- *The state of the world atlas:* further thoughts

The state of the world atlas forms, as James Bodoh says, a quite complete compendium of the presentation devices that are in current use by graphic designers: maps and diagrams of this kind now appear as a commonplace in books, in the press, in film and the broadcast media. To publish a book in which such visual presentation is the principal element, with the text as appendix, is perhaps novel—though the authors refer to 'the rich tradition of political atlases' within which their book stands. The reliance on visual means, coupled with the distinct socialist commitment evident in the focus on the major theme ('the state') and in the choice of particular subjects for the maps, was enough to cause a noticeable rise in temperature of reception on the part of commentators on the British edition. (The book is also being published in a number of other countries, and languages.) The surprise at such a book, which must spring from a lack of visual culture, was a recurrent feature of the reviews—common to those of all political persuasions.

While it would be mean-minded not to express enthusiasm for the concept of such a book, on a close inspection its methods are certainly open to objection. James Bodoh suggests some of these: the difficulty of understanding some of the maps, not because of any difficulty of subject matter, but more because of the attempt to show too much (the text appended at the back usually helps—but is perhaps too subordinate, in its physical position, to the maps); there is the assumption that almost every subject should be treated as a map, when often the attempt to show exact geographical location detracts from clarity of statement; and the use of colour is often unconsidered.

To expand on this last issue. There is no evidence of any attempt to co-ordinate or to standardize the allocation of colour over the whole series of maps. Thus where different colours are used to denote items in a set of increasing steps (percentage of economic growth, for example), there is no consistency in the sequences. On one map, the colour representing the greatest quantity may be orange; on another, red; on a third, blue; while the colours for the least quantities may be pink or green or yellow. The argument for standardization here would be that consistency of sequence would help the reading of the maps: one would begin to learn which colour signified the larger quantity. And such a consistency would also, incidentally, help those producing the maps (designers and printers), by introducing an element of system into the processes of design and production. It might be argued that consistency and predictability of sequence and applications of colours would make the maps less striking. But the colours, even standardized, would still be various and bright enough.

Similar arguments surround the use of symbols in the book: the choice and exact visual determination of the symbol; and the ways in which quantities are shown through repetition and/or enlargement of symbols. The game of quarrelling with choice of symbols is too easy—and anyone trying to show information through such 'pictorial

Information Design Journal 3:1 (1982), 80–83. DOI 10.1075/idj.3.1.15kin
ISSN 0142–5471 / E-ISSN 1569–979X © John Benjamins Publishing Company

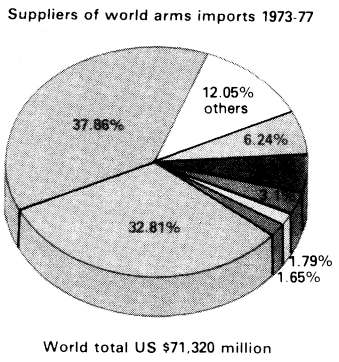


Figure 3.
Detail of Figure 2.

statistics' is doing it the hard way (with the possible reward of making information more widely and memorably understandable).

To pass on to one of the abstract visual devices used: pie charts. The obvious general criticism of all such pie diagrams is that exact size of parts cannot be read off (unlike a diagram consisting of repeated units or symbols): the reader has to be told in a caption or label. The visual representation then provides an illustration of the information. *The state of the world atlas* does not use simple pies, but (and this seems symptomatic of its 'graphic' ambitions) three-dimensional pies in receding perspective. The 'graphic effect' may be heightened, but distortion is introduced—and, in a minor way, untruths are told. Thus, for example, a sector representing 32.81% looks larger than one representing 37.86% (Figure 3). On the same map (Figure 2) the use of gun shapes to show money spent on arms is one of the more fanciful experiments in the book. One assumes that quantities are shown by length here, rather than by area: the complications of calculating correct areas would be too great. But, placed in juxtaposition with a map whose areas correspond to quantities (percentage values), one cannot be sure. This conflict between the attempt to be visually striking and the need to tell the undistorted truth recur continually. Judged by strict standards of visual truth-telling, the book fails consistently; this has nothing to do with any political intent.

The obvious counter-example here is Isotype: the work undertaken by teams under the direction of Otto Neurath, and discussed in a previous article in IDJ (Kinross 1981). Isotype work in the graphic presentation of information is distinguished by a remarkable restraint in its conventions: symbols are never enlarged to show an increase in quantity; symbols are never shown (unless with good reason) in three dimensions; colours are limited and standardized over a set of charts; the amount of information shown in any one chart or diagram is limited. Against the Occam's-razor-like severity and clarity of the best Isotype work, *The state of the world atlas* must appear distinctly excessive and arbitrary.

The closest single parallel in Isotype with *The state of the world atlas* is the portfolio of 100 charts *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* (Neurath 1930)—also called an 'atlas' (Figure 4). This publication might be seen as a member of the 'tradition' to which Kidron and Segal refer in their introduction—though, as suggested, the differences of approach to graphic presentation between the two are great. And *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft,* while much concerned with contemporary problems, incorporates a considerable body of historical material (extending back as far as classical antiquity); and in its contemporary charts is without the urgency and perhaps stridency of Kidron and Segal's book (most noticeable in titles to charts). The conception of *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* is that of a work of broad education; by comparison, *The state of the world atlas* seems journalistic. Such publications, though of limited life-span, have their uses—and it may be held against Isotype that its work is too restrained and sober to be interesting to those who need a degree of visual heightening in the presentation of political information.

Figure 4 (left). Chart 97, from: Otto Neurath, *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft.*

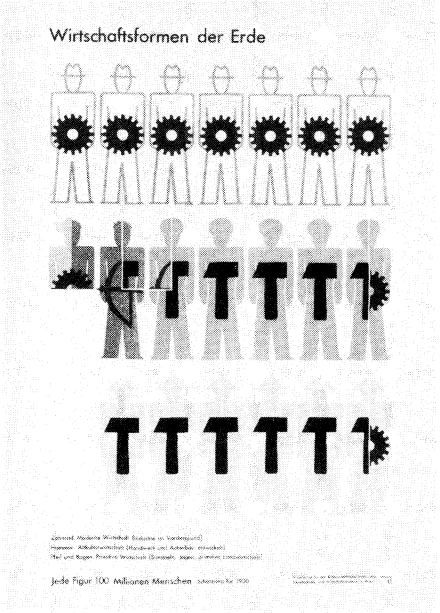


Figure 5 (right). From: A. Radó, *Atlas für Politik, Wirtschaft, Arbeiterbewegung.*



Isotype does not really belong to the tradition cited by Kidron and Segal, but there are at least two cases that certainly do provide close comparisons with *The state of the world atlas:* the works of Alexander Radó and of J. F. Horrabin (and it would be interesting to discover other examples). In the years between the two world wars, both these authors produced 'atlases' of contemporary politics: Radó's *Atlas für Politik, Wirtschaft, Arbeiterbewegung* (1930) and *Atlas of to-day and to-morrow* (1938); Horrabin's *An atlas of current affairs* (1934)—among a series of similar publications. Like Kidron and Segal, these authors were clearly socialist in their concerns (Radó worked for the cause of Soviet Russia in various capacities, and was described as a Soviet 'spy master' in his obituaries, while Horrabin was active on the British left, and his books were published in Left Book Club editions). Both relied principally on visual means: Radó being the more ambitious here —venturing into the field of pictorial statistics (Figure 5)—where Horrabin remained purely cartographic (Figure 6). Both were limited to the technical means of their day: their work is drawn by hand and reproduced in black and white (though in the *Atlas für Politik* extra colour printings are employed).

Again, the Occam's razor of Isotype helps to place these other two authors. By comparison with Isotype, Radó lacks a sense of self-discipline in how much he chooses to show. The ability to select rigorously was, however, one of Horrabin's skills. Both author's now seem handicapped by their reliance on hand-work: even Horrabin's neat lettering suffers by comparison with type-set captions and labels, and lacks the authority that 'proper printing' suggests. This is one feature that contributes to the continued sense of assurance of Isotype work, which, from 1928, always used type-set verbal matter in charts.

To conclude: in comparison with Radó and Horrabin, Kidron and Segal's book may seem more

sophisticated in its graphic means: the phototype-setting, airbrush work, four-colour printing, and so on. But these are surface differences, and the quality of thought underlying the graphic presentation does not distinguish *The state of the world atlas* from such forerunners as Radó's *Atlas für Politik*. One may not doubt the good intentions of Kidron and Segal (and their collaborators), but their approach to graphic presentation is open to fundamental criticism, along the lines suggested here.

Robin Kinross

Department of Typography and Graphic Communication, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading RG6 AU

Horrabin JF 1934
An atlas of current affairs
Gollancz, London

Kinross R 1981
On the influence of Isotype
Information Design Journal, 2/2, 122-30

Neurath O 1930
Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft
Bibliographisches Institut, Leipzig

Radó A 1930
Atlas für Politik, Wirtschaft, Arbeiterbewegung
Verlag für Literatur und Politik, Vienna

Radó A 1938
The atlas of to-day and to-morrow
Gollancz, London

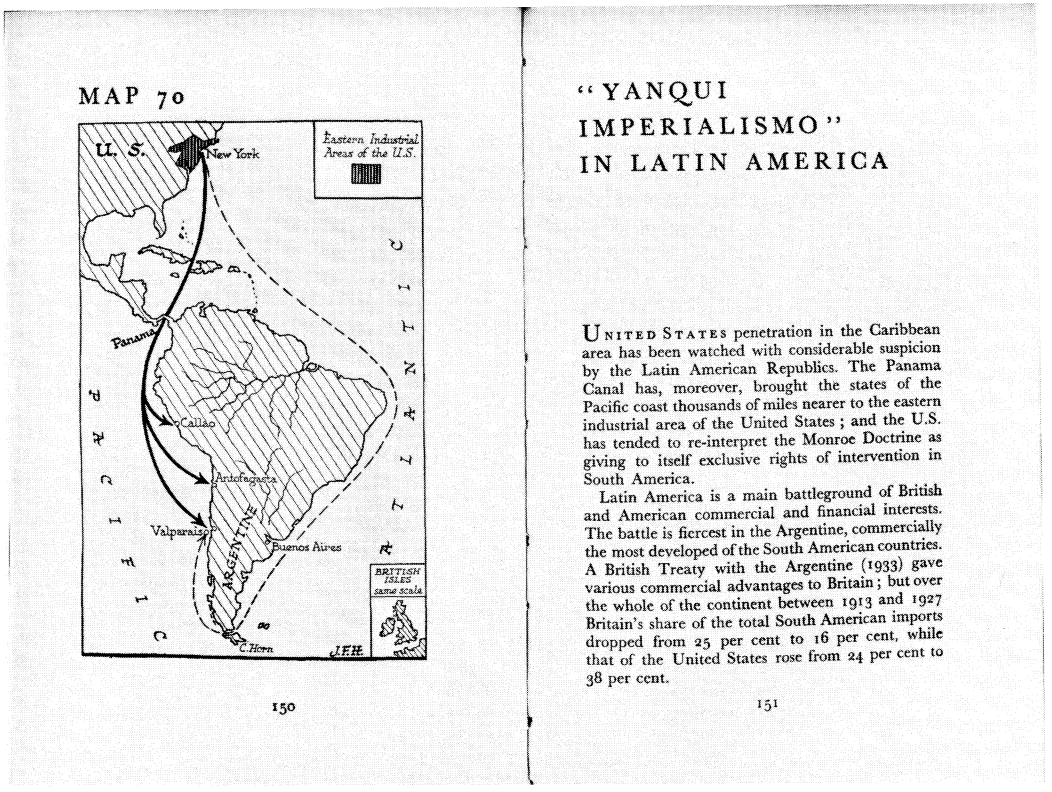


Figure 6.
From: J. F. Horrabin,
An atlas of current affairs.