

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jason D. Hansen.** *Mapping the Germans: Statistical Science, Cartography, and the Visualization of the German Nation, 1848-1914.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 232 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-871439-2.

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This slim volume traces the development of statistical and cartographic representations of ethnically based nationality by German-language scholars in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Along the way it also describes the ways in which these forms of ethnographic knowledge were disseminated, distributed, and acted upon by nationalist movements. Jason Hansen frames the story as a crucial but as yet little-noted background to the central role played by ethnographic maps at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and through this watershed moment, in shaping basic assumptions about ethnicity and politics through the twentieth century.

The approach Hansen takes is informed by the writings of geographers and others who have examined the history of cartography and social statistics from a constructivist perspective, and by a light dose of Bruno Latour. One of Hansen's core interests is the question of how the authority and credibility of ethnographic maps and statistics were constructed. The arc of the narrative is accordingly what one would expect from a constructivist perspective: after a general introduction, the substantive chapters treat (1) the search for a practical and unambiguous statistical method of identifying (in this case German) nationality; (2) developments and debates in ethnographic mapping; (3) relations between demographic discourses and radical nationalist activism; (4) modes of circulation and dissemination of ethnographic knowledge in connection with the politics of nationality; and (5) strategies of everyday intervention by nationalist activists and sympathisers in seeking to cement on the ground the cross-border national solidarities depicted in ethnographic maps and statistics.

The narrative flows well, and many of the details Hansen discusses are extremely interesting. The initial account of debates over how to measure nationality, and in particular the micro-politics surrounding the emergent preference among many scholars for reliance upon determination of mother tongue, is fascinating. It is likewise interesting, for example, to understand the role played by areal shading in the attempt to render language boundaries clearer on ethnographic maps (p. 59).

Hansen goes to great lengths, in the later chapters, to try to discover exactly how the new availability of ethnographic knowledge was actually taken up and acted upon by the German-speaking publics within and outside the newly unified nation-state. A key point he makes is that the wide circulation of such knowledge enabled, if it did not necessarily predetermine, a democratization and privatization of political action. In this connection there is a perceptive discussion at the end of chapter 5 on the difference between the "radical" micro-politics of ethnic activism and forms of activism that would have been revolutionary in character.

Hansen's study is valuable, on the one hand, in filling in this gap in the historical literature on the development of ethnographic knowledge and its role in the political backstory to the ethnically based geopolitics of the twentieth century. Beyond this standard form of relevance, however, it is also interesting because of the relationship between the techniques of representation at the heart of the empirical narrative and the kind of political frame into which Hansen places them. There are by now many critical-constructivist studies of the links between

the nineteenth-century emergence of social statistics and mapping, on the one hand, and power relations, on the other. And yet the majority of these studies focus primarily on the kinds of power relations Michel Foucault analyzed under the headings of “biopolitics” or “governmentality.” Statistics and mapping are typically assumed to be techniques developed for managing populations and economies during the upheavals of capitalist industrialization and urbanization. Hansen’s study is intriguing because it frames these techniques within dynamics of sovereignty, nationalism, and geopolitics rather than in the more “economic” registers of power frequently addressed in the literature.

There are a number of problems or unresolved issues in *Mapping the Germans*. The contingent historical context formed by capitalism is left unremarked as a quasi-natural backdrop for the story, despite the fact that demographic competition was always also shaped by the concern for access to resources. Instead of capitalist industrialization, Hansen speaks merely of “industrialization” (e.g., p. 70). At the more micro end of the scale, there is a tendency to talk of the projects of various nationalist scholars in terms of “their own ideas” (pp. 49, 50), as though some inscrutable subjective uniqueness rather than socioeconomic or cultural subject-positions ultimately render their actions intelligible.

Two ambivalences also haunt the narrative. One appears in Hansen’s characterization of the “illusion of agency” encouraged by the everyday politics of ethnic

nationalism, an illusion consisting in the “belief that individual actions could affect the larger historical destiny of the nation” (p. 148). If this belief is really illusory, why does the narrative give such prominent place to the role of ethnographic knowledge in engendering such actions? The suspicion that all of the ethnographic ferment had only limited impact is reinforced from a different angle by Hansen’s admission (pp. 154-155) that ethnographic information was often trumped at the Paris Peace Conference by Great Power interests. There is, in other words, some lingering doubt as to the ultimate significance of late nineteenth-century ethnographic mapping and statistics.

There is also some doubt as to the epistemological status Hansen ascribes to the knowledge produced by German geographers, demographers, cartographers, and statisticians at the time. As noted earlier, the overall shape of the narrative, as well as the references to Latour, and the attempt to trace the effects of knowledge-constructions, all clearly suggest a constructivist perspective. Yet in some passages, Hansen appears to buy into a more conventionally realist distinction between truth and “ideology” (e.g., p. 137). This is a typical problem for historical studies of this kind, but some additional clarification would have been helpful to the reader.

None of these issues detract fundamentally from the significance and overall quality of the study. It is an interesting, valuable, and well-executed contribution to the literature.

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