

“Spatial socialization”: Understanding the state effect geographically

Natalie Koch

Department of Geography, The Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Abstract: This article revisits Anssi Paasi’s concept of “spatial socialization.” The hallmark of Paasi’s geographic approach to identity, the concept offers a way to move beyond statist approaches that either reify the state or dismiss its significance. Spatial socialization sheds light on how the myths of coherence of “states,” “territories,” and otherwise-scaled regions come to be institutionalized through everyday practices and spatial imaginaries. Although Paasi is best known for his theoretical contributions, his long commitment to empirical research in Finland suggests the power of his contributions to think through unlike contexts, which I illustrate through a case study from my own research on the “state effect” in Central Asia.

Introduction

One of the perennial questions in political geography – and social sciences more generally – is how something so abstract and diffuse as the “state” acquires the appearance of unity. Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, scholars of governmentality do not take the state for granted as a naturalized “thing,” but have instead worked to trace its many, often ephemeral, sources of power rooted in individual actions, material synergies, and the everyday. While these scholars have been diligent in their efforts to take apart the state, they have not always been so skilled at piecing it together again (Jessop 2011; Lemke 2011). But if geographers do not consider how all those practices and performances are woven into the myth of coherence – the “state effect” – then how else, Alec Murphy (2013: 1215) has asked, “can we come to grips with the fact that countless people around the world identify so strongly with

the political territories where they live that they are willing to risk their lives to defend those territories?”

Within political geography, these questions have arguably been best answered by Anssi Paasi (1996) in *Territories, Boundaries, and Consciousness*, where he builds on his early efforts to conceptualize the “institutionalization of regions” (Paasi 1986) to explore the idea of “spatial socialization.” Keywords, Anssi Paasi (2011: 161) has argued, “motivate and even oblige scholars not to ‘surrender to them’ but rather to defy them and to develop new ones.” And yet, academia has a funny way of fetishizing certain keywords and letting others fall by the wayside. In this article, I will revisit “spatial socialization” as one such concept that has fallen away without due attention in political geography. This idea is the hallmark of Paasi’s uniquely geographic approach to *identity* and an exceptionally useful analytical lens for understanding the persistent “tenacity and

power” of territorial thinking and modes of identification today.

Spatial socialization and the state effect

In formulating “spatial socialization,” Paasi reworks Rob Shields’ (1991) idea of “social spatialization” (the constant social construction of the spatial) by reversing the terms to instead highlight “the process through which individual actors and collectivities are socialized as members of specific territorially bounded spatial entities and through which they more or less actively internalize collective territorial identities and shared traditions” (Paasi 1996: 8). Spatial socialization, he explains, is a process of “becoming” (Paasi 1996: 54), whereby individuals come to internalize place-based identities. Centrally, this theoretical formulation does not imply or operationalize a specific *scale* of such identity projects, instead suggesting multiple, overlapping scales coming together in the various processes of spatial socialization. In this respect, Paasi’s notion of spatial socialization is a particularly useful “thinking tool” (as he personally likes to speak of theoretical concepts) for approaching the “state effect” without reifying the state as an *a priori* or superordinate institution. Rather, the state becomes one institution among many; one scale among many; one set of daily performances among many.

While scholars typically treat *Territories, Boundaries, and Consciousness* as a landmark in border studies, I have long found that it is better understood as an illustration of the

“state effect.” That is, it shows how spatial socialization and the institutionalization of regions come together to produce the effect of “Finland” as one *kind* of region – a state. In fact, Paasi explicitly defines his approach as a genealogy of the Finnish state:

“The concept of genealogy, to employ the expression of Foucault, perhaps characterizes the aim best, since the past is not the object of the research but material which is interpreted conceptually and critically in order to make the historical construction of spatiality visible and understandable. It is hoped that this approach will open up a perspective on the disjunctive forms of representation that signify a people, a nation, or a national culture. The aim in employing this method is to interpret the roles of the three geographies in the social and historical construction of a particular social reality – an entity called Finland.” (Paasi 1996: 76)

In Paasi’s genealogy of the Finnish state, his concept of spatial socialization is what allows him to study the state, but without taking it for granted as the foreordained governing apparatus in control of a specifically-delineated territory. His object of analysis is the *production* of the state – “the social and historical construction of a particular social reality – an entity called Finland.” Here we see Paasi’s theoretical inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault: by de-naturalizing the state, we avoid reifying it as the natural scale of analysis, but still understand how it comes to be constituted as a geographically- and temporally-specific “object.” This genealogical approach does not dismiss broader institutional effects,

but rather assumes an inherent dynamism to how states, regions, and territories, and all their concomitant identity projects, coalesce to form an *impression of unity*. Not only is this regional institutionalization spatially variable, but it is also always in flux temporally – the state in this framework is the geographically-specific and dated sum of the processes of spatial socialization.

While various scholars in the social sciences have recently considered the state effect from multiple angles, Paasi's uniquely geographic approach to identity highlights the importance of individuals internalizing membership in "specific territorially bounded spatial entities." Place-based identity narratives, he shows, are central to naturalizing the state. The state effect is also intimately connected to the production of particular imaginative geographies – a kind of "territory effect." But holding onto the dynamism already noted, the state effect is not necessarily accompanied by a territory effect in the form of what is popularly called the Westphalian state system. While state-based nationalisms have hitherto received the most scholarly attention, statist spatial socialization implies imaginative geographies that can – and do – unfold at any range of scales. While political geographers have long considered this question in more general terms (e.g. Gottmann 1973; Raffestin 1980; Sack 1986), in the remainder of this article, I will ground this through a case study from my own research in Central Asia (a regional designation typically referring to the now-independent states that were once Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).

Fixing people in place and imagining the state: Spatial socialization in Soviet Central Asia

Central Asia is not typically considered under the rubric of empire. However, under Tsarist Russian and Soviet leadership, as in other colonial settings, political institutions in this region were not initially built on the scaffolding of states. Nor were subjects taught to identify with the state, but were instead assigned a series of official designations, such as religion during the Tsarist times and ethnically-inflected "nationalities" under the Soviet Union. Using a tactic common to European imperial rule in Africa, the Bolsheviks also governed citizen-subjects through geographic designations, by means of an internal passport system determining an individual's legal place of residence. Whether they were assigned to particular communal farms, labor camps, or cities, restrictions on freedom of movement made it hard (but not impossible) to move about the country at will. Implementing these bureaucratic intricacies proved tremendously difficult throughout the Soviet Union, but officials working to institutionalize the state were faced with a particular challenge in Central Asia, where much of the population was nomadic and semi-nomadic. Not only did their allegedly "backward" lifestyle mock the image and the ability of the state to "modernize" the region, but officials also wanted to bring the vast steppe under cultivation – to make use of all that "empty" land.

In pursuing these ambitions, Soviet planners had to imagine the steppe "as

empty space, waiting to be populated” (Brown 2001: 27), and simultaneously de-populate the steppe by settling the nomads. These groups, however, did not see territory in the modernist sense, i.e. an abstract “mold or container with clear and precise boundaries that can be conceptually and actually emptied and filled” (Sack 1986: 63). The ability to think of territory as “emptiable and fillable” must be learned and it largely depends on having a system of “metrical geometry to represent space independently of events,” which is so characteristic of modernist social planning and theory (Sack 1986: 63). Nomadic communities in Central Asia, by contrast, lacked an intimate encounter with the concept of abstract and emptiable space – until they were to be emptied from it (Brown 2001: 29).

Institutionalizing this abstract conception of space was the crux of Soviet state-making in the region; it was the colonizing forces’ categorical imperative in taking control of the Central Asian steppe. Many fought back against the Soviet project to fix them in place through simply crossing into China or Afghanistan, and bringing their herds with them. Soviet officials realized that the scale of the problem was so severe – all those lost resources! – that they eventually ordered guards to shoot anyone attempting to cross the border (Cameron 2010; Edgar 2004). While sedentarization campaigns on the steppes of Central Asia led to starvation and disease of appalling proportions, this traumatic time of political and social upheaval was mirrored in much of the Soviet Union. Like elsewhere, these changes were fundamentally about how space was to be controlled and imagined: the violent

and forced redefinition of socially-imbued visions of space as backward (Sack 1986). In so doing, the modernist planners were not just creating depopulated (i.e. governable) spaces, but also newly-governable political subjects.

Settling nomads and fixing individuals in strictly-assigned locales was just one piece of the spatial socialization agenda in establishing Bolshevik control in the region and union-wide. The people of Central Asia were also transformed into – and transformed themselves into – governable subjects through the Soviet institutions that gave life to official “nationality policies.” These policies were profoundly geographic in that they worked to ethnicize territories within the Soviet Union. This operated through a nested scalar hierarchy, with the 15 union-level republics at the top, each named for a “titular nationality.” This geographic organization of the state was key to how individuals were spatially socialized. But in most cases, strictly-delineated nationality-based identities were just as foreign as the concepts of abstract space.

In Soviet usage, “nationality” came to acquire two distinct meanings: one as a marker of republic-level citizenship and another as a marker of ethno-cultural identity (Brubaker 1996; Martin 2001). These two meanings corresponded to a dual conception of autonomy in the titular republics. In the first conception, autonomous territories were considered to “belong” to the titular nations; in the second, national autonomy was seen as independent of territory. In the early days of the Soviet Union, however, few people perceived identity through the lens of

nationality and all around the state, officials and their ethnographers worked to craft or sanitize newly homogenous ethno-cultural groups, and slowly work to break down highly-localized and overlapping identities. While much has been written about the Soviet ethnographic work to create new ethnic groups in Central Asia – inventing the nationalities of “Kazakh,” “Turkmen,” “Uzbek” and so on – these identities could only “stick” with the material supports they were endowed through the way that nationalities policies were written into the Soviet Union’s territorial structure.

The delineation of the Central Asian republics and imposition of “national” identities in the early days of Soviet power was remarkably uncontested, which Olivier Roy (2007: 73) suggests was because there were previously no other identities operating at a similar (“national”) scale in Central Asia. Rather than aggressively erase identities and allegiances operating at other scales and through patronage relations, Soviet nationalities policies essentially left these intact and merely added another layer to the population’s subject position. But people soon learned that this was a powerful new layer, since nationality became a key criterion for distributing socioeconomic benefits in the ethnic republics (Martin 2001). Nationalities policies eventually led to a *de facto* privileging of titular nationalities in “their” republics, and citizens were quick to appropriate the benefits of claiming a republic-level identity, which was inscribed in their passport. As Paasi (2010: 15) reminds us, “Identification with a territory may occur in various more or less *material* practices, for example in economic and political spheres, and not

purely at the level of mental acts and discourses as identity is often understood.” In Soviet Central Asia, where national identities as such were previously unknown, these material practices were essential to institutionalizing republic-level identities, which were “adopted by the population with surprising vigor” (Martin 2001: 72).

Conclusion

Scholarship about the end of the Soviet Union has often treated nationalities policies as leading to its demise, not least because the successor states “already existed as internal quasi-nation-states, with fixed territories, names, legislatures, administrative staffs, cultural and political elites” (Brubaker 1996: 41). However, insofar as individuals became invested in the state-initiated identity politics, the Soviet spatial socialization around nationalities is arguably better understood as promoting its durability. And in many ways, it endures today in the post-Soviet era, as titular elites who took charge of the successor states largely “owed their initial promotions and their current legitimacy to the fact of being ethnic” (Slezkine 1996: 229). Of course, elites did not face an easy task in institutionalizing new regions, in legitimizing themselves as the leaders of newly sovereign states. However, having been spatially socialized under the Soviet system, territorially-bounded modes of thinking about belonging were a small step compared to the leap it took for early Bolshevik leaders to institutionalize this abstract conception of space in the 1920s and 30s.

As this case illustrates, those actors claiming the name of the state were not working with pre-existing spatial imaginaries. Rather, in their efforts to govern the people and lands of Central Asia, Soviet leaders did not only initiate a particular state effect, but they also created a multiplicity of territory effects. This multiplicity is central to understanding local identity narratives historically and today. The power of Paasi’s concept of spatial socialization is that it affords us the language to keep this multiplicity in focus, and find a middle ground between reifying the state on one hand and dismissing it entirely on the other. This geographic focus on space is perhaps the most promising direction in further advancing the scholarship on the state effect – and for getting at the question of what explains the persistent “tenacity and power” of territorial thinking and modes of identification today. While Central Asia is often written of as “fringe” or “exceptional,” Anssi Paasi’s profound contributions through the case of Finland illustrate that supposedly peripheral places can be the source of some of the most important theoretical insights in our discipline.

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