

Book Review: A Social Atlas of Europe

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The Social Atlas of Europe, Dimitris Ballas, Danny Dorling and Benjamin Hennig, London, Policy Press, 2014, 311 pp., ISBN 978-1-44731-353-3

The Social Atlas of Europe highlights the notion that Europe as a continent, and group of countries can be conceived as a single entity. Through the innovative use of GIS and cartographic techniques the authors display the multiple human geographies of Europe, highlighting that Europe is not simply a collection of nation states, but an amalgamation of multiple regions which are both heterogeneous but also share many commonalities - revealing multiple different views of Europe. The authors, three geographers, attempt to display the realities of Europe from the perspective of human geography, developing a sense of the national, regional and spatial differences across the continent. *The Social Atlas of Europe* uses GIS and cartographic techniques to offer alternative views of Europe, focusing less on national boundaries as they rarely reflect the social and economic realities, but more on characteristics of the people and places within the continent.

The book contains maps or cartograms, divided into categories addressing different elements of European society including: identity and culture; demographics, education; employment; industry and occupation; health; politics; economics; environment; social cohesion and policy. Questions addressed in the atlas range from the consideration of the percentage of people in Europe who believe in life after death, how important politics is in an individual's life, to explorations of GDP or foreign direct investment; to net payments into the EU budget. Given the exploration of population characteristics and how they change are central to the work of planners - whether this be to cope with growth (Churski & Dominiak, 2014), shrinkage (Sousa & Pinho, 2015) or transformation (Therkildsen, Hansen & Lorentzen, 2009), these visualisations should serve as key points to inform discussions within the planning discipline.

There are three key types of visualisations included in the book – country cartograms, cartograms with thematic mapping, and gridded population Hennig cartograms. The first type uses a rainbow colour scheme showing countries resized according to their population, the second type uses shaded cartograms to show distribution of the population feature in discussion, and the third uses gridded population cartograms, where the size of each grid cell reflects the number of people

living in the area, using finer level geographical information about the populations in question than the previous two types. These are different to traditional maps as they are shaped to be proportional in accordance with the social statistics rather than just their physical features. In these maps, population is the key variable.

It would be impossible in a review of this length to do justice to the range of visualisations presented in this volume, and so those mentioned here are simply illustrative of the contributions. While the number of unemployed people is frequently discussed in policy discussions and the media, the visual representation included in the atlas shows the huge variety which exists in the content, with Spain clearly dominating the landscape (nearly 4 million unemployed in 2012). Similarly the map which shows the increase in unemployed people between 2007 and 2013 highlights the spatially variegated nature of the impacts of the financial crisis. Conversely when you observe the decline in unemployment between 2007 and 2012 the map is hardly recognisable as Europe as Germany dominates the picture. While many of the issues covered in the book are likely to be at the fore of political discussions, it also includes more novel cartograms which would not necessarily make their way into publications – one of these is the total votes received in the 2013 European song contest and the total votes given to the UK – revealing a lot about the politics of Europe.

It is clear the authors have made an effort to use the most recent data where it is available, although it is inevitable that with representations of populations which are by nature dynamic and ever-changing that they will become somewhat outdated. For example, where net adjusted income of private households for 2007 is displayed, the pattern is likely to have been affected by the 2008 financial crisis, and therefore it would be interesting to see how much this pattern has changed. This issue of keeping data and visualisations current is somewhat counteracted by new maps published on the dedicated *Europemapper* website which accompanies the book (Hennig, 2014b).

There are a growing number of works which seek to present social and economic data in a greater variety of visual forms, and data visualisation across many disciplines in the social sciences has taken hold. Geo-visualisations provide mechanisms to display representations of reality, based on spatial information (van

den Brink et al, 2007), and the authors of this book have been at the forefront of some of these developments, presenting innovative forms of maps and cartograms for several years (see Dorling, D., Newman, M. and Barford, A. ,2010; Hennig, 2014a; Hennig, Ballas and Dorling, 2013). However, this book represents one of the first attempts to bring together visualisation of the human reality of the European population. *The Social Atlas of Europe* will be of wide interest not only to planners, geographers, other social scientists and policy makers, but also to members of the public across Europe (and beyond). One only needs to glance at the key areas that Town Planning Review lists as interests: spatial planning; local and regional economic development; community planning and participation social cohesion and spatial inequalities; urban design and conservation; environmental planning and sustainable development, to recognise why these maps provide stimulating material for discussion. The issues addressed in *The Social Atlas of Europe* lie at the heart of many issues which planners address on a daily basis, and the maps included present not only the diversity, but areas of commonality which may inform the work of planners. This book presents a cartographic story of contemporary Europe, providing a new visual approach to the human geography of Europe, introducing the reader to a new way of viewing Europe.

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