

Book Review

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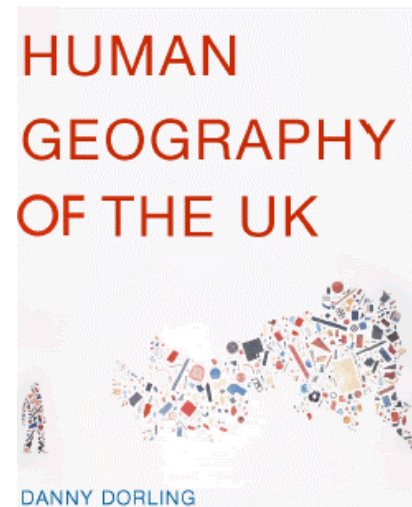
Human Geography of the UK

By Daniel Dorling Publisher: Sage Publications, UK

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On page 100 of this book, after mentioning the UK's high levels of functional illiteracy, author wryly comments how "Levels of functional innumeracy... are far higher and so you will find only the most simple use of statistics in newspaper articles". And, one might add, increasingly in the teaching of undergraduate students! In other words, if committed to the critical use of statistical material in teaching, as Dorling clearly is, how do we make this material both accessible and interesting to the average undergraduate student? This is the not inconsiderable challenge that this book tries to respond to.



The structure of the book is neat and simple: 11 short chapters of around 17 pages; each, barring the introduction, a chapter placing the UK in global context and a short conclusion, focusing on one key dimension of the human geography of the UK. Crucially, and essential given the relative brevity of the chapters, each chapter does not try to provide a comprehensive account of, say, 'Inequality' (Chapter 6) but instead tries to show some interesting, insightful and often unusual glimpses of the many ways in which the chosen topic is expressed geographically across the UK. Each of the substantive chapters also contains an exercise for students. Although these often seem rather time-consuming and challenging to organise, they may well be practical in some teaching contexts. They also have some clever critical touches, such as the subtle introduction to gerrymandering in the politics chapter.

Dorling's analysis and the overall effectiveness and usefulness of this book is predicated on his maps – around ten per chapter – whose cartography by Graham Allsopp we should acknowledge. These maps are far from conventional and are thus introduced in detail in Chapter 1. First, the areal unit of analysis depicted is quite unusual, namely the 85 constituencies drawn up for the 1999 European elections but never used; what Dorling calls "The constituencies that never were". Moreover, so as to present the UK's geography more in proportion to population size than in terms of its appearance from space, each constituency is presented as a rectangle of equal area. So far, so good.

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Secondly, for the whole of the book that follows, the rectangles are given a height that is proportional to a child's chances of not winning a place in university in 2000. Although this reflects Dorling's deliberate and laudable attempt to connect with "the hypothetical university student who turned 18 in the first decade of the millennium" (p. 6), this does not work for me. On the one hand, Dorling's promotion of the topographical map over the 'flat' view rests partly on a crafty representation of the latter in Figure 1.2 that removes intra-regional boundaries between the rectangles, thus rendering the map much less readable.

I do agree, though, that the plus point of the topographical map is the ability to compare variables. On the other hand, do we always want to make the comparison between 'variable x' and children's chances of not going to university? I would say no, which means that the comparative element of the topographical maps is largely wasted throughout the book.

Following this map introduction, the rest of the book seeks to present "A description [of the UK] painted from numbers collected to record key moments in people's lives" (p. xiv). This results in a very diverse set of topics as Dorling – correctly in my opinion – seeks to build on his understanding of human geography as the attempt "to understand and explain people's lives in the round" (p. 16). First up is 'Birth', where consideration is given to such things as child migration, and babies born to teenagers and those over 35 years. The former reveals a clear picture of children moving out of the cities, especially to southwest England. 'Education' comes next, with maps focusing on where children are failed – an emphasis that expresses clearly Dorling's critical take on contemporary society – at each stage of their examinations. 'Identity' follows, with an account of how the "powers that be" (p. 49) label ~~people via the decennial census~~ in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, religion, household type, etc. Because so much is given here, patterns are not really described, although trends such as the concentration of the elderly on the coasts come across very clearly. Appropriately for a book endorsed by Ron Johnston, someone who has also experimented with unconventional cartographic representations¹, the next chapter is concerned with electoral 'Politics'. Attention is given to the 2001 'victory' of non-voters and Dorling's perception of an unfair electoral system that could hardly be "better designed to annoy the majority of the electorate most of the time" (pp. 75-6).

The next three chapters concern themselves with 'Inequality', 'Health' and 'Work'. In these chapters, as in the book generally, an attempt is made to link topics together, although space constraints clearly limit how much this can be achieved. Certainly, though, the idea of analysing individual variables in isolation is resisted, even if this is how they have to be presented. The inequality chapter considers measures of wealth and poverty; health, various measures of mortality; and work, various measures of (un)employment and connected issues such as long-term illness. Unfortunately, the maps in this latter chapter are exceptionally hard to read and probably sometimes erroneous: for example, it is very hard to see a consistency in the classifying of constituencies as 'high' or 'low' in Figure 8.2. In contrast, the analysis of Glasgow, where many dimensions are considered together, really comes to life.

'Home' is the first of the remaining chapters, with analysis of indicators from car ownership to population density to unpaid care for the sick. A focus on housing tenure reveals the drift of the UK population to the southeast clearly. The penultimate chapter, 'Abroad', broadens the geographical lens to the whole world. Maps based on the population of children of each country are used to paint a grim picture of the global suffering of children. Indicators used include measures of water, sanitation, shelter, education and healthcare deprivation. The

book ends with a brief consideration of the future human geography of the UK, with emphasis given to just how sticky change can be and how sedimented much of our human landscape appears to be.

Although Dorling is surprisingly quite upbeat concerning his analysis, with talk of “a southern English garden with rough edges” (p. 180), overall his book presents a “ragged” (p. 101) human landscape of the UK, with map after map revealing how the inter-related institutions of “migration and money” (p. 36) sift and sort the population to produce (at least) “increasingly two Britains” (p. 151). Such is perhaps to be expected from such a politically committed account of the human geography of the UK.

Overall, in spite of my reservations above, I was very impressed by much of the book. First, I found the clear commitment of the author to social justice admirable and hope this rubs off on students using the text. Second, the sheer breadth of, and imagination shown in, variable choice lifts the book above more pedestrian accounts of human geography based on census and other data sources. Certainly, this is a book to be used in introductory modules on the human geography of the UK in universities and higher education colleges. In many ways, the presentations here can provide jumping off points for more detailed analyses. The book is also of references use for academics with even a passing interest in how the people of the UK are sorted and sifted today. It is clear that even relatively simple statistical geographical profiles still have much value!

Notes

¹ For example, R. Johnston, C. Pattie & J. Allsop (1988) *A Nation Dividing?* London: Longman