

Mapping Without a Net: Knowledge and Ontology of the Map

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In 1938 two new terms entered the literature. Both were neologisms derived from the Greek to describe geographic distributions. Both were proposed by senior and well-respected figures within their fields and both terms are still in popular usage today. Yet these terms indicate very different modes of thought concerning space, and ultimately questions of mapping, governance, and the biopolitics of race.

In this paper I would like to use these words, “choropleth” (coined by J.K. Wright) and “cline” (coined by Sir Julian Huxley) to prompt an examination of the relationship between “mapping knowledges” and race. How do maps frame our understanding of spatial distributions such as race, and how as a practice do they create and promote certain forms of knowledge and not others? In particular I examine the choropleth, which treats space as a set of areally bounded units with discrete borders over which a property is extended: *res extensa*. I contrast this approach with the anthropological and ecological use of “cline,” which is used to understand spatial distributions such as human variation and race as continuous phenomena without inherent boundaries. I draw a contrast between these forms in light of recent formulations of ontology and ontogenesis in mapping and GIScience.