

Mapism

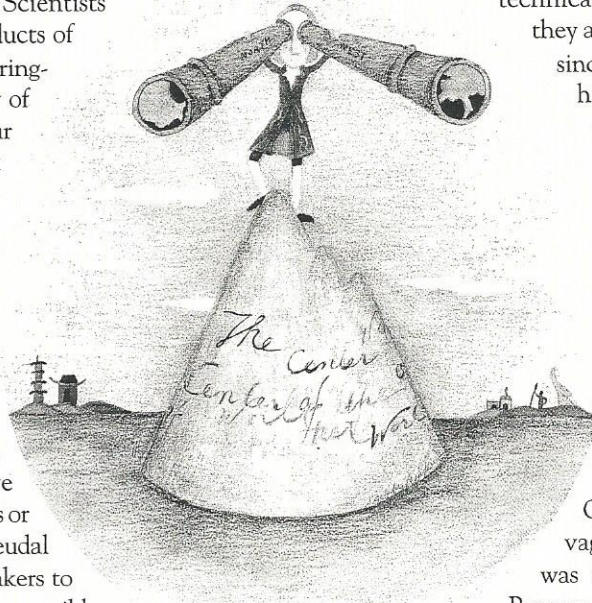
Our concept of the world is dependent on our frame of reference. Scientists contend that we are products of our environment. Our familial upbringing, city of residence, and country of origin contribute greatly to our world view. With this in mind, let us consider the subject of maps.

Almost all of the world's best-known cartographers have come from the Northern and Western Hemispheres. Does this affect the outcome of their work? Yes.

Of course, it is human nature to present one's country, city, or region in the best possible light. Throughout history people have attempted to portray their countries or areas of jurisdiction as superior: Feudal kings and queens required mapmakers to present their territory as favorably as possible. The Chinese call their country *Choong Guah*, or Middle Kingdom, because they considered themselves to be at the center of the world. Arabs and Israelis still vigorously dispute their representation on maps.

Regardless of race or culture, human beings are often self-centered, and our egocentric attitudes impact how our countries and hometowns are presented on maps. And even if they could be objective, world maps could never be completely accurate, for it is impossible to precisely portray the spherical earth on a flat surface. Indeed, the Mercator projection — a milestone for its time — presents Greenland as almost the same size as Africa. But it is our blind acceptance of these distortions — along with the other biases inherent in mapmaking — that lead to a form of discrimination and ethnocentricity that I call mapism.

Mapism is a frame of reference that comes from seeing a warped view of the world so many times that we grow to believe the deception. Instead of viewing our planet objectively (like an astronaut from space), we become swayed by maps that exaggerate the size of our section of the Northern Hemisphere. Before long, North America and Europe take on undue importance in people's world view. Moreover, mapism does not just exaggerate the Northern Hemisphere at the expense of the Southern Hemisphere. Because of the enlarged latitudinal lines in the extreme Northern Hemisphere, Europe (including Russia) and North America are given pre-eminence when compared to the rest of the world.



Although the Middle East and China are technically in the Northern Hemisphere, they are much closer to the Equator and, since they are non-Western countries, have often been lumped together with the "Third World." In fact, the Third World should actually be called the Two-thirds World in terms of land area, population, etc. But we have all heard the term Third World so often that we accept its negative connotation without question.

Like racism and sexism, mapism has far-reaching ramifications. For instance, few Westerners know much about the Crusades. Most of us only have a vague feeling that something tragic was done to Muslims by Europeans.

Because of the mapist (and racist) idea that Europe is more important than the Middle East, the effects of the Crusades — which Muslims consider abominable — have never been fully dealt with within the Western conscience.

South America is a significantly larger continent than Mercator's projection makes it out to be. China has about one-quarter of the world's population, but it appears smaller than Greenland on some maps. Africa — nearly four times as large as the continental United States — seems almost irrelevant compared to this enlarged Greenland.

Slavery continued for as long as it did due to racism. But could mapism have also contributed to its lengthy duration? Appalling things were done by the British and other governments to China during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The Opium Wars, and all that went with them, created a deep-seated anti-Western sentiment that persists to this day in Beijing. However, most Westerners have little knowledge of this period of recent history. Did mapism help to decrease China's importance and exclude these events from Western history books?

Once we recognize that mapism exists, I believe we should no longer, in good conscience, publish and resell maps that distort the world and diminish non-Western peoples. I do not have a simple solution to the problem of mapism, no perfect way to accurately portray the round world on flat paper. But I encourage all who read this to reexamine your perspectives and consider how cultural biases have influenced our world view.