



## Mapping Hybrid Spaces in Geopolitics: A Post-Representational and Experiential account

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### Abstract

Can the visual promotion of an academic event serve as an opportunity to implement a sequential, multidisciplinary map-making process? This article details the creative and scholarly exercise behind the map featured in the poster for the conference “Hybrid Spaces: Where Peace and War Overlap”, held in Rome in early February 2025. It begins by examining the epistemological assumptions explored in the preliminary stages of map-making – namely, the effort to map the hybrid nature of a political space while transcending the binary logic that has long dominated geography, one that maps have reflected throughout history. The discussion continues with an overview of the cartographic influences that inspired the creation of said map, as well as the rationale for selecting a particular political space as its focus.

**Keywords:** Cartography, Map-Making, Jaime Vicens Vives, Geopolitical Cartography

### 1. Introduction

On February 3 and 4, 2025, a conference titled “Hybrid Spaces Where Peace and War Overlap” was held in Rome, organized by two subcommittees of the Italian Geographers Association (A.Ge.I.), the Geopolitics group and the Geography of Transport group. I was approached by a member of the Association to gauge my interest in creating a conference poster that would effectively convey the concept of hybridity of political spaces through a striking and evocative map. I accepted with enthusiasm and promptly joined a collaborative map-making process, which moved through several distinct stages. Regarding the processual nature of map-

making, Lo Presti emphasizes that it “should be traced in the uses, feelings, and actions that arise at the moment of interaction with the map. This means that even if we consider the map an abstract representation, the process through which it is created, used, and perceived is certainly not abstract. A processual perspective helps to reconstruct those traces that become invisible once the map has been produced” (2019, p. 177). Our goal was to transform an abstract idea into a tangible representation, addressing several key questions. Could a map convey effectively the concept of the hybrid nature of political space (Galli, 2001, p. 11)? If so, what theoretical or practical framework would best support this endeavor? Finally,

which political space should be represented, and on what basis?

What follows is not only an experiential and post-representational account of the map-making process behind the poster and its various stages but, more importantly, a scholarly contribution arising from the phases of inquiry and reflection sparked by the epistemological questions surrounding hybrid spaces. The first section of this article will focus on a scientific review of the dichotomy between geography and cartography to provide a scholarly context for the initial question that guided the creation of the conference poster. The second section situates the work of Jaime Vicens Vives, which serves as the inspiration for the final map, within the broader context of geopolitical cartography. One of his maps, featured in several of his volumes (1940, 1949, 1950), served indeed as a reference for the design of the poster. The third section will explain the rationale behind choosing Alsace-Lorraine as the political space to represent; these reasons extend beyond hybridity, and reaffirm the connection between map and territory. Finally, the final section and the conclusion will reflect on the final and most creative phase of the map-making process, encompassing both the cartographic design and the conference poster.

## 2. Attempting to Overcome a Binary in Cartographic Representation

Binary reasoning in geography and cartography has provided numerous avenues for epistemological exploration. Sayer (1991, pp. 284-285) highlights the dangers of using such dualisms, stating that “it is when they are aligned that dualisms are at their most seductive and dangerous. What impresses us about such thinking may have more to do with its simplicity and symmetry than its ability to interpret the world”. Krygier expands this critique in *Cartography as an Art and a Science?*, arguing that in geography and cartography the use of dualisms has reached an extent that persistently structures disciplinary paradigms (1995, pp. 4-5). His discussion expands on the ideas of Sayer (1991) and Harley (1989), emphasizing a cautious stance toward binaries: “Such dualisms

are certainly useful as a means of thinking and conceptualizing but become problematic when used uncritically”.

Even critical cartography is not exempt from theoretical debates on the subject. Harley asserts that his position is “to accept that rhetoric is part of the way all texts work and that all maps are rhetorical texts. Again we ought to dismantle the arbitrary dualism between ‘propaganda’ and ‘true’, and between modes of ‘artistic’ and ‘scientific’ representation as they are found in maps” (1989, p. 11). Del Casino and Hanna further suggest that “there might be an alternative to thinking through the binaries of design and use, representation and practice, objectivity and subjectivity that undergird much of critical cartography” (2005, p. 45). Echoing these authors, Lo Presti (2019, p. 176) argues that “the possibility of overcoming the gap between practice and representation lies in conceiving maps themselves as spatial agents and spaces of action”. The concept of map spaces is used by Del Casino and Hanna to describe “the constructive ecology of the map – a relational process in which representations and practices cannot be separated” (p. 177). Finally, the issue of dualisms is also discussed by Miles in this journal (2024, p. 85), who relates it to both post-representational mapping – a term the author sees as “a challenge to the binary of representation and process” – and the opposition between professional and amateur cartography.

The urgency of addressing the problem of the cartography / geography binary is evident in the context of the “Hybrid Spaces” conference, where a specific goal was set: to create a poster featuring a map whose content would transcend the binary logic that has long constrained geography. This limitation has been exacerbated by cartography itself, which, as Boria (2019, p. 85) notes, “has paid the gift of synthesis with locational simplification”. My intention was to design a map that no longer conveyed the traditional inside/outside dichotomy, which perpetuates, by inertia, a dualistic representation of spaces. Instead, I wanted to emphasize what Whatmore describes as “a condition describing those things and processes that transgress or disconcert binary terms that draw distinctions between like and unlike categories of object”

(2009, pp. 361-362). The hybrid dimension, with its multiple definitions and facets, has also been explored by Latour (1993) and given an interesting socio-spatial interpretation in the work of Scott Baxter et al. (2021).

The goal, therefore, was to minimize the risk of reinforcing dualisms as much as possible. To achieve this, we decided to emphasize the spatial distinction that highlighted the gradation of hybridity within the spaces under scrutiny. At this stage, a question emerged organically: Do any patterns of representations exist within the field of geopolitical cartography that offer models that could serve as references?

### 3. Drawing critically from some geopolitical maps by Jaime Vicens Vives

In 1940, Spain, influenced by the significant production of geopolitical maps in Germany (Boria, 2008) and, to a lesser extent, in Italy (Boria, 2020), saw the publication of *España: Geopolítica del Estado y del Imperio*, authored by Jaime Vicens Vives (1910-1960). Vicens Vives was a multifaceted figure: a historian, editor of successful educational text series (Bosque Maurel, 2010), and a scholar of geopolitics. Villanova (1998, p. 722) notes, “Vicens demonstrated a profound interest in geopolitics throughout his life, and for some, he was”, quoting Bosque Maurel, Bosque Sendra, and García Ballesteros (1984), “the only Spanish scholar to engage with this subject both conceptually and empirically”. This commitment led to the assertion that “Vicens was the only Spanish academic to have published articles, books, and even a manual on the discipline of Geopolitics” (Carreras i Verdaguer, 2010, p. 61). In 1950, following the Spanish Civil War, and within a completely different political and scientific context, Vicens Vives published *Tratado General de Geopolítica*, a work in which, like his earlier publication, he expressed “a strong interest in the use of geopolitical maps, which he calls dynamic maps” (Villanova, 1995, p. 54). An interest that sparked mainly from two factors: the usefulness and importance attributed by Vicens to geopolitics and the enormous didactic potential he conferred to the map (Villanova, 1998, p. 14) (Martínez Rigol and

Moreno Redón, 2010). However, Martínez Rigol and Moreno Redón argue that the strongest reason for Vicens’ attraction to maps was his habit to think and express himself through images.

There are three “fundamental aspects” underpinning Vicens Vives’ cartography (ivi, pp. 74-75):

- 1) Cartography is an essential part of the scientific method of geography: Vicens distinguishes two functions of cartography. The first is “instrument of synthesis,” which involves gathering the most significant elements of research. The second function is to “show the relationship between the collected facts and the territory, in order to confirm and explain spatial relationships”.
- 2) Thematic cartography justifies the geographical dimension of geopolitics: According to Vicens, the elements considered by the researcher should always be mapped. This reflects the idea that the map serves as evidence of the “political and territorial aspects” taken into consideration by the scientist, not only at a given moment but also in their evolution over time.
- 3) The suggestive power of maps as instruments of communication: A key aspect in Vicens’ work is the idea that maps possess a unique power. Likely influenced by German geopolitical cartography, he believed that maps were “a very effective and fast tool for the transmission of ideas”.

According to Vicens Vives, geopolitical maps must own “an essential quality: to be suggestive, or in other words, to express a geopolitical action, tendency, or concept in a forcefully impressive and, consequently, lasting way” (1940, p. 23). However, he was also aware of the risks associated with this “suggestion,” which could be influenced by so-called “geopolitical signs”<sup>1</sup> (Villanova, 1998, p. 725).

<sup>1</sup> Geopolitical signs make it imperative to mention the German cartographer R. Von Schumacher, who, according to Vicens Vives himself, was the theorist of these signs (Villanova, 1998, p. 725). Moreover, from a graphical perspective, clear points of contact can be observed between German geopolitical cartography and the cultural universe of the Weimar

These geopolitical signs were a hallmark of Vicens' cartography, which he used sparingly at times but without ever abandoning them entirely. Five basic types of geopolitical signs can be identified, each with variants: the arrow for movements of human groups or influences; the straight line for unions and agreements; the broken line for resistance; the circle for nuclei and encirclements; and the triangle for ruptures or attempted ruptures (Santirso Rodríguez, 2010, p. 102).

In this regard, one of the most intriguing geopolitical maps proposed by Vicens Vives appeared in at least three of his publications. It was first featured in *España: Geopolítica del Estado y del Imperio* under the title "Estructuración geopolítica de la península" (1940, p. 33). Nine years later, it was republished in *Atlas y síntesis de historia de España* (1949, p. 8) as "Las entidades geopolíticas peninsulares" (Figure 1), and finally, in *Tratado General de Geopolítica*, under the title "Núcleos geohistóricos de la Península Hispánica durante el Medioevo" (1950, p. 137). The map features a "nucleus of vast expansion" (1949, p. 6), symbolically represented by concentric circles, and a series of tendencies depicted by straight or curvilinear arrows. This map also shows resistances through a pattern of small triangles placed next to each other, and two "peripheral nuclei" represented by circles enclosed in a triangle.

Republic, particularly with certain works by Kandinsky. However, these affinities were limited to the graphical level, as German geopolitical cartography was based on conceptual foundations that not only distinguished it as a separate experience from the Weimar culture but also created a significant theoretical gap between the two. In fact, while Weimar art emerged from the same, convulsive historical period as German geopolitical cartography, it was characterized by a clear rejection of the past and the aspiration to a new reality – an approach fundamentally distant from the objectives of *Geopolitik*. It is likely no coincidence that the development of geopolitical cartography in the mid-1920s coincided with the decline of the innovative impulses originating from the Weimar culture (Sorrentino, 2023, pp. 45-46).



Figure 1. The peninsular geopolitical entities (*Las entidades geopolíticas peninsulares*).

Source: Vicens Vives J., *Atlas y síntesis de historia de España*, Barcellona, Teide, 1949, p. 8.

In Vicens Vives' maps, the concentric circular symbols may represent a gradation of hybridity, particularly within the context of the conference poster. These symbols could be interpreted as illustrating varying degrees of interaction or blending, reflecting the complexities of geopolitical and territorial relationships. This would position them as one of the most "ambiguous signs" discussed by Vallega (2001, 2009), referencing Olsson's work on the topic. Such signs are described as "leading – or at least capable of leading – to a plurality of meanings" (Vallega, 2009, p. 155). The geo-semiotic reflection inevitably extends to the colors of the circles, as the gradation of hybridity would not be represented by a single fading chromatic scale, but rather through the colors of the French and German flags. This would be achieved by visually aligning the "reds" of their respective banners. On a connotative level, by a process of semiosis – where "a meaning, once constructed, behaves as



a sign generating another meaning, or other meanings, and so on” (Vallega, 2009, p. 164) – the first pair of signs (i.e., the flags) would produce one meaning, which, when integrated within another sign (i.e., the concentric circles), would generate a third, layered signification.

This geo-semiotic digression once again highlights the inherently interdisciplinary nature of map-making, a characteristic of which the cartographer should remain acutely aware.

#### 4. Reasons for the Spatial Choice

After selecting the symbols and stylistic elements for the poster’s cartography, the next step was to determine the political space to represent. This decision would guide the focus of the map, shaping how the spatial relationships and geopolitical dynamics would be conveyed visually. There was already a preference for a specific territory: Alsace-Lorraine during the period 1871-1914, for two main reasons.

The first reason was its hybridity, which aligns directly with the theme of the conference. This hybridity is particularly evident in the linguistic aspect: both Lorraine and Alsace have, for centuries, occupied the Latin-Germanic linguistic-cultural frontier (Cornish, 1934, pp. 369-371). This frontier predates, by many centuries, the onset of conflicts related to disputes between the Kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire in the mid-17th century (Dunlop, 2013, p. 254), as well as the transformation of Alsace-Lorraine into a territory (1870-71) (Vaillot, 2023a). Other ambiguities regarding the Alsace-Lorraine political space emerge in its administrative setup. The Franco-German War and the consequent Treaty of Frankfurt led to the disruption of the 1790 departmental order in Alsace-Lorraine, as well as in some neighboring French departments. Despite this, the new territorial order, of Germanic origin, persisted even after the French victory in 1918 and the subsequent change of sovereignty. Today, “the departmental boundaries of eastern France are the direct result of the work of the commission in the early 1870s” (Vaillot, 2021, p. 21). Finally, between 1871 and 1914, Alsace-Lorraine emerged as a borderland between two continental powers that confronted

each other on various levels, such as in the case of frontier regimes, which were discontinuous in time and prone to intensification following incidents at the border (Vaillot, 2023b, pp. 253-309). It was also a space where the peace treaty and change of sovereignty activated nationality options, leading to unprecedented levels of adhesion (pp. 321-327). This, in turn, caused population movements that significantly altered the demographic structure of Alsace-Lorraine and, by extension, some neighboring French departments (Vidal de La Blache, 1918, pp. 181-192).

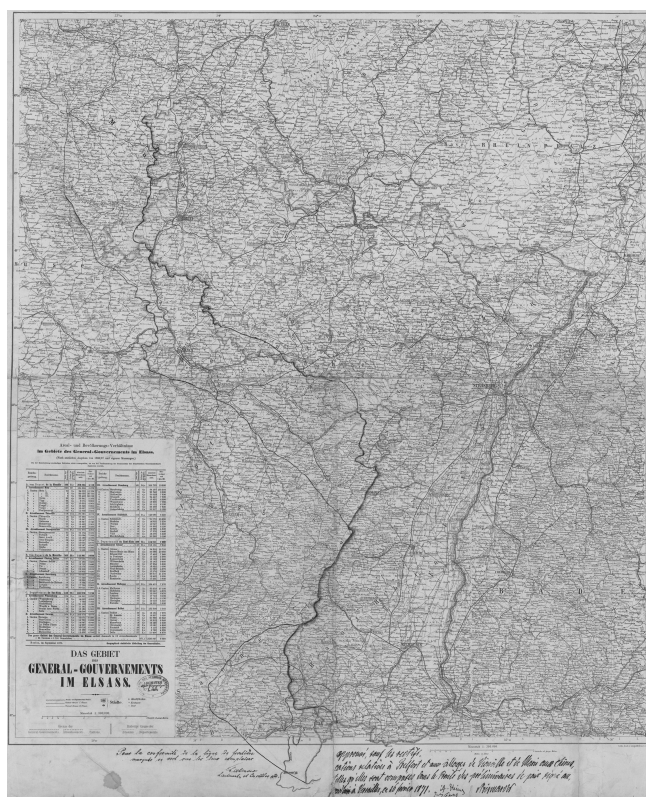


Figure 2. The Territory of the General Government of Alsace (*Das Gebiet des General-Gouvernements im Elsass*). Source: The Diplomatic Archives, TRA18710007/012.

The second reason for choosing Alsace-Lorraine pertains to a theme that connects geography and cartography: the idea that a map can invent a territory. Specifically, the first proposal to transform such a space into territory dates back to the Franco-Prussian War, when in September 1870, the Prussian General Staff published a map (Figure 2) of the Territory of the General Government of

Alsace (Vaillot, 2021, p. 1). This cartography, which reflected German territorial claims, performed “a performative function: it conveyed a worldview that established social and political order, even before any official recognition of what it represented” (p. 3).

### 5. The drawing process and the hybrid dimension of the map

Once the theoretical content phase was completed, the cartographic process moved to the drawing stage, which I initially sketched as a rough, pencil-drawn shape on paper. Subsequently, I used Quantum GIS software to project a series of vector data (point, line, and polygon) onto a plane. Those were then exported and imported into drawing software (Adobe Illustrator), where I transformed the aggregated geometries into a drawing that, while reworked and adapted, contained the theoretical and practical references I discussed earlier. This process resulted in a series of sequences that, on one hand, remind us that “mediality brings us closer to the cartographic object, helping recognize materiality and technology as fundamental operational tools in the process of image transmission” (Lo Presti, 2019, p. 184). On the other hand, they represent the concretization of the “formal diversification” described by Boria: a “deregulation” capable of producing multiple spatial representations “conceived and realized outside the official topographical canons” (2013, p. 4), leading to the emergence of a hybrid dimension from the map’s design that influences the map-making process itself.

If Lo Presti, summarizing Laura Canali’s work<sup>2</sup>, writes: “her map can be conceived of as a hybrid product, oscillating between the manual work of drawing and the process of digitization” (2019, p. 222), one might argue that here, the map and the poster possess a triple hybrid dimension:

<sup>2</sup> Since 1993, Canali is the cartographer of the Italian geopolitical magazine, *Limes*. Her map-making activity has been examined by Boria and Rossetto (2017) in a study that resulted in an article presenting a compelling combination of diverse scientific approaches, employed in an innovative and complementary manner.

First, in the message conveyed by the representation.

Second, in the realization process, which consists of three phases: the search for theoretical and practical references, manual drawing, and digital realization through the combined use of GIS and drawing software.

Third, in terms of the relevance of the cartographer/author, it is important to note that while the concept and tangible product are the author’s, the poster and cartography would have taken a different form without the suggestions and input from certain members of the scientific committee.

### 6. Conclusions

This experience has shown, albeit in an extemporaneous manner, how it is possible to overcome the divergent paths that characterize cartography and geography (Boria, 2020, pp. XXX-XXXI).

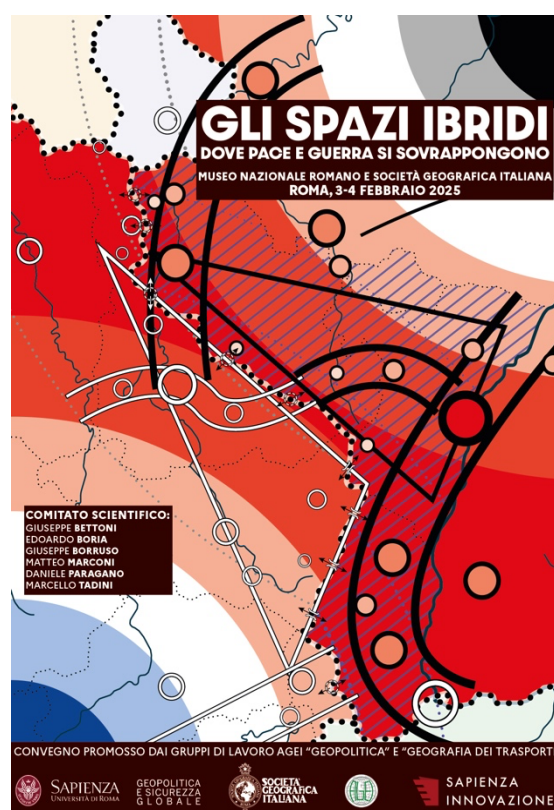


Figure 3. The official conference poster for “Hybrid Spaces Where Peace and War Overlap”.

Source: author’s own work.

This contribution has been deliberately structured as a sequential and multidisciplinary reflection to reaffirm not only the processual aspect of map-making but also the Lo Presti's (2019, p. 26) threefold conceptualization of maps: as material manifestations of inner journeys, as performative interfaces enabling

users to reconstruct spatial events through interaction, and as palimpsests of past trajectories – where traces of traveled routes linger before gradually fading from their surface.

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