



CONNECTOGRAPHY

Parag Khanna

A Book Review by Andrea Cafiero

Parag Khanna is an Indian author, a world-renowned expert in International Relations. He received his graduation in International Affairs from Georgetown University and his doctorate in International Relations from the London School of Economics in 2010. In 2016 he published what is probably his most important publication: "Connectography".

This work's object is the 'connectography', i.e., the methodology to track down the economic, social and cultural changes that globalization has set up in the last decades. The author states that those changes have overwhelmed the cognitive maps that social actors- the Nation States, institutions and individuals- used cognitive tools to interpret the social environments.

"This new generation of maps and models is thus more than a collection of pretty digital guides. They should be the focal point for the synthesis of environmental science, politics, economics, culture, technology, and sociology: a curriculum curated through the study of connections rather than divisions. We should not use static political maps any more than we would cling to QWERTY keyboards when we have voice recognition, gestural interfaces, and instant video communication (p. 18)."

Parag Khanna' work aims to provide more complex epistemic tools to overcome this lack of reference points. The start-point of his theoretical path is his field-research geography (p. 20 ff), namely maps. As he states:

"Maps are the original—and still most commonly used—infographics. However, pre-infrastructure maps are increasingly irrelevant in today's world. The corporate strategist Kenichi Ohmae thus claimed that maps are "cartographic illusions" because of how little they reflect our ability to overcome geographic distance through technology. In polite society, omission sins are regarded as lies; the same should be true of maps. Concluding his exhaustive and eloquent survey of the history of cartography, the British historian Jerry Brotton sagely points to the paradox that "we can never know the world without a map, nor definitively represent it with one." However, still, we must try. A complex world needs maps more than ever, but it needs better ones. Maps have graduated from art and theology to commerce and politics; now they need better to reflect demographics, economics, ecology, and engineering (p. 16)."

In other words, maps are a powerful tool to provide social actors with reliable visions of the world, no matter how complex the world has become. Through a historical description of the historical evolution of the geographical maps (p. 14), Khanna shows how to represent the implicit assumptions that social actors develop in their minds through a single image.



Within this framework, he proposes this simple mental experiment¹: think of the common maps in school classrooms; no matter if a region, a country or a continent: maps always show the borders between different geographical entities and the pertaining societies.

Common sense would interpret those borders and division marks: on the contrary, the author proposes a different meaning, that would turn a border into a contact line.

"If borders are meant to separate territories and societies, then why are ever more populations clustering along with them? It is a particular irony that our maps show mostly political borders rather than border demographics and economics, which are the embodiment of the anti-border nature of many border regions (p. 25)."

More specifically, if maps were based on demography, economics, ecology, and engineering, the lines that join geographical and social entities are much more relevant than division borders; furthermore, more connections would emerge in the border areas.

"Most of Canada's population lives near the U.S. border and benefits from proximity to the American market. Since 2010, both the Mexican and the U.S. populations on their border have grown by 20 per cent. Even more ironic: The best place to see how connectivity fundamentally changes relations from hostility to cooperation is borders. The thriving business between India and Pakistan and many other antagonists' pairs is a reminder that borders are rarely the solid lines we see on maps but rather porous filters for exchange. In these and dozens of other cases, we increasingly work around our borders—and build straight across them—more than we bow to them (p. 26)."

It is worth focusing more on the engineering level of analysis: the rise of the internet, the virtual space, and faster transportations on land, sea and air. Those powerful technical changes have caused a stronger integration of global economies through growing flows of resources, goods, capital, technologies, people, etc.²

Of course, the author is aware that global risks are growing stronger and stronger: global warming and overpopulation might trigger a crisis in the production and distribution of goods, especially alimentary.

Nevertheless, Khanna shows a quite optimistic attitude:

"Natural geography can help us leapfrog political barriers toward more functional logic. The fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain, for example, unites over one billion people across Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The Fertile Crescent along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is the lifeblood for people across southeastern Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and western Iran. The Nile River, the world's longest, is the primary water source for Egypt and Sudan, and its White and Blue tributaries serve nine other East African countries as well. Until colonization and independence, overpopulation and resource depletion, all of these were regions with cultural boundaries but far fewer formal borders. If they want to make it through

¹ Seeing is believing, pag. 26

² Cyber civilization and its discontents, pag. 216 ff.



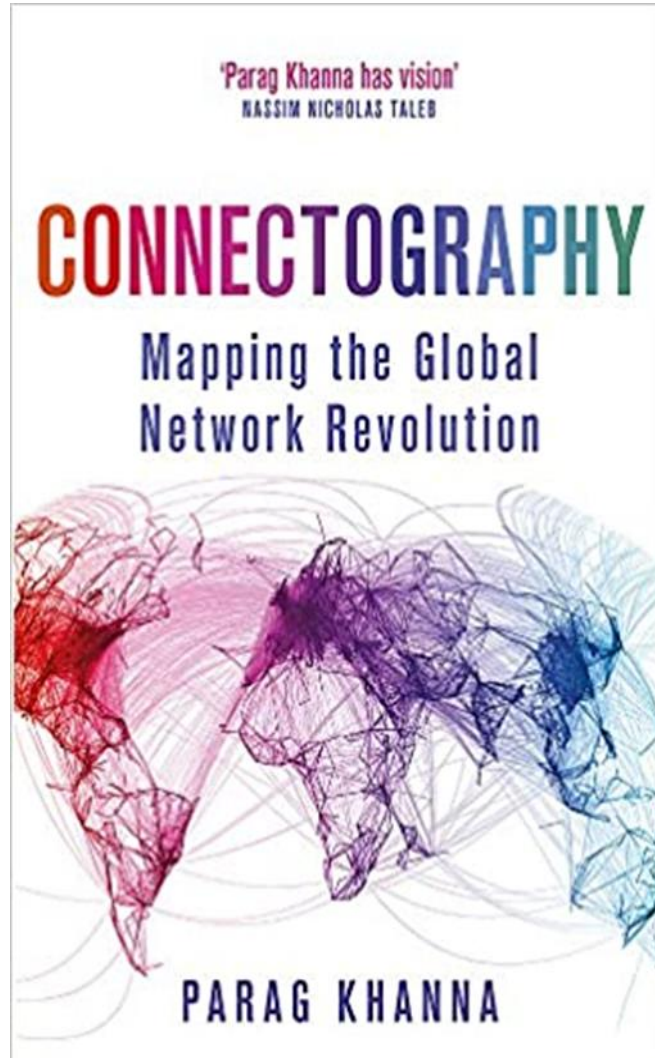
the next fifty years, they will have to return to that model again. We can steer nature but never fully control it. Over thirty years ago, China began planting the world's largest human-made forest—the "Green Wall of China" stretching for over forty-five hundred kilometres—to combat the rapid expansion of the Gobi Desert dust storms affect agriculture as far away as Japan and South Korea. The similar "Great Green Wall" has been launched by the African Union to combat the Sahara's southward encroachment on the semiarid Sahel belt (p. 240)."

Furthermore, this hyper-connectivity is shaping a new global order, where few global players, such as China and USA (overshadowing E.U. is maybe a mistake) will regulate the global processes of interconnection and production, and where megalopolises such as Japanese and Americans megacities will contribute to decreasing the importance of modern Nation-States.³

This work shows two main criticalities. On the epistemic side, the author suggests that connectography is an effective tool to grasp the contemporary world's increasing complexity. Now, the idea of representing in one map all kinds of connections among individuals, as well as their cognitive representations, is quite original and this book provides doubtlessly interesting hints to very diverse categories of readers; though, I am compelled to highlight that this is just a scientific proposal and an effective methodology to reach this goal will need lots of further scholarship in the next years. A series of food for thought even to readers with a more critical spirit, especially regarding the integration and interconnection generated by globalization. The second criticality is more, say, political. Khanna's does not doubt that managing the increasing connectivity will permit humanity to look confidently at the future, solve resolving important conflicts and overcome political divisions. The idea that connectivity will solve the contemporary world's main problems is quite too optimistic and based on excessive simplification.

In a nutshell, Connectography is well-documented and original work, which challenges readers' mental habits. A more robust epistemological framework could overcome a perhaps naïf optimistic attitude and provide scholars and policy-makers with effective analysis and decision tools.

³ Cities, pag. 48.



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