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An armchair alternative to A-Level geography

by Danny Dorling



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A message for A-Level geographers from Danny Dorling, Halford Mackinder professor of geography at the University of Oxford

Suddenly you have time on your hands. You would have been spending these weeks and months memorising facts for regurgitating. You would have been honing your skills to very quickly write those perfect six-point or nine-point answers to potential A level exam questions. You would have been doing ‘mocks’ – taking past-paper after past-paper in preparation – and have been pondering strategies for question-spotting; for taking the optimum risks over what you choose to revise, rather than spreading your learning too thinly to gain that longed-for maximal mark.

You would have been constantly reminded not to write what you truly believed was the right answer; but instead what you could best-guess was the right answer as far as those trained to mark your papers believed. And those markers would have had no idea whether it was the right answer either – they too would have been given their instructions; told what words should gain you a point. A-level markers are not permitted to use their imaginations; and, thus, neither could you. That is because there are now so many demands that re-marking must produce identical marks – but there will be no marking this summer, let alone any re-marking!

Exams have their uses, and you may well be lamenting not being able to take yours this year, but they also encourage a particularly narrow way of thinking and answering questions. Knowing that your supposed ability will be summarised by a single letter encourages you to concentrate only on those things that are in the syllabus; and only to think about them in the way that would gain you most regard. You were being treated like a dog is treated when trained to jump through hoops and given snacks (or simply a little appreciation) when performing the most unnatural twists and turns to please those who are watching. This year, however, you are free – no one is watching you jump through the hoops.

So, what should you do? You may well be stuck at home – you cannot go out and explore your neighbourhood; walk freely through the heart of the nearest large city to you, or try to see what is really gluing the countryside together. When movement restrictions are lifted please think of having a look at what is nearest to you. This is what you should have been doing anyway, rather than travelling away to some field-centre before looking outside your own door. Of course, you can explore your local area in many ways on the web. If you are interested in human geography and live in England, I would suggest you start here: <https://vis.oobrien.com/booth/>

When you look at this website of contemporary most-deprivation and least-deprivation, what are the maps really showing you? Why is what you see around you arranged as it is today? And where do the people who do the most vital jobs tend to live – in which areas? What jobs are actually most vital – which jobs are key?

Many answers to these questions have been suggested – those answers are also on the web; but before you start searching for those answers – begin by looking at the world geographically and asking questions – your own questions. Not A-level exam questions but sensible, interesting, important, real-world questions.

Next, when you get bored of your local area, why not think globally? You may not be able to fly anywhere – but you can fly through data. Life in Britain was last as disrupted as it is today during the Second World War – but even then, we looked forward with hope. Consider the five traditional key concerns of social scientists, which were labelled in the 1942 *Beveridge Report* as being ‘Want, Squalor, Disease, Ignorance and Idleness’.

Where can you travel on the Web today to learn about each of these?

On **Want**: work your way through the World income and wealth databases: <https://wid.world/>

On **Squalor**: what you can learn from three decades of reporting by the UNDP: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>

On **Disease**: see the Human mortality dataset (historical records for many countries): <https://www.mortality.org/>

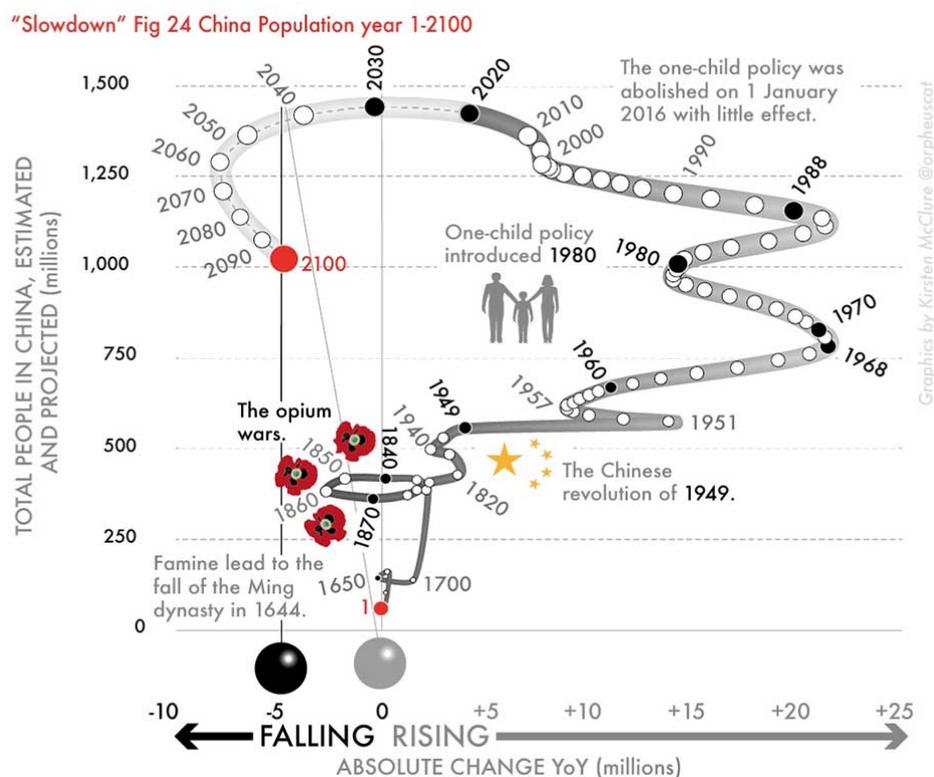
On **Ignorance**: what do we value most and how it that changing?
UNESCO: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

On **Idleness**: suddenly the greatest fear locally, what happens globally?
ILO: <https://ilostat.ilo.org/>

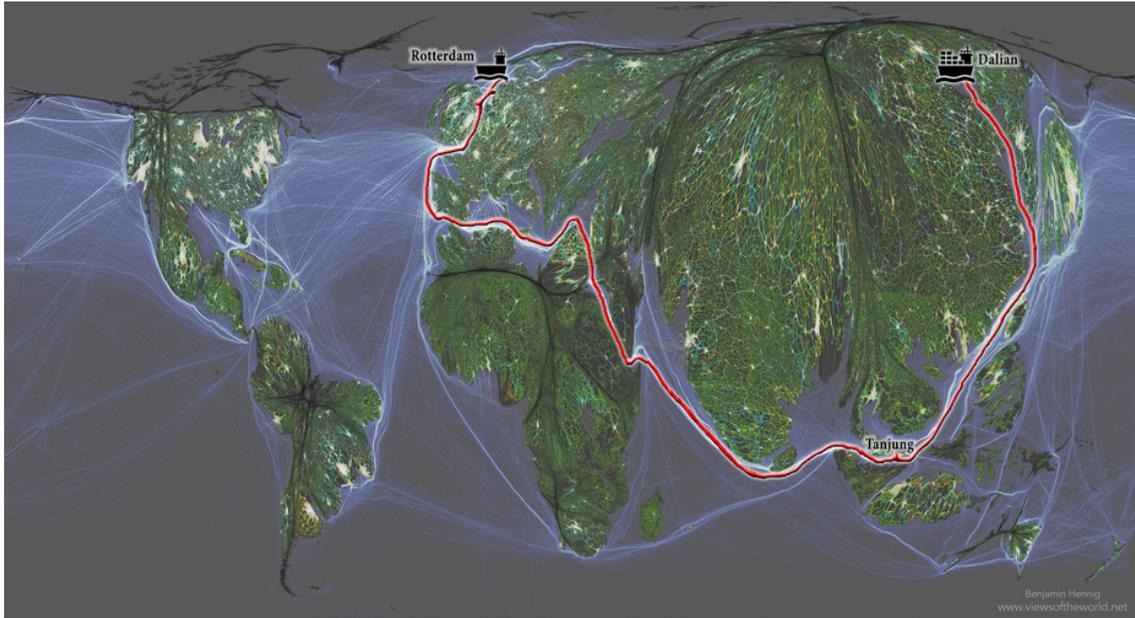
One great thing about travelling in your armchair is that you can travel further and faster. But if you find thinking about the entire world daunting, then limit yourself to Europe: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/home>. The kindly European mainlanders have kept the UK in the data sets (for now).

If you want to see what is done with data by university researchers take a look at the open access journal E&PA featured graphic section – the March issue is here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/epna/52/2> because, by chance, it features the flow out of key centres of China in the spring festival and life expectancy across the UK; and then look back at earlier graphs and at other journals – only ever look at free content (never pay).

Finally, here is something very simple that I made – having started with those resources above – that uses online data to try to suggest where we are heading: <http://www.dannydorling.org/books/SLOWDOWN/Animations.html>



A graph from Slowdown, Danny Dorling's latest book showing China's total population



It is easier to see how we are connected today. See: <http://www.dannydorling.org/books/geography/>

And there is absolutely no reason why you could not do something like this; or much, much better. And now, for once, just for one year, just for your year group, you have some time to explore in the way my generation could before – when exams were taken less seriously.

I hope this helps, there is much more than data out there to see on the web – but it is somewhere to start – when you leave the Alice in Wonderland world of A-level British geography behind; and decide that you want to look a little wider, further and with a great deal more imagination.

