Title: Is Participatory mapping feasible? Spirit and Usage of cartography in urban development schemes

This paper aims at analysing the various ways in which mapping is used in the so-called participative arenas for citizens. It is based on an earlier study of « ateliers de travaux urbains » (‘urban planning workshops’), that have been conducted in France, especially in Lille-roubaix-Tourcoing and in Marseille metropolitan areas. From several years on, through methodological guide-books and essays many specialists in various domains (geographers, architects, urban planners, etc…) have striven to develop and promote mapping practices in order to use them as an valuable support for collective mobilization and inhabitants’ participation in urban regeneration schemes. So much that some of these players have nowadays specialized in what is at stakes in that process and provide a large range of services and training courses in how to make the best of mapping. Mapping is then described as a ‘participative’ or even a militant tool because mastering tools that help figuring the city could allow the whole people to take part in making schemes, or even opposing and resisting them.

Can mapping be ‘participative’? When are inhabitants really invited to participate in drawing maps? According to which criteria? What skill can they rely on? What is the real part to be played by participative cartography ‘specialists’ in such experiments? Regarding urban development schemes, what is the role for ‘participative cartography’? A tool to enhance collective mobilization, a way to give value to alternative plans, an teaching tool or a mere tool for communications?

These are the questions this paper will try to answer:

1) First it will analyse the militant uses of cartography in development plans, from urban riots in the seventies till present participative experiments (“Ateliers de travaux urbains”; “diagnostic participatif”, etc…). Especially we will explain why ‘participatory mapping’ could and can still be seen as a tool for collective mobilization, or even as opposition forces. In other words through their supporting and mediating work for the inhabitants about development plans, some militants who are participation-specialists can justify for their involvement: to put one’ technical skills at ‘voice-less” people’s disposal.

2) Through a close study of some experiments in ‘participatory mapping’ we also want to show how participation-ideal often remains a mere speech. First an analysis of the various steps in making so called participative maps allows to underline that the classical logics of domination (experts v. laymen) still remains as far as information collecting, map making and distributing among decision-makers are concerned. This paper will also explain how ‘participatory mapping’ experiments finally can be used as tools aiming at preventing conflicts within debates, or even at preventing any collective mobilisation: restrictions to the right to speech in relation to the traditional knowledge of the local actors.

3) Finally we will ask the question whether participatory mapping experiments do not end up into reviving the expert-layman divide, as the final production remains very often in experts’ hands. One can wonder if above all ‘participatory mapping’ would not be just a way to legitimise technical expertise of activity leaders, participatory mapping ‘specialists’, or of the consultancy offices specialised in client-assisting take part in dialogue experiments more and more often.