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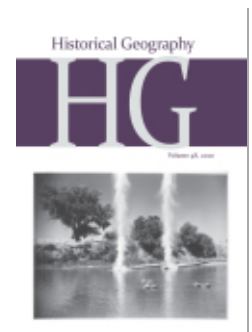
Mapping Populism: Taking Politics to the People by John
Agnew and Michael Shin (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Mapping Populism: Taking Politics to the People. John Agnew and Michael Shin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Pp. ix+171, maps, charts, bibliography, index. \$69.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-5381-2401-7. \$27.00, paperback, ISBN 978-1-5381-2402-4.

An image of the fable character the Piped Piper of Hamelin dominates the cover of John Agnew and Michael Shin's latest book, *Mapping Populism: Taking Politics to the People*. The use of such imagery is a brilliant foreshadowing of what lies within the pages. Both well-known geographers at the University of California, Los Angeles, Agnew and Shin deeply examine contemporary populism in the Western world, highlighting case studies in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Italy. Moving beyond the traditional geopolitical narrative of democracy's characteristics, the scholars employ geographic lenses and methods to examine, understand, and reveal contemporary populism's shared core—an intricate entanglement of voter turnout, political leadership, and social media.

In the effort to fully understand the recent turn, the authors begin by situating populism—figuratively and literally, historically and geographically—in Europe and the United States. They then examine the spatial intricacies of contemporary populism as manifested in the United Kingdom (2016 Brexit referendum), the United States (2016 election of President Donald Trump), France (2017 National Front), and Italy (2018's Five Star Movement). Overall, the scholars find that, despite varied local geographies, contemporary populism in much of the

Western world shares three attributes: (1) the geodemographics of voter turnout (i.e., a large portion of voters who are able to be swayed from their original “establishment” party to that of populism), (2) “the role of a putative leader cum rabble-rouser,” often a celebrity, “in focusing attention on the movement in context of an increasingly fragmented media environment and the need to replace the established party elites with new ‘outside’ cadres in tune with the ‘common sense’ of the people,” and (3) the populist leadership’s effective, widespread use of television and social media to disseminate and perpetuate “information” (read “propaganda”) to the masses (139).

Mapping Populism has numerous strengths, not limited to those discussed here. Agnew and Shin almost immediately situate themselves and the work. They employ scholarly transparency in the first few pages and reveal any possible bias. The introductory section includes caliber sections on “The Decline of Thinking Geographically about Politics” and “Placing Populism,” which lay a solid spatial foundation for the rest of the work. The scholars’ arguments are clear and strong. Examples are steeped in very current (e.g., within the last three years) interdisciplinary scholarship, often with every two to three sentences providing references. The geographers’ discussion engages with this literature by comparing and contrasting, and then moves beyond to produce novel arguments.

The work’s weaknesses are minor and relative. Occasionally the same word is used closely together (i.e., within two sentences); in such cases using a synonym helps add variety, depth, interest, and caliber to the narrative. The quality of the text and the printed imagery is not equivalent. The line work of maps and other visuals is occasionally vague. Many of the images are from secondary sources; the work might have been strengthened by utilizing more originally produced images, graphs, and maps. Though most likely cost-prohibitive, the use of color on maps would have been more reader-friendly in helping quickly distinguish between, for instance, a legend’s four classes. Unfortunately, at times, these issues with graphic print quality almost seem to undercut the graphics’ information and narrative’s caliber.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is language and tone. This is not a trade book. Most people will not read it. It will not educate the masses. If contemporary populists do pick it up and read a few pages, they will

likely quickly put down the book, belittle it, and ignore it. The language is often thick, and focused discussion is highly steeped in the latest literature. Here, where some might see a strength, others might see a weakness, in that the work arguably might feed into anti-intellectual stereotypes of biased, intellectual elites being irrelevant to everyday life, with academics living in their ivory towers of knowledge, only speaking with one another, not sharing relevant knowledge with the general public, and slandering their beloved charismatic leaders.

Because of its thick language, focused topics, and deep literature, the book is most likely not for general education introductory undergraduate geography courses filled with students who may not have political interest and/or a previous knowledge base. Instead, the work is better suited for upper-level, specialized undergraduate and graduate geography courses in which students already have a solid footing in these topics. And, of course, the book is excellent for specialists and scholars who are interested in, knowledgeable of, and conversant with the latest relevant literature.

In the end Agnew and Shin should be congratulated on a timely and groundbreaking scholarly work. They convincingly demonstrate that populism is not “the people” ruling; rather, it is one people’s rule over all others. Real democracy does not equal populism. Contemporary populism unchecked “degenerates into authoritarianism,” is the enemy of collective peoples’ rule, and thus is the opposite of real democracy (146). Despite such a deflating theme, the political geographers, though they warn against overly “wishful thinking,” close the book with a hopeful outlook (144). They contend that, despite contemporary populism’s widespread stronghold, its grip is weakening and its continuance is unsustainable. Eventually, with a growing citizenry focused on polyphony, civility, taking on citizenship responsibilities, and living by “stronger together” behaviors, real democracy might be realized.

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