

# Educational Atlases as Mediators of Spatial Imaginations

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**Keywords:** atlases, school maps, geographical education, imaginations, spatial formats, spatial orders

## Abstract:

Atlases aim to be a collection of spatial knowledge, but also to share knowledge about the world and its component parts. In contrast to historical atlases, which usually have a chronological structure, and national atlases with a decidedly thematic structure, geographical atlases, especially geographical school atlases, often use a regional structure. Here, they follow the requirements of education policies, like curricula, notably shaped by nation states. Without neglecting the influence of the state, it is worth taking a closer look on the atlas structure to find out other influences that shaped atlases during the last century and are doing so until present days.

At IfL we have developed a method for quantitatively analysis of atlas maps which allow us to provide a comparative study of various international school atlases (e.g. German, Russian, French, US; Cherrier et al. 2019). We use map coding in a mix-method approach, together with archival material, interviews, textbooks etc. to analyse map production, processes of spatialisation and imaginations. Furthermore, the atlases as a whole and their structuring are examined. This is done against the background of the hypothesis that, in addition to individual maps, the structure of atlases with their implicit hierarchies also has a significant influence on the perception of and ideas about the world. From our research we can see, that atlas structures have a very strong persistence and thus shape and perpetuate certain spatial orders over long periods of time. This is particularly interesting, because, under the influence of the global condition and its interdependencies (e.g. Kuchenbuch 2021: 49 ff.; Deuerlein 2020), parallel and partly contradictory ideas of space emerge. The school atlas plays a specific role in that, as for many people it represents the first contact with spatial concepts and very specific imaginings of the world laid out in maps. This may no longer be the case for parts of our today's mediatized "world", but still depends very much on the place and "culture" of possibilities, markets and (dis)accessibility of other media.

Firstly we will present a method for recording of atlas structures for synchronous as well as diachronic analysis (for an early attempt see Šimák 1969). This is done by coding the atlas structures spread by spread. Every spread will lead to a new row in the coding-table. Due to our research questions, we collect, among other things, the titles of the atlas pages, the content of the maps, the spatial coverage and the structure of the atlas page (e.g. several maps in a regular grid). Concerning the content we do not only differentiate between topographic and thematic maps (see the critique on the concept of thematic maps by Edney 2018). A more precise distinction allows us to analyse the thematic diversity between time periods and production regions as well as to identify topics that apparently are not relevant in school atlases. Depending on the research objective, these information has to be reconsidered and adapted, since only certain interpretation and statements are possible. The high effort of coding does not allow for an all-encompassing data collection. For our study we coded in a first step 15 atlases, each five of them of German, Russian and US-American origin using key editions between about 1930 until today.

Furthermore, the potentials but also limitations of the approach will be discussed on the basis of selected examples. Our set of atlases show changes in atlas conception over time and also between regions of atlas production (fig 1). Exciting differences are revealed with regard to the order of the continents as well as their scope, which should be questioned with regard to the varying significance of world regions. For example, the German Diercke Atlases started with world maps during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, changing the structure to the educational concept “from near to far” only afterwards. Having this in mind it is interesting to observe how much school atlases contribute to stabilizing and perpetuating traditional concepts of space or to what extent they can produce new spatial concepts, in the best sense irritate.

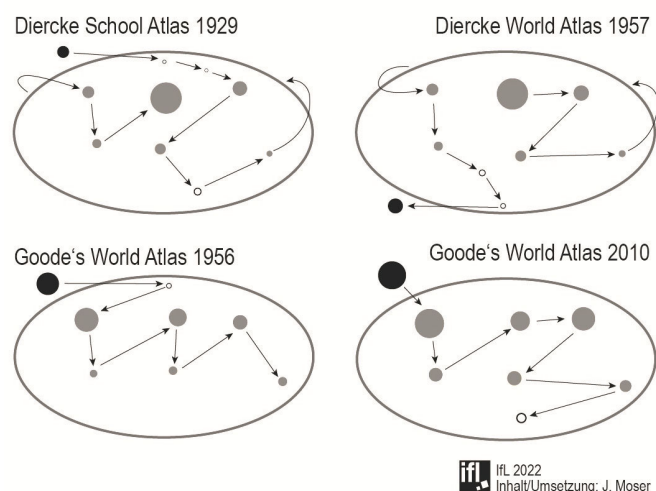


Figure 1. Visualized atlas structure of a rough analysis of two Diercke and two Goode-editions, showing differences in the sequence of continents. The typified world map is Europe/Africa-centric and contains the continental areas of North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania (light gray) as well as other spatial units such as world maps (black), polar regions and oceans (both with black outline). The arrows indicate the sequence of spatial units in the atlas. The size of the circle symbolizes the number of pages per spatial unit, i.e. the larger the circle, the more pages of this spatial unit the atlas contains (own graphic).

## Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1199, project C05 “Maps and Atlases as Mediators and Producers of Space (Knowledge) under the Global Condition”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

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