

Arno Peters: Radical Map, Remarkable Man

[TRANSCRIPT]

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: This is a story about a remarkable man, Dr. Arno Peters. A historian by training, he created a world map that has earned significant praise, yet also provoked controversy and outrage, probably as much as any map in human history. His obituary in The London Times noted he was an, quote, "advocate of equality in all things, a man of remarkable charm and gentleness."

The Peters map was a timely product in the world of globalization. And its unusual shape inadvertently became an icon of left-wing thinking, selling more than 80 million copies worldwide in several languages. Perhaps its greatest contribution has been to provoke thought and discussion about how we view our world.

Arno Peters's searched for truth-- he wanted to spread that truth to make a more just world. His commitment to seeing the world differently brought him into conflict with the prevailing cartographic establishment. But the turmoil he created never bothered him. He remained single-mindedly intent on changing how we see our world.

Arno Peters was the son of Lucy and Bruno Peters, trade union activists who raised their two sons in the post-World War I era. The Peters family had a constant stream of international visitors. Guests in the Peters home were of worldwide ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Among the guests was William Pickens, an American who corresponded with Arno's mother, Lucy. At the time, Lucy was the secretary of the League Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism. Lucy wrote to Pickens about alliances between anti-imperialism activists in Germany and Negro rights activists in the USA.

There were plans to collaborate and meet at a conference in London. Pickens was then director of the NAACP. He brought a copy of his book, *Bursting Bonds*, to Germany to give the Peters family.

This African-American narrative of slavery to freedom had a profound effect on 13-year-old Arno's outlook on the world, one of the many significant moments that led Dr. Peters to become an advocate for people from developing nations. His entire career as a historian was dedicated to fairness and equal representation of cultures, which were given short shrift by the history books of industrialized modern society.

ARNO PETERS: I began to work in history because I had found in my study that this what my professors named "history," "world history," is not a right world history. It is only history of Western Europe, with a little bit of Eastern Europe, a little bit of United States, and very small of Africa, of South America, of Far East, China, India, and so on. In reality, we didn't know anything about all other cultures. And the word "world history" is wrong in all our world history books.

If you have ten volumes of world history, five or six for the last four centuries, that is a time where Europe was high and over the whole world. But the other great cultures-- China, South America, Africa, and so on, Arabic countries-- they have the best time in other centuries.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: For his comprehensive world history project, he insisted on an atlas that showed all countries at their true size. Arno explains how he asked his old professors about this. But he recalls that even they were not aware that Africa was larger in area than the Soviet Union.

Most maps in use at that time showed countries in the Northern Hemisphere as much larger than they really were. For Peters, it was unacceptable to have a map where Europe, at 3.8 million square miles, looked larger than South America, which was at 6.9 million square miles, nearly twice the size of Europe.

ARNO PETERS: The size is the first sign of the importance of a country. The base of my world history is the fairness to all peoples. But this map-- they asked me what map do-- ah, you have the Mercator. Yes, I could give you some maps where this mistake is not as big.

And they gave me some other maps, Van der Grinten or Winkel, and so on. And I said, no. I want a map where the sizes are exactly the same as in reality. I don't want to have smaller mistakes. I want it right.

TERRY HARDAKER: I think it's very important that we understand Arno Peters's whole concept of life and the very good principles that he put into his work. It all stems from this feeling that people should be equal, have equal opportunity, and the reluctance of the world to implement that.

The way that the Peters map came to us was really by mistake. I think we were approached by somebody who gave me a call from London and said, I have got a new map projection. Would you be interested?

And because we get quite a lot of people approaching us with new ideas and we are not publishers, I said, I'm sorry. I couldn't use it at all. There's no way that I have a medium for promoting this.

What I didn't know was that that was the Peters map. And Arno Peters had got some agent in London to try to promote the map in the UK. So it was turned down.

A few years later, I was approached by a magazine publisher in Oxford, who said-- and this was The New Internationalist. And they said, we have a map in German. And we would like it translated into English.

I said, oh, yes. We can do that for you. Of course, it turned out to be the Peters map.

DEXTER TIRANTI: We'd started a magazine called The New Internationalist, which was about the relationship between rich and poor world and different perceptions of the world. About six or seven years previously, we'd had quite a lot of help from Oxfam and Christian Aid. I don't know if people know about these organizations in the United States. But they're very big in the United Kingdom, concerned with helping the developing countries.

And they saw helping a magazine which was campaigning on issues on behalf of the third-world countries as a useful tool for them. We'd started the magazine by then. We'd become independent. And floating into the office one day came this German atlas.

And a number of us did speak German-- not myself-- and looked at it. And we became rather excited by what we saw. It was a different view of the world, and it was a view which gave far more weight and emphasis to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the people that we were championing.

We had never thought at all about a Mercator projection or other projections of the world and that they could be telling different stories.

ARNO PETERS: And so we don't need a new map. We need a new view of the world.

TERRY HARDAKER: Actually, when I saw it first, I think I was probably as prejudiced and as blinkered as the people I complain about now. I looked at it as everybody looks at something new and thought, that's a really funny shape. I don't understand what's going on here. Of course, then I very quickly learned that it's an equal-area projection.

And it is a shock when you look at this map first and you think, that's not the world I know. Why is Africa so long and thin? There's something wrong with this map. I don't like this map.

Look at the way that Alaska is all stretched out and Canada is all stretched out. Oh, I can't use this map. That was my first reaction.

As I say, I soon learned the rationale behind it. And then we began to realize that it does have a serious place in the cartographic scenario.

ARNO PETERS: Why Mercator's map was so long in use till our present is because he came just in the minute when Europe took over the rest of the world. So his map is a map of the epoch of Eurocentrism, of colonialism, imperialism, whatever you want. And this time is over.

TERRY HARDAKER: Initially, I was not aware of any hostility to the map. It came to us, as I say, for translation. But we became familiar with it through the translation of the map. And I began to see its advantages without knowing that there was academic hostility.

I think this probably first came to my attention when we attended a trade fair somewhere-- it might have been in London-- that was attended by academics. And a man came to the stand, and

I had the Peters map on the stand. And he was quite incensed that we should be displaying the Peters map.

ARNO PETERS: I let the cartographers say what they want.

WARD KAISER: My first experience with the Peters map dates back to a date in 1982, when in my office in New York, I had a number of appointments, including one with the representative of a German publishing enterprise. And as he was coming through New York, as his custom was, he stopped at my office.

And then he brought out a kind of surprise, a map and a rather strange-looking map. And he gave me a bit of the story behind it. But it looked so unusual that I thought to myself, we can never make a commercial success out of something like that, except for one person on the board who saw its potential.

And over a period of time, he presented this idea to the board until they got tired of him. One day, they said, are you going to keep talking about this map until we say yes, instead of voting it down? And he laughed and said, that's correct.

We represented three different organizations in the English-speaking world that were interested in the map. One was Christian Aid out of England. Another was Church World Service, headquartered in New York. And the third was Friendship Press.

The 11th of October in 1983, we signed the contract. And we became the first English-language publisher of the map. And before the year was out, we were selling maps.

ARNO PETERS: I find out that the worldview is what I am looking for, not the map. The map only is the possibility to give a worldview.

BOB ABRAMMS: A woman came up to me at the National Council of Geography Educators Conference in Boston. And she saw the map at the back of the book, and she became really agitated and upset. And she said, do you sell that map?

And I said, well, yes, we do. She said, well, I have a real problem with it. I used active listening. I said, well, tell me more about what you mean.

She said, well, I was yesterday at school in-service. Our whole school was brought together for a day of cultural diversity sensitivity by a-- and she mentioned the name of the presenter, who's a nationally recognized name in the USA, who's been at the forefront of the work in the area of racial equality for 40 years.

And this person got up in front of the group and showed the Mercator projection and showed a Peters projection and pointed to the Mercator and said, anyone that uses this Mercator map is a racist.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: Racism can come in the form of blatant bigotry. Or it can be somewhat subtle, when the racist person doesn't even realize their own prejudice.

BOB ABRAMMS: A map projection by itself is not racist. But it can be used in a way that is oppressive or demeaning or diminishing certain peoples and countries.

But this woman had this awful experience where now all-- she was a geography teacher. And all the other teachers in her school look at her, and they know that she's got that map on her wall. And it's sort of like she felt just exposed and put down and humiliated.

And that caused us to really start to write a lot of support materials that position the map in a different way, so people would understand that the Peters map is not used to supplant or replace the Mercator, but to supplement it and show another perspective or another point of view.

At that point, I wasn't aware or educated about the fact that the Mercator is still used in the USGS topo series.

TERRY HARDAKER: Oh, yes. A transverse Mercator is used all over the place and quite valid. It's how you use it that's the important thing, not the projection itself.

I think in this subject, we are no different from any other subject which gets media attention, whether it's politicians, whether it's pop stars, football players, or whatever, that when anything's exposed in the media, there is a danger that overgeneralization, oversimplification, and wrong information will ensue. And I think the Peters projection is just another victim of that.

BOB ABRAMMS: Mm-hm, because like I mentioned before, a lot of what I try to do is damage control. So I wrote articles and put together support materials so that at least we were in a place of integrity in presenting the map as fairly and appropriately to make it useful to the majority of the map purchasers.

WARD KAISER: We used the offices of the National Council of Churches, as well as our own publicity and promotion office, to celebrate what was happening here, in terms of its justice dimension, its fairness to all peoples. We provided those persons with a lot of source material, including quotes from representative figures and well-known personalities in a variety of fields, who were saying, essentially, this is the map for our time.

There certainly was resistance on the part of professional cartographers, as well as a certain amount from ordinary people who were not schooled in that field. I can say a number of examples. One of these would be a letter that I received from Arthur Robinson, who was then thought of as the "dean of American cartographers."

And he said, don't take it on. It's not a good map. And we have other maps that are much better than that. The problem is that Arno Peters is promoting his own self, his own ideology, and other maps are objective. And they don't have any hidden agenda.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: So the Peters map shook up the cartographic world. A prominent historian of cartography wrote an article in an issue of *Cartographica*, one of the world's most significant cartographic journals, which referred to the Peters projection controversy as, quote, "cartography's defining moment."

If the opposite of conformity is courage, Dr. Peters had courage. He had the passion and commitment to be a lightning rod for outrage and criticism. He explicitly asserted that maps have political agendas and that the maps we employ help mold our beliefs about how the world is and how it should be.

At first, the cartographic establishment was insulted and outraged. Collectively, they exclaimed, quote, "Our maps are not prejudiced. They are not biased. They are objective and scientific. How dare you accuse us of having a hidden agenda. It is you, Dr. Peters, who has the political agenda."

In fact, Peters did have a political agenda. He wanted maps to be fair to all people, especially those living in the developing nations.

BOB ABRAMMS: It's cartographers that pick and choose and select those images that, at the very least, we should wonder why they chose the image they chose and whether, in fact, those images represent in some way laziness or prejudice or bias or convention or any of another sundry motives that cause us to then receive those images and process them as messages, whether it's about the relative importance of countries or the center of the world or any number of other things like that.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: Arno Peters began his crusade in 1974 against the Mercator and what he referred to as "Mercator-like" world map projections. In two short decades, he had galvanized the cartographic establishment, with most conventional cartographers lined up against him.

But his map resonated with a large number of people who were, like Arno, concerned with social justice. Germany's chancellor Willy Brandt, an early advocate of the map, featured it on the cover of the famous Brandt Report prepared by a group of international statesmen dealing with problems of world economic inequality. Even Pope John Paul II featured the Peters map at the Vatican.

The Peters map has earned much wider acceptance outside of North America. Only recently has it been exposed to audiences in the USA. NBC's hit television show *The West Wing* featured the map in an episode. The show reached 18 million Americans, with a plot twist of a fictional organization of cartographers for social equality lobbying the White House staff to support legislation that would require every public school classroom in the USA to have a Peters map.

THE WEST WING

- The Peters projection—
- It has fidelity of axis—
- Fidelity of position.
- East-west lines are parallel and intersect north-south axes at right angles.
- What the hell is that?
- It's where you've been living this whole time.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: The show not only introduced the novelty of an equal-area map projection, but proposed an innovative twist to further stretch the television audience's view of the world.

THE WEST WING

- Where else could you put the Northern Hemisphere but on the top?
- On the bottom.
- How?
- Like this.
- Yeah, but you can't do that.
- Why not?
- Because it's freaking me out.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: When Ward Kaiser and Bob Abramms brought their newly published book, *Seeing Through Maps*, to Germany to share with Dr. Peters, it was not warmly received. The book's premise was that we need many diverse maps to fully understand our world.

Kaiser and Abramms argued the Peters map must take its place among other projections as seminal, important, and noteworthy. Kaiser and Abramms proposed that Arno Peters's adversarial stance against all other projections was no longer necessary.

The Peters map had gained a significant position in the annals of map history. Dr. Peters softened his position, but only by just a bit. Sometime later, Kaiser and Abramms met with Denis Wood to discuss Dr. Peters's reaction to the *Seeing Through Maps* book.

WARD KAISER: Well, it seems to me that Arno has moved somewhat from his early position, which, as we said, was a polemic position. And he was very much convinced that there ought to be one map for one world. And one can argue that point, and this is not the place to do it.

But it's an identifiable position, and it's frequently taken by people. Now, I think he is moving to the point of seeing the possibility of other maps, even though when we offered him a copy of *Seeing Through Maps*, he looked at it that night. And the next morning, he was unhappy.

DENIS WOOD: Why?

WARD KAISER: Because it does not defend his map as the sole map that anybody ever ought to use. This is the image, and don't vary from it. And most of us are in a more liberal, open-minded-

DENIS WOOD: Ecumenical position--

WARD KAISER: Ecumenical position. And we say, hey, there's a lot of worldviews. There's a lot of ways of viewing reality, and we're not about to say one is better than the other-- for one purpose or another, yes, but in a final sense, in an ultimate sense, no.

DENIS WOOD: Well, at the bottom of that is the idea, one map for one world. There's not one world. And to pretend there is one world is completely crazy.

WARD KAISER: Yes. Yes.

DENIS WOOD: So what you really do need is many maps for many worlds. I don't think it's the only map in the world, but I also really have zero time for the people who want to attack it and do so on the most bizarre grounds.

They'll attack it because it's not really a Peters map. It's a Gall map. Or they'll attack it because it's an ugly map. Or they'll attack it because it's a rectilinear map. Or they'll attack it because it's got bad colors.

WARD KAISER: Yeah.

DENIS WOOD: They'll attack it for any reason at all.

WARD KAISER: Yeah.

DENIS WOOD: And what's at stake here is just making it go away. They don't have any grounds for fighting it or rejecting it. That's what I mean. And I have no time for that.

And their arguments-- I don't care who they come from-- are totally specious. And when they advance them in the persona of scientific cartography, it's like Mr. Pompous needs to be pricked and let the air out of him, because it's not true.

And so I've defended Peters from those kinds of attacks. But I will resist his effort for complete hegemony of the map classroom in the name of his particular version, which is one of only very many equivalent projections.

WARD KAISER: Right.

DENIS WOOD: I understand that it's an equivalent projection, and the lines are straight on them, the grid lines. And they cross at right angles. And if you think those things are overwhelmingly important, as he does, and that people--

BOB ABRAMMS: Then only three choices or four choices to choose from.

DENIS WOOD: Right. There are a fewer number of choices. There still are choices. But I'm less convinced than he is that people who are looking at a map cannot understand that the grid doesn't have to be, as it's not on the globe, this rectilinear grid that you see on his map.

WARD KAISER: That's opening up a whole other question, because cartography is a pretty esoteric discipline for most people. Could they care less? I doubt it. If they have a road map that tells them how to get from point A to point B, that's about the extent of it.

And they're willing to leave these other questions to a small clientele or a small coterie of people who take an interest in those things. Suddenly, we think and we hope that the rest of the world, that vast number of people out there, are going to take an interest in maps and through maps learn about some other things, other realities of life.

ARNO PETERS: Fairness to all people. And sure, Mercator-- and even the others-- doesn't give fairness to all people.

BOB ABRAMMS: All this conversation and all this heated discussion is not about maps. It's not about cartography. It's about worldview. It's about the representation as an icon of how we conceive of the image of the world.

People can fight about whose countries are represented where and how. But the fact is that it's very much of a subjective and maybe even subliminal judgment as to how we relate to the world through our constructions of it in the form of images. And this is why the Peters projection is so revolutionary. And this is why it's so hotly contested.

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: What do you think? Does selecting one map projection or another to represent the world really make a difference? Can the Peters map be just as valuable today as one of many world maps? Does it have as great an impact as when it was a lightning rod of controversy by accusing all the other world map images of being Eurocentric, imperialist, and colonialist?

How important do you think it is that a world map shows each country according to its exact landmass? Would a world map showing population density be a map that was fairer to all people? How do you represent peoples who don't have their own country? Or do we need several perspectives to have a balanced worldview?

Is the state, in fact, the most important organizing device to represent the people on our planet? What happens if we start to think outside of the box of the concept of nation states?

Here's an updated map that was first developed in the 1960s by radical cartographer Bill Bunge. Bunge's map shows exactly where the most people live, while avoiding declaring the country

boundaries. Bunge's politics? He was part internationalist, part socialist, and part anarchist. But mostly, he was concerned with saving the children, making sure young people in Detroit had a decent place to grow up.

Even if Dr. Peters asserts--

ARNO PETERS: We have to have one map not for one country, but for the whole world--

DR. DIANE J. JOHNSON: His legacy to us is that we now can think much more critically about the many ways to see the world.

TEXT ON SCREEN

Arno Peters died 15 months after these interviews were videotaped. A radical map. A remarkable man. His impact will be felt for generations to come.

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