

The Defective Harper Collins Atlas and the Missing State of Israel

by Norman Berdichevsky (January 2015)

As recently as 1989, The General Assembly (State Legislature) of Pennsylvania passed House Resolution No. 189 declaring a "Geography Awareness Week" in the State. It would have been more fitting for the U.S. Congress to pass it but the results would probably have been equally fruitless. Unless there is drastic action, Americans will continue to rank as among the most unaware peoples of their surroundings, both cultural-historical and environmental-physical. I speak as a graduate of the University of Wisconsin with a Ph.D. degree in Geography (1974) and many years experience doing research and teaching geography.

The Pennsylvania resolution included among its many citations that...

WHEREAS, The United States of America is a truly unique nation with diverse landscapes, bountiful resources, a distinctive multiethnic population, and a rich cultural heritage, all of which contribute to the status of the United States as a world power; and Historically, geography has aided Americans in understanding the wholeness of their vast nation and the great abundance of its natural resources;

Whereas Geography today offers perspectives and information in understanding ourselves, our relationship to the earth, and our interdependence with other peoples of the world; and Statistics illustrate that a significant number of American students could not find the United States on a world map, and Departments of geography are being eliminated from American institutes of higher learning, thus endangering the discipline of geography in the United States; and Traditional geography has virtually disappeared from the curricula of American schools while still being taught as a basic subject in other countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan and the Soviet Union.

It is therefore all the more regrettable as well as a disgrace that a heretofore recognized prestigious publishing house that specializes in atlases – Harper Collins, one of the world's largest publishing houses, that sells English-language atlases to schools in the Middle East has omitted labeling Israel – as if it were some unclaimed, nameless, faceless territory. Collins Middle East Atlases show Jordan and Syria extending to the Mediterranean and clearly

mark the position of the West Bank. Looking at this atlas, Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are all missing but we can see Gaza clearly marked. In fact no other city in the entire region is indicated! This is clearly voodoo – liking sticking pins in a doll and an indicator of how low the publisher has sunk! This atlas will simply encourage blind rejection of reality that has characterized the Palestinian “narrative” (by their political leadership) for the last 66 years.



Collins Middle East Atlases show Jordan and Syria extending to the Mediterranean but do highlight the position of the West Bank. Dr Jane Clements, director of the Council of Christians and Jews has criticized the publisher and argued that “Maps can be a very powerful tool in terms of de-legitimizing ‘the other’ and can lead to confusion rather than clarity.” Collins Bartholomew, the subsidiary of Harper Collins that specializes in maps, said that including Israel would have been “unacceptable” to their customers in the Gulf and the amendment incorporated “local preferences.” Of course, this position would necessitate wholesale revision of many other maps where boundaries continued to be disputed and would equally be as serious a distortion of reality as using a different set of longitude coordinates instead of Greenwich, England as was the case well into the 1880s before which German maps used Berlin, French maps Paris, American maps Washington D.C., and Russian maps, St. Petersburg as the Prime Meridian of zero degrees longitude.

In 1843, Jared Sparks (1789-1866), a future President of Harvard (1849-54) while a student there, authored a clarion call for the inclusion of geography in the curriculum of America’s colleges. Sparks spoke at a Harvard College debating group, and began... *“Few studies are more useful, few more easily attained, and none more universally neglected, than that of geography.”* He developed this thesis, noting geography’s importance in understanding historical events as well as contemporary commerce and political occurrences at home and abroad. His talk ended with calling for the explicit inclusion of geography in the “course of liberal education” rather than leaving students to their own devices to acquire its gifts of understanding.”

Did the last hundred and fifty years since Sparks’ statement – witness the dreadful experience of America’s neglect of geography – come to the attention of our leaders in education and political life, given the woeful isolationist, provincial attitudes or base geographic ignorance prevailing on the eve of World Wars I and II, Vietnam or Iraq?

Geographers legitimately complain that their discipline is misunderstood by the general public

for whom it remains a hangover from primary and secondary schools where it meant the rote memorization of inventories: the capitals of countries, the heights of mountains and lengths of rivers; facts such as China has lots of rice and Arabia lots of oil.... In our grandparents' time, they learned that Belgium and the Northern Midlands of England had lots of coal, but today these regions have exhausted their supplies and are now net importers. Geography is not a static inventory of unrelated facts. Knowing the location of landscapes, climates, industries and cultures without understanding the relationships between them is much like knowing important dates in history without understanding how events created changes and have influenced the political, economic and social realities in different societies. History is more than a calendar and geography is more than a map.

Geography explains and analyzes why things are where they are, and not somewhere else. Even if we have not personally experienced earthquakes, volcanoes, floods or famines, we are all more aware today through television and sophisticated techniques of remote sensing of the changing face of the earth's surface—rivers change their course, mountains rise, coastlines sink, fertile cropland may become exhausted through poor techniques of cultivation, and irrigation may make the desert bloom.

Nothing can be understood apart from the place where it occurs. No event, situation, problem in nature or human history has much meaning until it is examined against its geographical background. Geography studies the location, extent, distribution, frequency and interaction of all significant elements of the human and physical environment on the earth's surface. They are not just present or absent but found to co-exist in recognizable patterns. They do so not in random, unpredictable relationships by accident or coincidence. Their distribution and extent, whether it is mineral wealth, traffic flows, good agricultural soils, pollution, health hazards, population growth, or economic development and political alliances, can often be explained and even predicted.

Even if European states jump on the "Palestine" bandwagon (at the moment, only Cyprus, Malta and Sweden recognize "Palestine"), and agree uniformly to recognize it as the 23rd Arab state, these actions would still have no authoritative legal effect nor will any atlas change reality on the ground. This is because, inter alia, the governing treaty on statehood – the Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1934) stipulates a number of explicit criteria that always must be satisfied, irrespective of recognition – and first and foremost among these is effective control over a distinct territory with specific boundaries.

Geographers cannot stomach a "characterless place"—this is tantamount to a "placeless place." The process of getting to know a place means discovering the interconnections of the phenomena

which do give it a different character than our place or origin but which are not immediately apparent because they are so strange. This is akin to learning a foreign language that at first is just gibberish until slowly (and painfully because there are no shortcuts) it becomes meaningful, expressive and even eloquent or beautiful (to the connoisseur or linguist at least). Languages themselves never remain the same when transplanted to a “new world”—just listen to the differences in intonation and stress between British and American English, or Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, or Spanish and Argentinian Spanish. Few if any state has such a clear historical character as Israel defined by the millennia long relationship of the territory with a people who regarded it as their homeland, and established a long lasting state with a distinctive culture, religion and language. Of course, the Palestinian Arabs have their own “narrative” about their claim to the territory. Like hundreds of other disputes over borders, it is not the function of an atlas for contemporary general or school use to make judgments. It may be true that no current map in any atlas reflects the reality of what is referred to as Syria or the Ukraine in which case, an atlas may certainly include a map with a clear date and mark it with different colors or patterns to show control on the ground until the dust settles and the conflicting sides agree to new borders. Such a map however would, until then, change from day to day.

Geography is an important antidote to the infantile habit of thinking the world is a laboratory in which we can carry out all kinds of experiments, or a huge rubbish heap where we can get rid of all our trash. As David Landes warned in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, “Geography tells an unpleasant truth, namely, that nature, like life, is unfair; unequal in its favors; further that nature’s unfairness is not easily remedied. A civilization like ours, with its drive to mastery, does not like to be thwarted. It disapproves of discouraging words, which geographic comparisons abound in.”

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