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**DOI**

[10.1177/20438206211044571](https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206211044571)

**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Dialogues in Human Geography

**License**

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**Citation for published version (APA):**

Carraro, V. (2022). Reimagining the cartographic nation: In praise of risk taking. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 12(1), 33-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206211044571>

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# Reimagining the cartographic nation: In praise of risk taking

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Dialogues in Human Geography  
2022, Vol. 12(1) 33–36  
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DOI: 10.1177/20438206211044571  
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## Abstract

I read Rossetto and Lo Presti's article, 'Reimagining the National Map', as an invitation to develop what I call, following Eve Sedgwick, a reparative study of national cartographies. In this commentary, I enthusiastically support their call but also argue for the need to move from an appreciation of maps' fundamental instability to a more daring engagement with the normative dimension of national mapping. Like many scholars working from a post-representational perspective, Rossetto and Lo Presti associate the fundamental dynamism and contingency of maps with (potential) positive social change and, more specifically, the development of multicultural national imaginaries. I suggest that these associations deserve further scrutiny and argue that change and 'everydayness' may offer a starting point, but not a basis for progressive national mappings. Finally, drawing on the thought-provoking examples presented by Rossetto and Lo Presti, I reflect on what principles and practices could guide a progressive national cartography of Italy in 2021.

## Keywords

Post-representational cartographies, mapping, Italy, paranoia, far-right

*What if* maps were understood as 'unpredictable objects or events, able to express cultural forms of pluralism' and, thereby, likely to generate progressive national imaginaries? Arriving after decades of paranoia (Sedgwick, 1997) about maps and nations alike, Rossetto and Lo Presti's (2022) question comes across as a provocation. Since the early 1990s, the notion that maps are tools of power used to reify territorial boundaries and reinforce exclusionary national identities has been the metaplot<sup>1</sup> of critical cartography, a motif that runs through countless articles in this field, as well as opinion pieces and social media threads. The display of scepticism, or even disdain, towards national maps is a basic

component of the supposedly enlightened scholar's toolkit. The issue here is not that this notion is mistaken but, rather, that it is *plausibly* (but not definitely) true of virtually *any* map of *any* nation at *any* time. Cartography's hidden agendas (Harley, 1989) have become an open secret and, more often than not, deconstructing the map reveals little that we did not know before (see also Rose-Redwood,

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2015). I thus fully agree with Rossetto and Lo Presti about the need to expand the repertoire of the critical literature on national cartography to offer what one could call, in keeping with Sedgwick's terms, some form of reparative reading.

For Rossetto and Lo Presti, post-representational and (post)phenomenological theories offer a promising starting point to develop an alternative study of 'the nexus [between] maps and nationhood', bringing together processual understandings of maps (Gerlach, 2013; Kitchin et al., 2013; Rossetto, 2015) and analyses of everyday nationalism (Antonsich, 2016; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). The generative potential of such an approach is demonstrated by three thought-provoking case studies of Italian national mappings: the sketch-maps produced by readers of the centre-left newspaper *La Repubblica*, the educational park *Italia in Miniatura*, and the video performance *Italian-African Rhyzome*, by visual artist Martina Mellili. Rossetto and Lo Presti analyse these mappings, in turn, as vernacular practices, autonomous objects, and artistic interventions. These alternative analytical lenses usefully foreground different properties of maps and different ways to engage with them and, through them, with fellow humans. Taken together, they generate an account of maps as fundamentally unstable, always open to redefinition through collective and creative practices. According to Rossetto and Lo Presti (2022), such dynamism and unpredictability make the map 'one of the few spaces left to cultivate progressive imaginaries of cultural diversity and migration as intrinsic, positive features of national experiences'.

It is on this last point that I wish to reflect in this short commentary. I do so as an Italian concerned by the resurgence of far-right nationalism in Italy, and as a scholar who has also grappled with post-representational cartographies and their ethico-political implications (Carraro, 2022). Premised on 'flat' ontologies, post-representational approaches underscore everydayness, change, and contingency, attaching to them a quasi-normative value, in the performative hope that 'things could be otherwise' (Law, 1999). More specifically, Rossetto and Lo Presti (2022) here juxtapose their 'incarnated, alienated, contaminated nations' to traditional forms of

nationalism, implicitly characterised as top-down and static. To my mind, these associations and juxtapositions (of change, everydayness, and progress vs. stasis, 'top-downness', and exclusionism) deserve further scrutiny.

I begin with the observation that national mappings and imaginaries, whether progressive or exclusionary, are necessarily dynamic, refashioned by mixing old tropes with new ideas; it is a process that involves historicizing the past as well as envisioning the future. The right's appeal to 'natural' identities rooted in a reified past cannot be taken at face value: nativist nationalism is also creative and mutable, in its own way. The narratives tangled together by Lega, Italy's largest far-right party, work well to illustrate my point (see Vaglio, 2014 for a more detailed and rigorous account). At its outset in the 1980s, Lega presented itself as the spiritual heir to the Northern Italian towns that, in the twelfth century, united to fight Frederick I, guided, according to the legend, by knight Alberto da Giussano. In the 1990s, the party's (initially confused) political agenda consolidated into regionalist secessionism and calls for the independence of 'Padania' (Northern Italy) were justified by appealing to a distinct ethnic identity. Lega found this identity in the myth of the Celts, who inhabited Northern Italy during the third and fourth centuries BC. The shift may have been a deliberate operation of ideological maquillage designed by the party's leadership, but it was also appropriated by its supporters, who started showing up to gatherings dressed as characters from the comic strip *Asterix and Obelix*, or as William Wallace, the Scottish rebel portrayed by Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*. Incidentally, and chillingly, the adoption of neo-pagan symbols and rituals also alluded to the more recent Nazi past, as did the mass gatherings in green (rather than black) shirts. Since the mid-2000s, Lega has largely abandoned references to the Celts, in a (successful) attempt to position itself as a generic centre-right party that represents the interests of 'all' Italians (on this latest about-turn, see Albertazzi et al., 2018). The party's leadership, who once claimed to use the Italian flag as toilet paper, now rarely appears in public without a tricolore face mask. On promotional flyers,

Alberto da Giussano stands next to the (allegedly Celtic) ‘sun of the Alps’ symbol and the slogan ‘Prima l’Italia’ (‘Italy first!’). Such pseudo-historical contortions would be amusing had they not helped Lega to become Italy’s most popular party, rivalled only by the ultra-nationalist and explicitly neo-fascist *Fratelli d’Italia* (YouTrend, 2021).

What does this have to do with maps? To my mind, this short digression highlights, on the one hand, the co-presence of change and durability, of ‘microcartographies of the everyday’ and ‘greater master narratives of geopolitics and historical cartography’ (Lo Presti, 2018: 106). Re-imagining ourselves necessarily entails engaging with the past, be it through Lega’s grotesque performances of Celtiness or through Melilli’s thoughtful personal reckoning with her family’s colonial past in the video-performance discussed by Rossetto and Lo Presti (2022). In these engagements, everyday and artistic practices, pop culture, folk myths, and traditions combine with formal historical knowledge and elite-driven political agendas. On the other hand, Lega’s transformations also illustrate the role of change in upholding power differentials: ultimately, they serve to consolidate the party’s original, primordial message: ‘we’ (once Padanians, now Italians) are engaged in a double fight against powerful colonial institutions (once the Italian central government, now the EU) and a dangerous invader (once Italian Southerners, now foreign migrants). In this sense, I find Saldanha’s (2012) idea of viscosity more apt than notions of constant flux and emergence to describe the ‘stuff’ of national mappings and imaginaries. They flow and modify shape, but not without generating a certain amount of friction and resistance to meaningful change.

Change, everydayness, and contingency are, as far as I am concerned, too weak a basis for a progressive cartography, let alone a national project. If, as I argue, all maps are made and remade through practice but also incorporate remarkably durable stories about ‘us’ and ‘them’, and if everyday practices can both support and challenge nativist nationalism, then a reparative reading of national maps needs different guiding principles and practices. These need to be more ambitious, likely to generate debate and be contested, but also more

specific to the context that is being mapped. Rossetto and Lo Presti (2022) choose to leave aside a possible discussion of the normative dimension of their proposal. The examples of national mappings they have selected, however, offer some inspiring suggestions of what such principles and practices could be in Italy, in 2021: cross-Mediterranean solidarity, anti-racism, collective engagement with the principles of equality embedded in the Constitution, commitment to reckoning with the country’s colonial history, and, notwithstanding the pertinent reservations raised by Rossetto and Lo Presti (2022), multiculturalism. Maps, and on this I agree with them, provide one of the spaces where these principles can be worked out, however provisionally. We may, of course, be wrong – about the principles that could work, as well as about the potential role of maps in the process. But if, as Sedgwick suggests, one of the defining features of paranoia is aversion to surprises, especially bad surprises, then a reparative approach such as the one proposed by Rossetto and Lo Presti is valuable precisely because it forces us to take the risk of being wrong, of being accused of naivety or reformism, or, as Sedgwick (2003: 141) puts it, quoting Peter Sloterdijk, of being taken for suckers. It allows us – and this is no mean feat – to consider the map that lies in front of us with a sense of curiosity, wondering where it may lead us, and what we may do with it.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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## Note

1. In role-playing games, the metaplot is the overarching storyline that publishers include in the rule books and that provide the backdrop to the stories developed by players at the gaming table.

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