

Regions, borders and identity in a relational and territorial world

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This Special Issue is set up to commemorate Professor Anssi Paasi and his academic work on his 60th birthday. Anssi Paasi's research on regions, territoriality, borders, identity and power-knowledge relations in neoliberalizing academia has had a wide influence in human geography and beyond.

His robust body of work has made him the most internationally well-known scholar in Finnish geography and has charted the path for internationalizing human geography in Finland. He has achieved the highest honours in Finnish academia, including the nomination and employment as Academy Professor (2008-2012) and the establishment and leadership of the RELATE Centre of Excellence in Research in Oulu and in Tampere (2014-2016)¹. In addition, he is Honorary Professor of Human Geography at the University of Wales (2006–) and recipient of prestigious Ashby Prize that was given to him based on the most innovative article published in the journal *Environment and Planning A* in 2005. Yet his work has contributed not only to academic knowledge production and the progress of social scientific thinking but has

contributed to society, as well, in the fields of regional planning and education.

Many of the key ideas, theories and concepts for which Paasi is well-known, such as the theory of the institutionalization of regions and the concept of regional consciousness, were formulated already in his exceptionally extensive doctoral dissertation in 1986 that consisted of the three publications: 'The institutionalization of regions. Theory and comparative case studies' (Paasi 1986a), 'The institutionalization of regions: a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of regions and the constitution of regional identity' (Paasi 1986b) and 'Four provinces in Finland: a geographical study of the development of regional consciousness' (1986c). He revised and discussed the idea of regional institutionalization in a key 1991 article in *Environment and Planning A*:

"If a region is comprehended as a dynamic social category, not merely a spatial cross-section of time in which various social practices take place, it appears to be useful to conceptualise the emergence or institutionalisation of regions as consisting of stages which are entirely or partly simultaneous or are ordered in different ways. Although there exists a risk of being too schematic, four stages appear to be of importance in this process: the constitution of territorial shape, symbolic shape, and institutions and, finally, establishment in the

¹ RELATE is an acronym for "Relational and Territorial Politics of Bordering, Identities, and Transnationalization". The key objective of the CoE is to investigate and conceptualize the simultaneous, "chiasmatic" existence of territorial and relational processes as well as to study the contested processes of bordering. RELATE is the first ever CoE in geography in Finland.

regional system and social consciousness of the society. Institutionalisation is a sociospatial process in which a territorial unit emerges as part of the spatial structure of the society concerned, becomes established and identified in various spheres of social action and consciousness, and may eventually vanish or deinstitutionalise in regional transformation.” (Paasi 1991: 243)

In the last decades innumerable studies have proved the explanatory power of Paasi's theory of regional institutionalization in various geographical and geohistorical contexts. Since this initial conceptual breakthrough, Paasi has continued to expand our understanding and knowledge of regions, boundaries and territoriality in a globalized world through his numerous path-breaking theoretical and methodological studies. The continuing significance of the theory of institutionalization is illustrated by the continuing interest and discussion by human geographers and others (e.g. McLeod & Jones 2001). An important factor in the regional institutionalization is the formation of regional identity that involves both collective and individual dimensions:

“Regional identity’ is, in a way, an interpretation of the process through which a region becomes institutionalized, a process consisting of the production of territorial boundaries, symbolism and institutions. This process concomitantly gives rise to, and is conditioned by, the discourses/practices/rituals that draw on boundaries, symbols and institutional practices. While practice and discourse are the media by which the structural and experimental dimensions of

the process are brought together, it is useful to distinguish analytically between the identity of a region and the regional identity (or regional consciousness) of the people living in it or outside of it (Paasi, 1991). The former points to those features of nature, culture and people that are used in the discourses and classifications of science, politics, cultural activism, regional marketing, governance and political or religious regionalization to distinguish one region from others. These classifications are always acts of power performed in order name and symbolize space and groups of people. Regional consciousness points to the multiscalar identification of people with those institutional practices, discourses and symbolisms that are expressive of the ‘structures of expectations’ that become institutionalized as parts of the process that we call a ‘region’.” (Paasi 2003: 478)

Beyond regional and political geography, Paasi is a leading scholar in the field of border studies. During the geopolitical turbulence in the late 1980's and early 1990's he conducted an extensive study in the context of the Finnish-Russian border and the divided border town *Värtsilä*. The main findings and theorization of this seminal study were published in 1996 as *Territories, boundaries and consciousness: The changing geographies of the Finnish-Russian' boundary*. Paasi argues that regional transformation and identity construction is not an internally driven process; rather regional identity is formed in relation to significant others through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. His examination of the institutionalization of Finnish territory brings the theory of regional transformation and geopolitical discourse into a dialogue in

a novel and persuasive way and shows how national and local consciousness become interlinked and often constitutive of each other in the process of spatial socialization via national education, media, and literature. Almost 20 years later, the book continues to offer one of the most detailed studies and sophisticated theorizations of state territoriality and national borders and has become standard reading for students of state borders and territoriality.

In his much-cited article ‘Boundaries as social processes: Territoriality in the world of flows’ published in *Geopolitics* Paasi (1998) broadened our understanding of the functions and meanings of borders beyond their traditional functions as the territorial limits of sovereign states. He argues that borders should be understood as manifestations of wider social and cultural discourses and practices, not merely physical demarcations and border crossing points:

“social action, discourse and ideologies produce diverging, perpetually changing meanings for boundaries and these are then used as instruments or mediums of social distinction and control. Boundaries are institutions, but they exist simultaneously on various spatial scales in a myriad of practices and discourses included in culture, politics, economics, administration or education.” (Paasi 1998: 72)

Paasi’s work continues to question theoretical and popular assumptions about the spatial organization of our world. During the past decade Paasi has widened the focus of his research to include internationalism in academic markets and publishing spaces, independence

and nationalism, and planning. For example, Paasi has studied how the idea of independence is promoted through different forms of banal/hot nationalism as epitomized in the Independence Day celebrations (Paasi 2015a), and how the “Anglo-American hegemony” in geography has been established by the power of language and context in the production of knowledge (Paasi 2005, 2015b). This latter research theme has focused on how the academic core and periphery is created and maintained by the “uneven geographies of international publishing spaces” that divides the English speaking world and rest. Paasi, if anyone, knows what it involves to overcome this unevenness, as he has operated genuinely and simultaneously in both periphery and core.

Paasi’s recent work has also focused on notions of relational and territorial spaces in planning. More precisely, he has scrutinized and problematized the commensurability of open and bounded notions of regions as manifested in both planning documents and in planners’ practical work (Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2015). Paasi argues that there is a ‘planning paradox’ in strategic planning: planners need to think increasingly in terms of open, porous borders despite the fact that in concrete planning activities, politics and governance the region continues to exist largely in the form of bounded and territorial political unit. What is more, he argues that borders in planning could be better understood as ‘penumbral’ borders rather than fuzzy, since they are not solely either ‘hard’ boundary lines or ‘fuzzy borderscapes’, but typically manifest themselves only in certain practices.

Recent geopolitical conflicts in Europe and in the neighborhood have proven the enduring significance of borders, territoriality, national identity and regionalism in a relational, networked, fluid world. Indeed, the state has not yet been hollowed out and borders are still very much present in political processes and related academic discussions. This Special Issue highlights Anssi Paasi's intellectual contributions to these themes; indeed, he has been instrumental in shaping the way we think about them. Contributors include former PhD students, collaborators, and scholars working on similar themes. The collection demonstrates the direct impact of Paasi's guidance and scholarship and the new directions scholars are taking his ideas. The rigour of his work and his commitment to excellent scholarship set a high standard for us all and show that passion, creativity, rationality and hard work can lead to academic success and breakthroughs with international and national recognition.

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