

## «MENTAL MAPPING» THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS IN EUROPEAN COMMUNITY COUNTRIES

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**ABSTRACT** A recent study of opinions of nearly 1,000 students from all EC countries provides insights into their perceptions of the EC. The survey explores and maps students' answers on social, economic and environmental issues. The conclusions show comparative uniformity of opinions on some questions like tourists' behaviour abroad or degree of pollution by acid rain. Knowledge of such perceptions is essential as they will influence behaviour in the unified EC after 1992. Hence the need to understand how images of places are constructed and interpreted.

**RÉSUMÉ** Une récente étude d'opinion effectuée auprès d'un millier d'étudiants de la CE montre de quelle façon ils la perçoivent. Les réponses, portant sur des questions sociales, économiques et d'environnement, ont été analysées et cartographiées. Certaines font apparaître une quasi unanimité d'opinions: les comportements à l'étranger ou la pollution des pluies acides. La connaissance de ces perceptions est essentielle car elle influencera les comportements après 1992. De là, le besoin de comprendre comment les images des lieux sont construites et interprétées.

**RESUMEN** Una reciente encuesta dirigida a un millar de estudiantes de la CE muestra de qué modo la perciben. Las respuestas sobre temas sociales, económicos y ambientales fueron analizadas y cartografiadas. Algunas de ellas revelan opiniones casi unánimes: las conductas en el extranjero o la polución de las lluvias ácidas. El conocimiento de dichas percepciones resulta esencial por su influencia sobre las conductas después de 1992. De ahí la necesidad de comprender de qué modo la imágenes de los lugares se construyen e interpretan.

• EUROPEAN COMMUNITY • MENTAL MAP  
• PERCEPTION

• CARTE MENTALE • COMMUNAUTÉ  
EUROPÉENNE • PERCEPTION

• COMUNIDAD EUROPEA • MAPA MENTAL  
• PERCEPCIÓN

A recent study of opinions of students in European Community countries provides some interesting insights into the way the EC is perceived by those living within its boundaries.

Nearly 1,000 students from all 12 European Community countries participated in the study, which was carried out through questionnaires by a student of Birkbeck College, University of London. The questions covered social, economic and environmental issues. In most cases, two or more locations from each country were surveyed, with all of the respondents being students of Geography or a related science from post secondary colleges. Most conclusions were drawn from data on a country level and represent the average perceptions of all students in a country. Responses from a country will therefore be biased to the locations from which the greatest number of questionnaires were returned (fig. 1).

The survey explores and maps students' *perceptions* of the European Community countries and their citizens. There are

no correct answers to the questions, they are subjective. A person's perception of a country and its citizens is built up over a lifetime and may be based on first hand experience, hearsay, media bias, education, prejudice and any number of other factors. The charts and tables produced are therefore «mental maps» rather than maps of realities.

The data from the questionnaires were analysed by two methods, both running on Apple Macintosh computers. The first part resulted in data at country level; these were computed on Excel spread sheets. Part two involved students recording perceptions of specific geographic locations within countries; these responses were entered as geographically linked data onto tables and maps in MapInfo software, from which it was possible to produce summarising tables, charts and maps combining variables.

The conclusions show that although the 12 independent sovereign states of the European Community may not agree on everything, they are perhaps not as impossibly different in opinion as the media would have us believe.

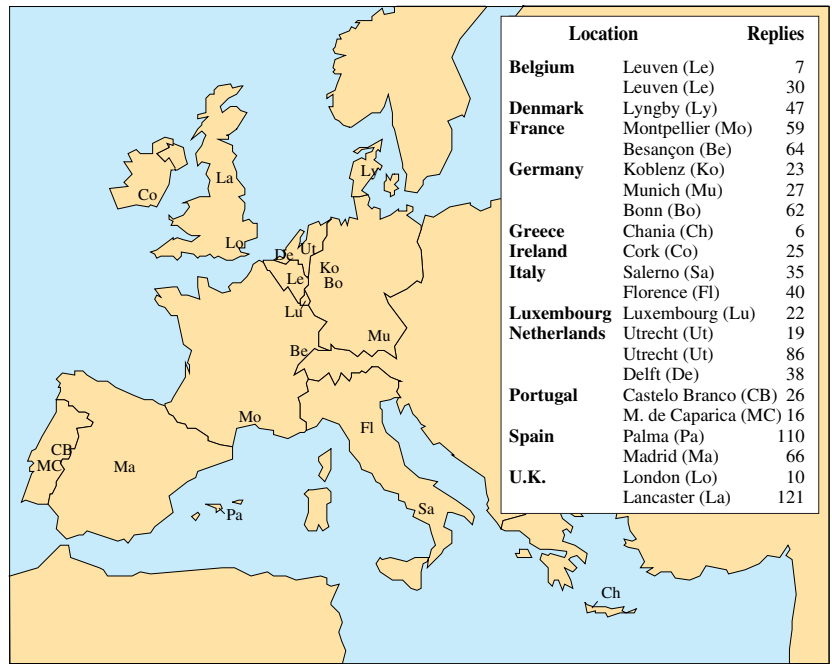
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Some conclusions are almost unanimous. That the Germans are inconsiderate tourists and the British «hot» on national defence are views recorded by students from nearly all countries (even Germany and Britain). France is by far the most desirable retirement location and Luxembourg is perceived to have the lowest unemployment. There is also a strong element of national pride concerning some topics, notably education (where the Belgians, Danes, Germans, Luxembourgers and Dutch all think that their own citizens are the best educated in the European Community), and standard of living, where the Danes, Germans and Luxembourgers again place themselves top.

The Dutch are the most travelled within the European Community, and France the country to which most travelling is done. On the economic front, the Germans top the league table - by the year 2000 Germany is predicted to have the strongest economy followed by France, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom - Greece and Portugal the weakest (fig. 2). Germany, the United Kingdom and France are consistently considered the three most important players in world affairs.

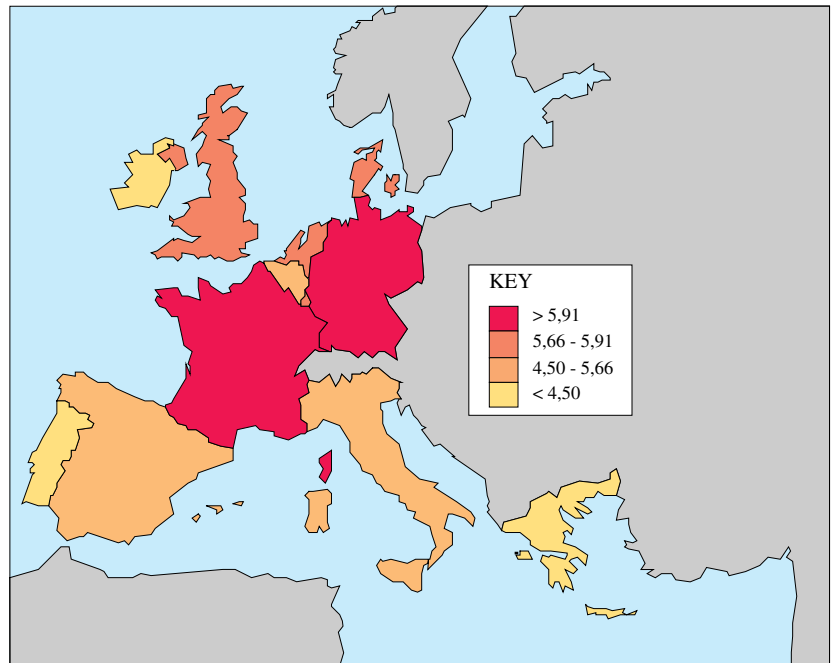
There was also a high degree of agreement on the location of the worst pollution in the European Community (fig. 3), with 40% of students perceiving this to be in Germany (mainly the east). This was primarily industrial or chemical and air pollution, but also acid rain. There is also concern (20% of all students) for smog around London and industrial pollution in the north of England. 7% of students think Athens' air carries the worst pollution in the European Community.

Students were given the option of recording «d» = don't know, if they had no perception of a country or question at all. Although on average opinions were given in 83% of cases, a pattern became apparent in the countries which were consistently included in or excluded from responses. For example, stu-



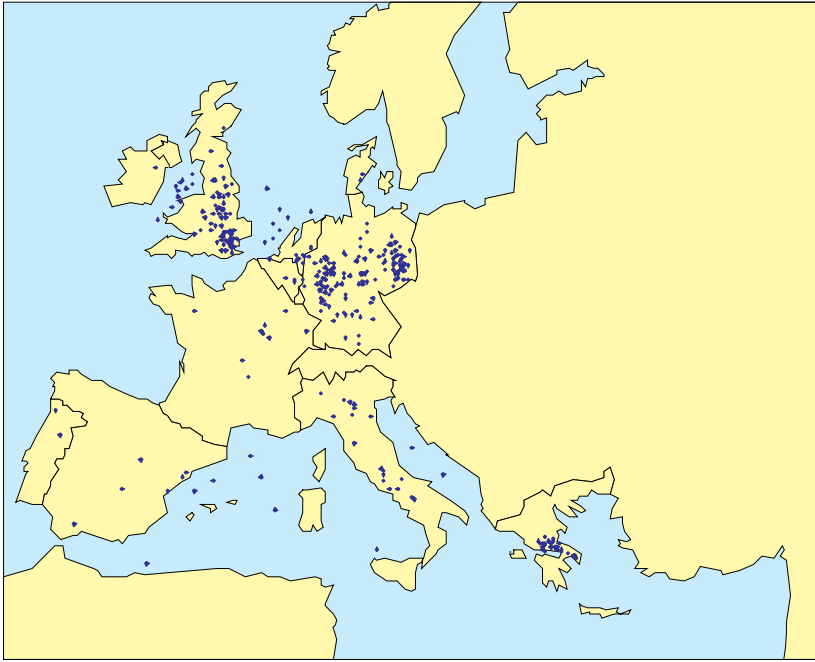
### 1. Responding colleges' locations, and number of responses

*Localisation des universités ayant répondu, et nombre de réponses*



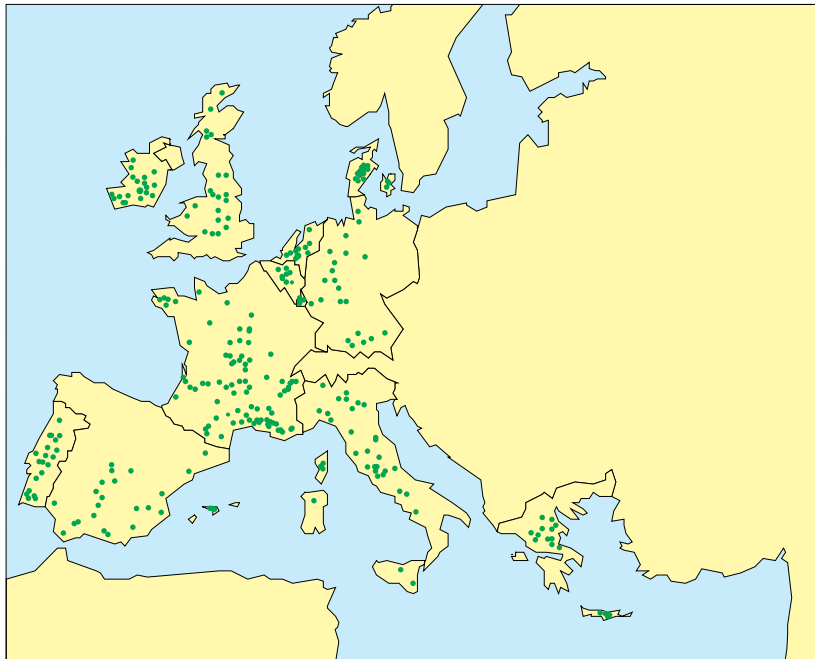
### 2. On a scale of 1-8, for each country: how strong do you think the economy will be in the year 2000?

*Sur une échelle de 1 à 8 pour chaque pays: quelle sera, d'après vous, leur puissance économique en l'an 2000?*



### 3. Location of the worst pollution in the European Community

*Localisation des sites perçus comme les plus pollués dans la Communauté Européenne*



### 4. Location of the retirement preferences in the European Community

*Localisation des lieux de retraites préférés dans la Communauté Européenne*

Ce travail a été réalisé avec l'aide de Johnathan Raper, directeur de l'Apple Mapping Centre, Laboratoire de Géographie, Birkbeck College.

dents recorded the most opinions about the French (91%), which is also the country to which students have recorded the most travel. By contrast, the fewest opinions were recorded about the Luxembourgers (74%), perhaps because, in spite of its central position, few students have ever been there. Indeed, of the neighbouring French and Germans, only one student in 235 claims to have visited Luxembourg!

Whether the perceptions of European Community students are based on fact or not is unimportant. What is crucial is that it is these perceptions which will influence their behaviour on where to live, work, take holidays and retire (fig. 4) in the unified European Community after 1992. To understand the evolving geography of the single European Community market therefore we must look increasingly at the ways in which images of places are constructed, transmitted and interpreted.

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