

Book Review

Environment and Planning B:
Planning and Design
0(0) 1–3

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0265813515621425

epb.sagepub.com



Dimitris Ballas, Danny Droling and Benjamin Hennig, *The social atlas of Europe*. Policy Press: Bristol, United Kingdom, 2014; 256 pp. ISBN: 9781447313533, (hbk)

Reviewed by: Arzu Coltekin, Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Switzerland

Summary

The Social Atlas of Europe, as the title suggests, takes on a job of mapping social issues in Europe using mainly cartograms. The book includes the European Union (EU) member and candidate countries as well as the European Economic Area (EEA) and the Schengen countries. The thematic coverage is as impressive as the geographic coverage: identity and culture, education, employment, industry and occupation, health, politics, economics, environment, social cohesion and policy; 21 different data sources are listed, among which EU-related official statistics appear to dominate, but the authors also make use of specific studies such as the European Values Survey¹ or the very general ones such as the CIA World Factbook², and occasionally Wikipedia or various newspapers and organizations.

Praise

The readers will find the questions posed (and topics covered) immediately interesting and relevant. Some examples include “Can the death penalty be justified?” (p.16), “Do you believe in life after death?” (p.18), “Is competition good for people?” (p.28), “Economically active female population by region” (p.67), “Deaths due to breast/prostate cancer” (p.98/99), “Methane Emissions” (p.140), “Vulnerability of European Regions to Climate Change” (p.158), “Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants” (p.178) and so on. Overall, I think the authors did a really good job in choosing topics that allow discovering multiple aspects of Europe. The questions and the presented facts make the reader feel curious, which should not be underestimated in motivating people to explore more. Authors put the effort in bringing disparate data sources together, and use “city-scale” (instead of country-scale) where possible. These city-scale representations might somewhat alleviate misleading generalizations and eventually prejudice, especially for larger countries where regional differences may be very big.

A few thoughts

I agree with the humanitarian outlook provided in the introduction where authors suggest that national boundaries are not meaningful. However, they suggest a “European identity”

as a solution – and I intellectually object to that, as this would rather create just a larger “nation,” possibly still with unjustified feelings of superiority/inferiority towards the “others.” This is what a group identity does, and replacing one group identity with another is a questionable solution. Of course, while one can have a conversation about the ideals, with no global solution at sight, even such larger regional identities might be a step forward. If people embrace the identity, they might be more willing to share resources and stop violent wars. The EU has shown some signs of this, even though it is a rocky road, to say the least. The book, as the authors present it, is meant as a contribution towards this identity building.

Criticism

I genuinely recommend the book to those who are curious to understand Europe better. However, I also question some aspects of the book. Primarily, I could see various possibilities to improve the visualizations. Cartograms are interesting and can be powerful, but because they distort the geometry, displaying the actual geometry alongside with the cartogram as a reference is helpful, perhaps even necessary. Keeping in mind the relative size of many countries at the same time and mentally comparing them to their distorted geometry seems like a recipe to cognitive overload (Cowan, 2001). Furthermore, the distortion tends to “eat” some regions (even when the values are manually set above zero, visualizations suffer when a country becomes a “line”). Careful manual editing and having an undistorted geometric reference would help with that as well. I also noted that there was no legend explaining the colors, which can be confusing. The authors provide an introduction where they explain the colors (p.4); however, if the reader skips that page, they might associate random meaning to these colors and misread the maps. Even if they did read the explanation, I found the legend on page 4 confusing because the title of the legend says “Colors denote years of accession or current status related to the EU” and does not explain further. For example, we see Switzerland as light green and the legend says 2011. It is unclear what “current status related to the EU” this date refers to – at first sight, it might seem that Switzerland joined the EU in 2011 (Switzerland is not in the EU and Schengen agreement was earlier). Removing such ambiguities, adding a legend to all maps, using a different color scheme (see “Rainbow colors are still considered harmful” (Borland and Taylor, 2007)), and ensuring that the color scheme is color-blind safe (see Color Oracle³) would further improve the visualizations in this book.

Overall recommendation

I found the book exciting and highly interesting; therefore, I recommend this book to everyone interested in Europe – especially as a cultural and political entity. You will enjoy browsing it and you will learn a great deal from this book as it integrates many aspects of life into one resource. However, to get the most out of it, make sure that you have read the introduction and maybe keep a “regular” map of Europe in sight when browsing it!

Notes

1. <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu>
2. <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>
3. <http://colororacle.org/>

References

- Borland D and Taylor MR (2007) Rainbow color map (Still) considered harmful. *IEEE Comput Graph Appl* 27(2): 14–17.
- Cowan N (2001) The magical number 4 in short-term memory: A reconsideration of mental storage capacity. *Behav Brain Sci* 24(1): 87–114; discussion 114–185.