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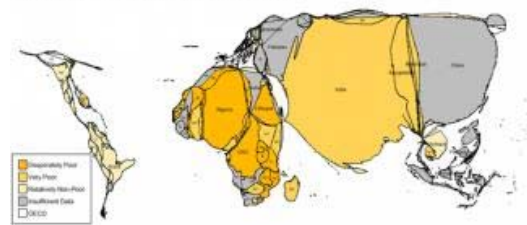
Mapping Space, Politics and Possibility

[Jamais Cascio](#)

July 27, 2005 4:43 PM

One of the fundamental problems with writing for a website like this is that it's far, far too easy to get caught up in a particularly interesting site, realizing hours later that the day's almost over and the corresponding article still needs to be written. (I'll leave as an exercise for the reader a determination as to which days have that particular structure.) Some types of sites are more gravitational in this way than others; among the most seductive are sites about maps. We have a [particular affection](#) for [mapping both](#) as a [practice](#) and as a [concept](#) here; this is not surprising, as maps have a real utility for teasing out otherwise invisible connections as well as facility for making masses of information comprehensible at a glance.

Figure 3.1 The proportion and size of chronically poor populations in world regions



A [piece on Future Feeder](#) pointed me to the [Places & Spaces](#) exhibit now touring around the world (physical showings are happening right now in both Stockholm, Sweden and San Diego, California, and will be part of next year's Meshforum). Places & Spaces is an attempt to compare and contrast geographical and conceptual maps, both as a way to examine human behavior over the centuries and to understand recurring ideas in science. The online version of Places & Spaces has copies of most of the exhibit's maps; some are more compelling than others, but most trigger reconsideration of how concepts are communicated. Probably the most immediately relevant to WorldChanging's interests is the map, reproduced above, entitled "[You are not here](#)," a cartogram of the 2004 world poverty report.

The Places & Spaces link took me to a site called [information aesthetics](#), a weblog examining "creative information visualization." Like many weblogs, it provides a terse description along with images and links -- very much like Régine's Near Future in that regard -- and immediately landed on my RSS feed list for its set of connections to *other* sites with which I was unfamiliar.

From information aesthetics, I [jump](#) to a French site displaying the [distribution of Oui et le Non votes regarding the EU constitution](#) in the French blogosphere; the proportion of sites on each side roughly mirrored the eventual poll results. While interesting, it led me to want another dimension of information. To the extent that the geographic distribution of blogs could be determined, how did they map to the voting by district? Did any of them show signs of evolving opinion, where oui became non (or vice versa)? How did the positions map against blogger demography -- age, ethnicity, and the like? We've [noted in the past](#) the value of cartograms for showing political complexities better than strict, uni-dimensional maps. Although election results generally only need a tally of the votes, understanding *why* elections turned out as they did needs something deeper.

But the most intriguing map I found in my wandering today had to be the "[flipflopflyin](#)" [What If...](#) map, wherein the author charts the possible scenarios of his life. It's actually two graphs, one showing the various potential outcomes leading up to where he is today, the other showing a variety of scenarios leading from his current status. It's more cladistics than traditional mapping, admittedly, but the spatial relationships displayed reflect thematic relationships between careers and outcomes. In a way, it's the

best visualization of scenarios I've seen, as it covers both progression and inflection, making any one of the outcomes plausible in the context of the author's life.

It makes me wonder what my own personal scenario map would look like.



Jamais Cascio

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COMMENTS

Care must be taken not to create '[new and improved](#)' fences with such things.

Posted by: [Taran](#) on July 28, 2005 12:37 AM

Cartograms have historically been hard to make, but for GIS-savvy DIY-ers there's some good software for implementing a really good, recently published cartogram algorithm [here](#).

Posted by: Ted W. on July 28, 2005 9:42 AM

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