the famed 1955 conference at Bandung, Indonesia, the idea of an international movement using "Third World" status as a kind of organizing, resistant banner became more and more viable (Wright, 1956; Kahin, 1956; Tan and Acharya, 2008). The concept of the Third World "served as both a hegemonic conceptualization of the world, and of struggles against that hegemony" for "the paradigms of capitalist modernity" and "radical advocates of liberation from Euro-American colonialism" (Dirlik, 2004, p. 133). And in Carl Pletsch's estimation (1981) "the very thought of three worlds on one planet constrained even those who were opponents of the Cold War or partisans of the third world to do work that

contributed both to the strategies of containment and to the exploitation of the third world” (p. 572). The phrase became a kind of “abbreviated ideology” that could represent both state power and its resistance (Beloff, 1978, pp. 12–13).

Particularly from the standpoint of Western elites, though, the three worlds idea was inextricable from the modernization doctrines of Cold War social science and public policy. As a discourse, modernization argued that with knowledge and instruments, underdeveloped civilizations could advance themselves. The three worlds concept folded space into time, partitioning the “one-world” into a continental hierarchy where certain spaces are frozen onto the map as always “arriving” (Agnew, 2003, p. 47). In this process, as Arturo Escobar (1992) points out, “to represent the Third World as ‘underdeveloped’ is less a statement about ‘facts’ than setting up a regime of truth through which the Third World is inevitably known, intervened on, and managed” (p. 62). This management of knowledge defined Third World space by what it “lacked” (whether in money, political stability, health—even in developing nations’ abilities to properly map themselves) (Slater, 1997). In turn, the First World and the Second World would define themselves and each other around the ways they could meet this lack.

Despite the ways that the Third World was defined as underdeveloped and backward, it is important to note how the South became a powerful geopolitical trope (Saul, 2005). While this “mass” South was often presented as a passive repository of Cold War interests, it was just as often appropriated (and feared) for its potential strength and threat (Buchanan, 1964). As geographer Donald W. Meinig wondered aloud as early as 1956, “Is it not ironic that in this era...of unprecedented concentration of military power in the hands of two powerful nations...the small nation, the obscure culture group, the wholly non-industrialized people, are able to exert far greater force upon the complexion of events than in the past?” (p. 220). Indeed,



historians such as David Painter (1995) and Odd Arne Westad (2006) made clear that the influence of the South on the actions of the so-called North in the Cold War was not merely about security and economic influence—it was about deeply embedded historical beliefs.

The notion of recolonization becomes particularly salient here because, while traditional colonial control may have been seen as more invasive and totalizing, the new subtler and softer brand of colonialism retained a peculiar controlling power of its own, as nation-states were compelled to enter the framework of “becoming” modern. Such recolonization involved a sense of idealism about Western powers being able to altruistically improve the fortunes of a globalizing world through sharing (or imposing) of industrial, economic, and educational techniques and programs. At the same time, this idealism existed uneasily alongside a fear of the South’s ability to rise and become powerful on its own—or worse, to fall under socialist influence. Amidst the tumult of decolonization, Edward Said (1978) noted a “*distribution of geopolitical awareness*” that resulted in “a whole series of ‘interests’ [that] *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will of intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (p. 12).

With the politicization of the equatorial masses, the North was cultivating a new geopolitical will to incorporate and control the Third World by producing massive amounts of knowledge about it (Suri, 2006). The replacement of East/West with North/South set up new “processes of subjectification,” in Homi Bhabha’s terms (1996, pp. 37–38), where there were constant attempts to “fix” the developing nations’ places in the world. For Westad,

In a historical sense—and especially as seen from the South—the Cold War was a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means. As a process of conflict, it centered on control and domination, primarily in ideological terms. The methods of the

superpowers and of their local allies were remarkably similar to those honed during the last phase of European colonialism: giant social and economic projects, bringing promises of modernity to their supporters....(p. 396).

The Peters controversy, coming at the early 1970s apex of still-violent struggles over decolonization particularly in Africa, exists at this transition where the end of the colonial system begets a search for a new system—one that the tiered world of development seemed to fit.

Cartography served as an apt mediator for this transition—able to account for the global spread of markets and its accompanying ideologies through the map’s ability to compress the world into one visual field. Cartography had long been a form of surveillance, managing complex data and simplifying territorial space to align with certain universal, characteristics; as Denis Wood (1992) famously wrote, “The map links the territory with what comes with it” (10). Scholars have amply documented the imperial origins of mapping and the nation-state’s use of geographic knowledge to survey and control (see especially Edney, 1997, and Brotton, 2012)—and the world after colonialism put this cartographic framework into question. Yet, like those maps of empire from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, many political maps of the post-WWII period, however subtly, imposed a view of the world supporting what John Hobson (2012) has called the “subliminal Eurocentrism” and paternalistic “liberal civilizing mission” of Third World development (p. 199). The era’s rise of geography as a quantitative social science aided this global movement in its ability to synthesize immense amounts of data about the growth of nation states that were suddenly independent (McMaster and McMaster, 2002). From popular maps to institutional maps to alternative maps of protest, the content of cartography was expanding exponentially into covering a wider range of social and political topics to keep up with the decolonization explosion (Robinson, Morrison, and Muehrcke, 1977). But because the *form* of

the map was still often conceived as a technical system of scientific techniques, those social and political functions could be downplayed as simply being part of an objective survey of the globe—seemingly far away from the more overtly controlling aims of earlier, colonial maps.

The central difference between the old colonial maps and the new maps of recolonization was that the new maps were less concrete (no spaces for conquest and expansion), but rather more abstract and universal in their aims. Cartographers and state representatives of the Cold War could see in one simple glance a potential world made at least somewhat stable through the influence of democracy and capital. Of course, Walter Mignolo's work (2011) reminds us that "capitalism is not only a domain of economic transactions and exploitation of labor, but of control and management of knowledge and subjectivities" (p. 33). And the cartography of the Cold War was arguing for particular values that seemed almost contradictory: on one hand, maps like the Peters projection were shrouded in a powerful rhetoric of science and modern progress *for all*. On the other hand, this was rhetoric that could represent control and division just as starkly as the imperial maps of old. As Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996) notes, "the struggle over geography is...a contest of power and resistance that involves not only struggles to represent the materiality of physical geographic objects and boundaries but also...the equally material force of discursive borders between an idealized Self and a demonized Other, between us and them" (pp. 14–15). As progressive as their aims could be, these maps still set up powerful divisions between a developed and a developing world. And it is, perhaps, the Peters map's visual display of "area" for the Third World that accentuates these divisions most forcefully.

### **The Form of the Third World: The Politicization of Area in the Peters Map**

The most infamous critique of the Peters projection came from Arthur Robinson (1985), one of the most distinguished American academics in cartography, as he pointed out that, "On

the ‘Peters projection’ the landmasses are somewhat reminiscent of wet, ragged, long, winter underwear hung out to dry on the Arctic circle” (p. 104). Upon Peters’ death in 2002, British geographer Peter Vujakovic (2003a) even eulogized him with a large cartoon of Peters dutifully standing in front of a clothesline putting out the world’s continents to air. These images speak to Peters’ central conceit: the rhetorical choice to emphasize the accurate area of the world’s continents over the accuracy of their shape. This section explores the consequences of this important move, particularly in how the Peters map’s specific definition of equality makes a powerful recolonization (through development) of the South by the North seem natural and progressive in the wake of European colonialism.

The first noticeable visual effect of the Peters map is the elongation of the areas in the middle, which Peters manages by relegating the equator to the exact middle of the map. As Henrikson (1979) writes, “On most Mercator maps, the Equator is located well below the middle, resulting in a kind of global pituitary problem: North America and Eurasia are giant-sized, South America and Africa are dwarfed” (p. 175). By contrast, in Peters’ map, the continents of South America and Africa, as well as the region of Southeast Asia dominate the visual field (figs. 3 and 4). Porter and Voxland (1986) derided this “squeezed accordion” effect as only being able to “give north and south” and thus useless in terms of calculating distance (a hallmark strength of the Mercator) (p. 27). In terms of Cold War geopolitics, the air-age globalism of the 1940s posited the airplane’s shrinking of distance as the new measurement standard on the map; here it is the sheer scale and population power of the equatorial masses that serves as the new standard. While the de-emphasis on Western Europe and America was central to the map’s arguments, the challenge to “Second World” areal power was also made clear. The Soviet Union is stretched into a flatter and less imposing shape, and its more extreme placement in the upper North

“squashes” the usually sprawling Soviet Republics together. As Peters told the *Guardian*, “It makes it easy to see why the Russians are so nervous about the Chinese” (Morris, 1973, p. 15). The recalculation of area articulated anxieties and new vulnerabilities in the fault lines of the Cold War.

In this way, Peters’ claims to fidelity and consistency through the principle of equality posit cartography as a fusion between form and content. The scientific use of equality in scale and coverage of particular places in his maps parallel the ideological argument for equality amongst nations and peoples. For example, part of Peters’ claim to cartographic equality is his promotion that *all* of his topographic maps in the *Peters Atlas* are on the same scale: each map uses an equal area scale, rather than one simply based on distance—one square centimeter on the map equals 6,000 square kilometers in reality. Peters’ collaborating cartographer, Terry Hardaker (1990), notes in his introduction to the atlas,

We have come to accept as ‘natural’ a representation of the world that devotes disproportionate space to large scale maps of areas perceived as important, while consigning other areas to small-scale general maps. And it is because our image of the world has become thus conditioned, that we have for so long failed to recognize the distortion for what it is—the equivalent of peering at Europe and North America through a magnifying glass (p. 6).

This challenges the reader’s sense of formal expectations: in the topographic section, we get to see the relative size of Britain to, say, Madagascar, which is surprisingly larger in area. In this way, Peters sought to minimize the propensity for misrepresentation and distortion, and to give readers accurate world comparatives. This would often be a point of contention with critics;

Monmonier (1995), for example, wrote that “Peters’s claim of ‘fairness to all peoples’ seems less accurate than ‘fairness to all acres’” (p. 35).

Such critiques hint at the potential tendency for the Peters map to impose a new colonizing vision through its symbolic choices of color, shape, and iconography. For example, most versions of the Peters world maps feature a color scheme that relegates certain color “families” to particular continents: Europe gets shades of roses and pinks, Asia gets lavenders and deeper purples etc. The *New Internationalist* (1983), publishing the first English-language edition, highlighted this use of color as an innovation: “One of the most potent symbols of the dissolution of the British Empire, for those old enough to remember it, has been the disappearance of those splashes of red around the world. Indeed since the 1960s there has been relatively little need for political maps which give the same colour to countries under the same administration—since most are now independent Peters suggests that we start again and, instead of emphasizing the difference between countries, we should highlight the growing links between nations in the same region” (para. 26). Kaiser’s guide to the Peters’ (1987) supports this, adding:

Regional and national identities more and more take precedence over a relationship that owes its origin and its continuation to forcible conquest and foreign domination.

Therefore Peters conceived the idea of showing a whole region in one dominant color-family, with each nation having its own variant. Thus the “family connections” as well as the separateness of each country can be shown (p. 23).

The color scheme speaks to the context of decolonization: by choosing to give each state its own shade of the color “family,” Peters’ map reifies the power of regional stereotyping in the Cold War—that each political unit has its own voice, but is still part of a “bloc” of similar voices. In

an important sense, this grouping reduces the intensely volatile transnational relationships between such “families.”

The potential problem is that in spite of its focus on equality and distribution, the Peters map retains a partitioned world of distinct landmasses as an enduring feature of a global geographic imagination, what Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen (1997) calls the problematic “myth of continents.” This myth advances that there are somehow significant cultural groupings denoted by these divisions and that continents are still useful units of analysis. According to Lewis and Wigen, the continental framework may conveniently “structure our perceptions of the human community” but “does injustice to the complexities of global geography, and it leads to faulty comparisons. When used by those who wield political power, its consequences can be truly tragic” (p. 1). The complications of the changing world of the decolonizing late-Cold War world and the individual identities of the emergent nations are left off the Peters map in favor of a simplified political message, implying that the West still has a power to define the fates of Third World nations.

In addition, the Peters map and its politicization of area cannot be understood without being seen as engaged in a dialectical kind of tension with the Mercator projection, which somewhat ironically contributes to this sense of re-colonization. The Peters projection is almost always consistently drawn (and debated) in reference to the Mercator map by Peters himself, his critics, and in media coverage of the map. Therefore, while Peters seeks a total replacement of the Mercator, his own projection draws its power through comparison, always referring back to the visual memory of the Mercator that he assumes his audiences share collectively. For example, in the version of the Peters map distributed by the United Nations Development Program, the margin of the main world map is filled with a series of insets—these constitute a group of

comparatives meant to indict the falsities of the Mercator, particularly in terms of areal distortion (see Figure 1 again). In one inset, the top half of the world above Mexico and Asia is colored in black, while the rest is colored in gray, captioned by the staggering statistic that the “North” is 18.9 million square miles, while the “South” is 38.6 million square miles. Visually, this black and white bipolar Mercator presentation stands in contrast to the multi-colored visual explosion of the larger Peters map.

Such contrasts render the Mercator as politicized, unscientific, and outdated, while the Peters map is billed as the clear, untainted frame of objectivity for the future. Indeed, Peters’ sweeping version of history in his writings bear this out—in the *New Cartography* (1983) he refers to the end of “the work of cartographers of a bygone age – the age of European domination and exploitation,” an age being replaced, as he says, by a “worldwide consciousness of solidarity” (p. 7). Critics derided Peters’ background as a historian for imposing this kind of linearity on the development of projections, rather than viewing the world like a cartographer, where different projections could be useful depending on the mapmaker’s purposes (Vujakovic, 1988, p. 5). And because the Peters map *has* to invoke the Mercator, its utility as a radical innovation may be tempered. Peters’ map insists on the same detached, rectangular, and omniscient vision of space that characterizes the Mercator. The conundrum is in how much its calls to radicalism through equality can truly inculcate an anti-colonial world vision.

In this way, one of the most important challenges facing the Peters projection is that while it makes “equality” a central corrective measure of the map, the projection (and the agents of its ensuing circulation) does not make a critique of equality itself—it accepts and imposes a particularly liberal vision of equality. The Peters map’s equality of area implies a brand of social justice based on distribution—indeed, historian Jeremy Black (1997) once called the Peters



projection a “redistributive polemic” (p. 33). By correcting area, users of the map can supposedly see plainly where the redistribution of global resources should take place. Similar to how the Mercator map based its colonial vision of the world on the potential openness for sea trade and exploration, the Peters map enhances the area of the Southern nations to mark as “self-evident” the regions where the West should direct its aid and economic investments. The power of the West doesn’t diminish necessarily on the Peters map—rather, it offers a new set of prescriptives for influence in the future. In other words, the politics have changed, but the universal presentation of the world for a Western gaze remains—development becomes as inevitable and commonsense as colonial intervention.

Thus, even a map sensitive to the history of colonialism such as the Peters projection still equates equality with *sameness* and constructs the global South as a *mass*. As Iris M. Young (1990) has written, “It is a mistake to reduce social justice to distribution” as this “tends to focus thinking about social justice on the allocation of material goods such as things, resources, income, and wealth,” which “tends to ignore the social structure and institutional context that often help determine distributive patterns” (p. 15). In basing the map in a paradigm of redistribution, Peters may have limited his ability to critique the North’s own hegemonic standards and structures, and helped to perpetuate the kind of “difference” that allowed European and American policymakers and aid groups to re-colonize the spaces of the Third World through the ideologies of development. Overall, the choice to offer the startling contrast in area is used provocatively to alarm readers at the ballooning size of the Third World. In turn, this contrast incites audiences towards actively re-directing the unpredictable energy of anti-colonial liberation and independence toward a controlled dependency on Western influences. And this kind of

redirection can be seen even more clearly in the Peters projection long-gestating transformation into an international development symbol.

### **North, South, and the Iconization of Development in the Peters Projection**

While the internal form of the Peters map offered a complex presentation of equality through area, the map's external circulation suggests that the Peters seemed less to equalize the North and South and more to dramatize the scope of the South's "problems" and promote the self-evident need for modernization. By tracing the busy rhetorical life of the Peters map's elevation to an international icon, this section offers that the Peters map arguably became less of a militant banner of social change, and more of a symbolic accommodation to the Eurocentric altruism of "bringing up" the South. Many diverse groups, from international development organizations to global religious movements, were using the Peters projection to connote a sense of rupture with past colonial practices, but at the same time were imposing a new set of structures (in the form of economic, political, and social development) to replace colonialism, even if those structures may have been more abstract and ideological. In the process, the Peters projection complied with a positivist story about what "progress" should mean for burgeoning nation-states and organized how such nations should self-identify in the face of Cold War superpower influence.

As Hariman and Lucaites (2002) explain, "one reason images become iconic is that they coordinate a number of different patterns of identification within the social life of the audience... which together provide a public audience with sufficient means to comprehend potentially unmanageable events...." (p. 367). And the way in which that icon helps manage events and contexts is powerful—as Catherine Palczewski (2005) notes, icons are always "referential forms" that can become "appeals to fix and stabilize" in "the face of social pressures

of destabilization” (p. 388). The elevation of the Peters map into the iconic is important, becoming a kind of “totalizing discourse,” rather than simply a geographic image of spatial relationships (Cosgrove, 1994, pp. 287–88). As the bipolar, East-West geopolitical frameworks were being destabilized in the rise of the non-aligned movements in the Third World and international development organizations, the Peters projection offered itself as a political shorthand for an alternative interpretation of Cold War space. As Peters himself understood, “My projection has ceased to be just a piece of mathematics or cartography—it is now a symbol” (Spicer, 1989, p. 42).

The influential “Brandt Report’s” support and circulation of the Peters projection demonstrates well the map’s transformation into an icon of distributive justice, but also the problem of replacing colonial ideologies with another set of potentially hegemonic frameworks. In 1980, the Independent Commission on International Development Issues released the influential report *North-South: A Programme For Survival*, comprising representatives from over 20 countries and outlining a humanitarian and economic system of world development. The group was convened and led by former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, internationally known for *Ostpolitik* and the thawing of East-West relations in Germany. While debate was widespread about the politics behind the commission, the publicity of their report was extensive (Williams, 1980; Bird, 1980). And, sure enough, the cover of the report was the Peters projection: rendered simply in red over a gridded background, with a stark, thick black line running over Mexico, over the tip of Africa up through China, and then dramatically dipping below Australia. The inside flap of the report read, “This projection represents an important step away from the prevailing Eurocentric geographical and cultural concept of the world...the more densely settled earth zones, it is claimed, appear in proper proportion to each other.” With the

powerful picture of Western development gurus like Brandt standing in front of massive backdrops of the Peters projection at international conferences, and through its use in the popular printed report, the irony of a newer Eurocentric viewpoint replacing an older Eurocentric viewpoint is on full display. In this case, the leaders of Europe are invested by visual icons like the Peters map with the license to order and classify world space according to specific Western ideas of liberal progression and economic advancement.

The ensuing diversity of the map's appropriation would continue to showcase this iconic function, and its implications for recolonization. In addition to the Brandt Commission, other development organizations such as the Overseas Development Institute would use it in publications like their *EEC and the Third World* (1981), similarly as a kind of a simplified logo. The UN Committee on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) used the Peters in its report on the least developed countries of the world, while it would also be appropriated into UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) brochures, and newsletters for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Organization (GATT – the precursor to the World Trade Organization) (Robinson, 1985). International charity group Action Aid would simplify the Peters into a logo for the masthead of its newspaper (Bain, 1984, p. 343).

And the Peters map would circulate well beyond these supranational communities. Much was made out of the fact, for example, that the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church had a Peters world map six feet high etched in glass at the entrance of its New York offices (Kaiser, 1987). Lutheran Church leaders also endorsed the map, with testimonials such as: "The Christian message includes an emphasis on justice for all, based on the love of God which is extended to all... The Peters map appears to be the best education tool for showing us our place on earth. The values and purposes of this map coincide well with the teachings of

the Bible and the church” (p. 26). The mere image of the Peters aesthetically connoted a sense of internationalist values for large religious organizations attempting to spread development of a different kind worldwide.

In terms of its international education possibilities, coordinators at the Development Education Association, an international consortium of educators, would rave about the Peters map’s ability to teach the values of global citizenship (Ashmore, 2003). An eighth-grade math teacher from a Chicago Mexican immigrant community used the Peters to teach his students how to critically “read” the world, with one of his students reporting that, “doing this project has opened my eyes in different ways. I am learning how small details like maps have a lot to do with racism and power” (p. 58). And nonprofit groups like Broader Perspectives secured acceptance by the State Board of Education in Texas to integrate the Peters map into curricula since, they argued, it “demonstrates more accurate and objective perceptions of the significance of nations in both hemispheres” (Kaiser, 1987, p. 27). Academics in developing nations also became part of the Peters campaign: geographer Vernon Mulcasingh of the University of the West Indies commented that the map “represents a burst of brilliance that can be compared with any major breakthrough in the world of science” (p. 10).

Through this diversity of usages and the wide circulation, the internationalist, progressive theme of development became a uniting, common theme. In many of these cases, the projection was divorced from its production and its connection to an atlas or scientific grid. In this way, the Peters map was abstracted as a “logo”—while Benedict Anderson (1991) spoke of “map-as-logo” in the sense of the shape of a nation state becoming a kind of “flag” logo in consolidating nationalist imaginations, here the Peters map becomes a floating logo for an *internationalist* identity (p. 175). As an iconic emblem, the map could transcend its technical origins and be

appropriated to represent, above all, a collection of *values*. Brandt's introduction to *North-South* (1980) was telling, as he wrote, "In the summer of 1978, half a year after we had started our work, a friend and distinguished African leader sent me an encouraging message: our Commission, he said, could 'contribute to the development of worldwide moral values'" (p. 7).

The ability of the Peters map to project such values was often missed in the disciplinary debate by cartographers and scientists. After a survey of 42 NGOs on their perceptions and use of the Peters projection, Peter Vujakovic (1987) concluded that "the decisions to adopt the Peters projection are probably based on very restricted knowledge of cartography and on intuition regarding the value of its distinctive 'image'. This is supported by the fact that very few of the organizations receive advice from professionals involved in cartography...It has become accepted as the ideologically correct map to use" (p. 14). The Peters projection was being measured according to two very different standards. Vujakovic was implicitly denigrating "ideological correctness," "intuition," and "image"—in a sense, *rhetoric*—as a factor in choosing to use a map as opposed to its function as a professional, scientific instrument. Conversely, development organizations saw the map as an encapsulation of internationalist moral values—a political statement that, for many, transcended the technical considerations for something more universal. Placing and maintaining the Southern nations on the path to Northern standards of economic and social success was considered a moral, civilizing duty, and the Peters projection mediated that mission for a host of international organizations.

These many uses and reproductions of the Peters map by international development organizations, religious missions, and school groups (mostly of Western origin) raise questions around the thorny notion of "multiculturalism." Shome (2012), for example, has questioned if Western overtures to multiculturalism during the post-WWII era have reiterated the kinds of

colonial “difference” that they were designed to replace, and wonders aloud whether the discourses of “multicultural democracies end up being alibis for a logic of exceptionalism in relation to many non-Western contexts (‘We are a pluralistic society; you are not’) (p. 145).” For Shome, the abstract goals of multiculturalism may be worthy, but as a communicative practice, the rhetoric of multiculturalism risks actually re-othering the so-called “rest of the world.” In its impressively wide circulation, the Peters map is celebrated as a multicultural touchstone, from inside classrooms right up to heavily mediated international summits. But perhaps it is the very internationalist, multicultural status of the Peters map that tends to recolonize the de-colonized world by way of a universal, moral corrective. Roxanne Doty (1996) has written of how Northern elites have often seen the cultural “difference” between North and South as something that can be scientifically managed by Northern powers—a piece of cartography that spatially plots this sense of difference may have proven ideal for that management job.

This reproduction of difference reminds us that while many global institutions used Peters to idealistically bring all three “worlds” together, these groups were still part of the contentious context of Cold War geopolitics, thus making the map’s internationalist identity still beholden to more nationalistic ends. Mignolo (2000) remarked on Cold War “cosmopolitanism,” where international spatial relationships were redefined by Western elites in terms of interdependency and *human* rights through the “master discourse” of political economy (pp. 737–38). In this move to interdependency, the “language of developing under-developed nations as an alternative to communism” became integral; the problem was that during the Three World system, “decolonized countries were striving for a nation-state, at the same time that the ideologues of the new world order no longer believed in them” (p. 738). Peters’ image as icon, then, exists within the tense relationship between nationalism and internationalism. Development

organizations lent the Peters map a kind of cosmopolitanism to transcend Cold War antagonisms, but this was done largely from the national viewpoints of Western elites.

Because of this, the Peters map downplayed the realities of self-determination and nationhood that other cartographic icons were able to encapsulate. For example, the original OPEC logo of the 1970s featured an ellipse that centered on the Middle East and Africa, with the bottom half of Asia and South America rounding out the Eastern and Western sides of the map—Europe, North America, and the Soviet Union were completely omitted from the image (Henrikson, 1979). The Peters map still needed to have the two spaces visualized in relationship to one another (the South still needed the North); but the OPEC map argued that the Northern half of the world was largely irrelevant to the political and economic advancement of the so-called developing nations. Such logos remind us that the Peters map was still adhering, in many ways, to traditional cartography, rooted in the values of universality that were not always shared by the nations it purported to represent more “accurately.”

In summary, while the Peters map allows non-governmental development organizations to transcend the influence of particular nation-states like the U.S. or the U.K. for a more cosmopolitan, international image, the act of drawing developing nations as one united mass of Southern protest against the North potentially re-bipolarizes the Cold War. In turn, this kind of circulation and appropriation of Peters reasserts a kind of colonial control of North over South, even if under the cosmopolitan guise of international economic development. The final section looks at one particularly explosive articulation of Peters’ tensions between decolonization and recolonization: the passionate debate around the function of science and values in cartography revolving around the burgeoning popularity of the Peters map.

### **Disciplining the Peters: Ideology and Scientific Practice in the Peters Debates**



In this final section, the often strident academic reception of the Peters projection is situated as an important piece of the map's re-colonizing function. Detractors of the map could deflect the radical aspects of Peters' message by redirecting the projection towards a more traditional debate over method and *form*. In the process, such scholars were bringing the Peters map into the realm of the new "enlightened" post-WWII value on cartography as science, a move that even Arno Peters himself became complicit in. In a burgeoning age of globalization, cartographers were upholding the ability (and duty) of Western liberal experts to draw the world according to sanctioned standards and decorum.

While the Peters map circulated widely during the 1970s and development and aid groups distributed them for some time, the true fire of the academic response did not reach its hottest point until the late 1980s—and the bile of some of the critiques has become legendary. Vujakovic (2003b) recounted a call he made to a prominent (unnamed) colleague when "the mention of Peters was enough to cause a stream of invective to be directed down the telephone line" (p. 61). Monmonier (1996) railed against news outlets, who he claimed "covered the story as if [Peters] were a courageous innovator challenging a cartel of racist fuddy-duddies" (p. 22). Perhaps the apex of the Peters' debate came when the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping simply had enough and declared *all* rectangular world maps obsolete and dangerous. The story was noteworthy enough for the *Wall Street Journal*, reporting that the ACSM "adopts a sternly worded resolution condemning such maps for 'showing the round earth as having straight edges and sharp corners'" (Winans, p. A1). The official resolution declared:

WHEREAS, world maps have a powerful and lasting effect on peoples' impressions of the shapes and sizes of lands and seas, their arrangement, and the nature of the coordinate system, and WHEREAS, frequently seeing a greatly distorted map tends to make it "look

right,” we strongly urge book and map publishers, the media, and government agencies to cease using rectangular world maps for general purposes or artistic displays. Such maps promote serious, erroneous conceptions (Robinson, 1990, p. 101).

Over 300 copies of the resolution were distributed to media outlets, and was officially endorsed by all major American geographic societies. While Peters is nowhere mentioned in the resolution, the decision of these prominent organizations to take an official stance on the “rectangular” map seemed a veiled way of condemning the Mercator and the Peters in one fell swoop. ACSM member Arthur Robinson defended the measure’s public opinion function by writing that the committee “hoped it would, over time, help to make the public aware of how seriously distorted is any rectangular portrayal of the spherical earth” (pp. 103–4). The field’s standards of authorship and commitment to innovation and thoroughness had been violated, resulting in an uneasiness about what was to come in the future for maps.

Peters’ sympathizers like Wood and Fels (2008) referred to this declaration as a “preposterous (and wholly ineffectual) resolution,” but used it as an example of just how deeply the projection had shaken the discipline (p. 11). Due to necessities in military and foreign policy applications, post-WWII geography had long been resituated as a quantitative social science, and maps were increasingly drawn by experts to solve particular strategic problems (Farish, 2010; Cloud, 2002). The production of cartographic knowledge, thus, was often a guarded process. On a 1983 NPR broadcast of “All Things Considered,” David Malpus interviewed Ward Kaiser, Peters’ main translator and promoter in Britain and the U.S. When Malpus asked Kaiser why the Peters map does not show Africa in its normal shape, Kaiser answered that, “Well, one needs to ask what is the normal shape of Africa? Without having seen Africa from outer space, I’m really not in a very good position, nor perhaps [is] any of us, to say how it actually looks” (Snyder,

1988, pp. 191–92). Geographer John Snyder’s ensuing response to Kaiser represents the kind of terms by which scientific cartographers were assessing the debate, as he protested, “But because we have navigators’ and surveyors’ mapping work applied to our globes, as well as the new evidence of photographs by astronauts, we know very well how Africa looks from space!” (p. 192). In Snyder’s terms, the trusted tools of scientific experts *have already* given us what we need to envision continental space with accuracy, making the Peters projection useless.

In many ways, the debate was about the concept of “disciplining” cartography. Edney (1997) has written of this concept, where the map serves not just as a tool of state power, but also to perpetuate a progressive narrative about the worth of cartography as a discipline. Much of the push and pull between the acolytes and the detractors of the Peters map goes back to whether the map would be used as a political statement or a scientific device. Supporters emblemized the Peters projection, making it into an icon for development and Third World identity, and removing it from its mathematical plane. Conversely, critical voices often were attempting to *de-iconize* the map—to reclaim the Peters map as a scientific document and a system of calculations, and to bring it back to the grid and debate its technical merits.

The function of this “disciplining,” of course, tended to obscure the underlying politics that the Peters map brought forth. At least in the initial debates about Peters, there was little discussion about what it meant to “map” the Third World, or about the discipline’s approach to issues of ideology and social justice. Peters had certainly produced new knowledges for the field in respect to ideology etc., but as Crampton (2003) points out, these were, at least at the time, “disqualified knowledges” (p. 55). Peters himself did not, however, remain un-implicated in this disciplining: he was certainly aware of the provocative power of a map to challenge worldviews, but he also subscribed to the positivistic narrative that cartography is part of a search for truth. In

his continual insistence that his map was *the* most accurate picture of the world, and that his new projection could ALONE rectify Eurocentric inequalities, he problematically adhered to the cartographic discipline's standards and values. In his claims to truth, Peters upheld *representation* as the key function of his map—the same paradigm of cartography in which many of his critics were working under. Therefore, Peters was often easily brought up as a straw man by cartographers to show how his claims to objectivity and accuracy were a farce. Rather than ask why international organizations would want the Peters projection to represent their global missions, cartographers could instead claim that Peters was simply manipulating these groups through his deceptive marketing campaign. From both sides, a sense of self-reflexivity about a mapmaker's positionality vis-à-vis the Third World was missing.

The volley of debates can be seen as an attempt by professionals and academics to close ranks on the amateurish methods and blatant self-promotion of Arno Peters (Harley, 2001). But more importantly for the argument of this essay, the anger at the Peters projection was also part of the decolonization/recolonization tensions of its late-Cold War context. Cartography's rise as a tool of imperialism and colonial control in the 1700s and 1800s also coincides with its emergence as a scientific enterprise perceived to be value-free. By the last half of the twentieth century, though, in the face of a rapidly decolonizing world, mapping's entire function was called into question. In the highly technologized world of the Cold War, cartographic professionals dedicated themselves to new methods and projections that could stabilize once again our sense of the world. Such new maps could easily support the progressive ideologies of development and modernization—the new kind of recolonization of the South by Northern powers looking to universalize capital and global technologies.

What incensed these cartographers, then, perhaps most was *not* that the Peters map was baring its ideological goals (most mappers had long admitted inevitable subjectivity in maps) but that they felt Peters was damaging the professional decorum of a long-hallowed discipline. These cartographers were not calling for a return to the colonial and imperial functions of the maps of old, but they did have a vested interest in continuing to perpetuate the primary value of liberal expertise. The ideologies of development also shared that premium on expertise—that the expert professionals of the North could provide models for and train the self-determining peoples of the Third World. Peters jeopardized this process by calling attention to maps as symbols that could be appropriated *outside* of the control of cartographic experts. While Peters and his detractors both represented very different sides of a Cold War-era argument around science and value, they both articulated the difficulties in continuing, as Westad says, “colonialism through slightly different means.”

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the Peters projection has not stood as the lone map to challenge the Eurocentrist, colonial framework under which much of the world lived for centuries. An impressive diversity of maps has taken up this mantle, both in professional science and in popular culture. Arthur Robinson’s projection improved abilities to see the realities of a curved earth on the flat page (used by *National Geographic* through the end of the Cold War and after, until it adopted the further improvements of the Winkel Tripel projection in 1998). The Hobo Dyer projection of 2002 used equal-area but corrected the distorted shapes of Peters, and was often printed innovatively with both north-upwards and south-upwards versions—eventually rewarded with wide circulation after President Carter used it for his Nobel Peace Prize speech.

And, yet, the timing of the Peters map's introduction to international discourse and its popularity remains unique and important. As Mignolo (2011) writes, a "project of Westernization" thrived in the Cold War "not by appropriating land, but by managing finances and natural resources through the project of development and modernization, in two stages: from 1950 to 1970, when the project collapsed, and from 1980 to 2008, when the project revived. In the second stage, development was translated into globalism, the conceptual tool of neo-liberal designs" (32). A host of development organizations, NGOs, and other global institutions were taking up the Peters projection at a time when development transitioned toward globalism. The Peters map mediated, if not helped to shape, a distributionist brand of equality and social justice that fed globalization's growth.

Since Peters' work must be re-contextualized as part of the Cold War's powerful re-colonizing shift to development, situating the map's role as an artifact of visual communication in its specific context becomes central. The Peters projection does not simply *depict* the space of the world at a particular time, it is constituted through it—and the very form of the map becomes part of the material experience of the Cold War. In the process, the map frames the South as perpetually moving towards (but never reaching) the standards of the North—time and space are powerfully suspended. On one hand, the Peters projection can be seen as, in Graham Huggan's words (1989),

A deconstructive reading of the Western map...one which, focusing on the inevitable discrepancy between the 'natural' and the 'imitated' object, displaces the 'original' presence of the West in such a way as to undermine the ideology which justifies its relations of power. This operation of displacement is tantamount to a 'decolonization' of

the map, where decolonization entails an identification of and perceived dissociation from the empowering strategies of colonial discourse (p. 121).

Yet, on the other hand, Huggan acknowledges that any map is “characterized by the discrepancy which marks out the ‘recognizable totality’ of the map as a manifestation of the desire for control” and must negotiate “the ‘rules’ of cartography, both those which function overtly in the systematic organization of the map and those which are implied in the empowering methods of its production” (p. 117; 119). The Peters map falls into Huggan’s contradiction: the projection makes no attempts to fall back on cartography’s history of relegating overt ideology and advocacy to the margins; yet, in its displacement of one universal vision of the world comes another totalizing vision, thus making Peters’ claims of representing a new global order built on equality problematic.

Therefore, the Peters map ended up reproducing, however unwittingly, many of the colonial assumptions it was critiquing, except now under the more subtle intervention of liberal development. Certainly, the Peters projection frames the *problem* of colonial space quite eloquently—but it lacks a mechanism to offer a solution, an issue that radical maps regularly struggle with (Barney, 2009). In the void of that solution, international development groups answered that the Western, liberal ideology of progress and “becoming” could perhaps do the trick. And the Peters map’s loud critics also reproduced that ideology of progress by questioning whether Peters’ method could even be part of such a narrative. Maps like Peters’ that argue for a “third way” out of superpower visions still negotiate a rhetorical tension of both resistance and control, disputing the colonial history of cartography while still embodying much of its stylistic assumptions. The Peters projection, in fact, goes further than merely embodying these assumptions, however—the map’s remarkable circulation helped the development movement

enact a re-colonization of the Southern hemisphere. As Matthew Edney (1997) has written, “as with any form of representation—graphic or textual, artifactual or ephemeral, meaning is invested in all aspects of cartography: in the instrumentation and technologies wielded by the geographer; in the social relations within which maps are made and used; and, in the cultural expectations which define, and which are defined by, the map image” (p. 24). Altogether, the Peters controversy reveals how concepts of North/South and East/West become both challenged and reified by the internal choices of the mapmaker as well as the external ways in which the map is appropriated, circulated, and debated.

If the “coloniality of power” was often maintained by the continuous production of difference, then re-colonization is an important concept for communication scholars to trace in the post-WWII landscape—to see how difference is reproduced in practice, and to trace the roots of how the emergent South is consistently classified and “managed” by the North. In the spirit of Shome and Hegde’s call for scholars to “account for the ways in which the Western realities have spread across the world as the universal condition” (261), the critique of development sits at the heart of postcolonial scholarship in communication. The often-unquestioned narratives of equality, distribution, multiculturalism, and scientific management require scholars to find specific, historically situated cases of these stories’ mediation and reproduction.

The questions around the legacy of Peters are still relevant—and still challenging. As Jerry Brotton (2012) puts it: “Peters implied that it was possible to address political inequality. Size, at least for Peters, did matter. But, as another critic asked, did a more accurate representation of the size of Indonesia really address that country’s exceptionally high infant mortality rate, or only further obscure it?” (p. 383). Put more broadly, David Cooper (1983) asks, “Since area alone is neither the cause nor the symptom of the division between North and South,



does this map improve our understanding of the problems of the world?" (p. 416) Of course, maps are not necessarily expected to provide that kind of portrait, and it could be enough that this map portrays a "politics of difference" in situating *perception* as a key factor in North/South relations. Still, the lingering, unanswerable question remains: are all maps so constrained by cartography's history as a colonial and imperial science that a truly radical cartography is impossible? Is it enough that Peters jumpstarted a thirty-plus year debate, or should cartographers have pushed themselves further into more projects of activism?

To pose these questions is not to criticize the Peters map for what it somehow did *not* do, but they are posed in the spirit, as is this essay overall, of properly contextualizing an icon of cartography. What the Peters projection *did* do was serve as a visual rhetoric reminding its users that the Northern superpowers are not "self-constituting, autonomous entities, whose societies and economies develop entirely independently of non-Western economic, military, political and cultural interactions" (Hobson, 210). In other words, the politicized area of the South on the map at least reminds us that the world is constituted by spatial relationships, not natural givens. Peters' map excites debate precisely *because* of its communicative abilities beyond what appears in the content of its display. A round of re-examination, for example, came through the obituaries of Peters in the *Cartographic Journal*, where Vujakovic (2003b) would write that "now, perhaps is the time to acknowledge a debt to Peters for bringing the discussion of the politico-social significance of mapping to such public prominence" (p. 66). As the Peters map reminds us, the volatility of spatial concepts like the Third World anchored global relations but also opened up the enticing possibilities of radical challenges to those relations. At the same time, if, according to Shome and Hegde (2002) "the politics of communication are of central importance in the understanding of the contradictions and ambivalence in our deeply divided world," then the

Peters map's political contradictions and dividing lines will also continue to remain compelling and instructive.

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