

## Entrevista

# POLITICAL AND REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY IN AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. ANSSI PAASI

## Geografia política e regional em um mundo em constante mudança: uma entrevista com o Dr. Anssi Paasi

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**ABSTRACT:** In this interview, we explore some of Professor Anssi Paasi's thoughts and reflections on cornerstone aspects of political and regional geography. We discussed his comprehension of borders, the interactions between space, power, and society, and his original and useful understanding of regional formation and institutionalization. His insights and profound understanding of political and regional phenomena in geography allow him to revise his assumptions in light of an ever-changing world that redefines its frontiers, creates political and regional spaces, and constantly demands new and efficient interpretations.

**Keywords:** Political geography; Regional institutionalization; Borders.

**RESUMO:** Nesta entrevista exploramos algumas das ideias e reflexões do Professor Anssi Paasi sobre aspectos basilares da Geografia Política e Regional. Abordamos sua compreensão sobre as interações entre espaço, poder e sociedade e sua original visão sobre o processo de formação e institucionalização regional. Seu entendimento e profunda análise dos fenômenos políticos e regionais na geografia o tem levado a fazer uma constante revisão das suas visões à luz de um mundo que redefine suas fronteiras, cria espaços políticos e regionais e demanda constantes interpretações novas e eficientes.

**Palavras-chave:** Geografia Política; Institucionalização; Fronteiras.

## INTERVIEWEE PRESENTATION

In March 2024, Anssi Paasi, Ph.D Professor of Geography, Faculty of Science, University of Oulu, Finland, agreed to answer a series of questions for an article to be published in the Journal Geonorte of the Department of Geography of the Federal University of Amazonas, Brazil. He is a well-known author in Brazil, especially among those working and/or researching in Political Geography. He is also an important

voice in Regional Geography and has developed a most interesting approach to regional formation and institutionalization that is considered a cornerstone in geographical thinking and research.

As is evidenced in the responses given during the interview, he has a significant and all but shallow reflection upon and analysis of the topics described above. Also, and very importantly, he shows an epistemological concern that appears explicitly in some of his thoughts and implicitly in a more subtle fashion. This underscores his deep interest in acknowledging the transformations of thematic and conceptual matters and the need to grasp the links between theoretical and empirical domains of geographical science without undermining either. Political Geography is a domain of thought and inquiry that shifts in empirical groundings when causal powers express and transform a certain status quo, as in any conflict or war. Nevertheless, it also belongs to a domain where the status quo is crucial in reinforcing the relations between the powers in a particular setting of territorial encounters. To comprehend political geography phenomena, it's important to constantly revise our theoretical assumptions in light of changing empirical data and conditions.

Dr. Paasi shows significant concerns in these topics since he is explicitly revisiting his thoughts and is willing to either revise or complement them to be responsive to the ever-changing ways in which space, power, and society interact. His views on the new European territorialities in the face of the Ukraine invasion by Russia and the institutionalization of the European Union show a willingness to sediment new paths of inquiry if and when necessary to embrace the novel without falling for novelty.

Spatial socialization, a concept developed by Dr. Paasi and part of his contributions to Political and Regional Geography, is helpful in understanding not only national but regional and territorial building. It is a conceptual device for comprehending the territorialities and social constructions involved not only in borders but also in the making of territories where economic, historical, institutional, and cultural considerations are intertwined.

We are confident that the interview will provide our readers with a comprehensive view of some of his main interests while covering these and other topics.

## INTERVIEW

**GV: If borders can be conceptualized as political entities that reinforce political communities as well as connective entities of socio-cultural processes and practices, are there no contradictions between these two approaches? If so, how can we reconcile them?**

When I started to work with borders during the second half of the 1980s, one of the problems in existing border research that I recognized soon was that borders were seen often as separate entities, dividing lines which have sort of causal power that has an impact on physical mobility, but also on images of threat and perhaps also the “mentalities” appearing in states. In this role they were seen to divide rather than to join. I started to think that it is probably much more beneficial to realize that borders

come into being and function through discourses and practices, which may be at times contradictory, even at the same time. Thus, they can both reinforce political communities and be connective entities of socio-cultural processes and practices, depending on the respective social practices. Further it is critical to acknowledge that borders are not eternal but are themselves processes that have their origin and certain “life cycle” or trajectory related to social practices and discourses. They may ultimately disappear as part of the continual regional/territorial transformation, typically resulting from conflicts and wars. Hence even one and the same state border may have different meanings in different practices and discourses. That the situation would not be too straightforward, most states have not just one border but several and each of them can have a different geohistory, some being peaceful, some characterized by perpetual conflicts. Borders are thus historically contingent. The Finnish-Russian border is a fitting illustration, since it has been seen at times as a peaceful medium for cooperation, at times as a grim dividing line and medium of conflicts.

**GV: What new lines of border division between us and them, if any, are being designed in the twenty-first century, and what realms are involved in these new divisions? Are global or regional geopolitics the main realms of these divisions, or are there cultural processes to take into account?**

State borders and their changes are usually resulting from violence and conflicts. There are currently tens of disputed territories across all continents, displaying a sort of regional geopolitics. Therefore, there are some strong indications that leaders in some states are dreaming of the occupation of new territories, almost in the spirit of classical geopolitics. Such actions would of course also relocate some borderlines. Currently the most serious conflict is of course between Russia and Ukraine which is based on the illegal attack of Russia across the border of Ukraine. Current conflict has been designed by Russia’s president Vladimir Putin and his henchmen, following a pattern that Putin seems to follow incessantly. This has been supported by a harsh propaganda machinery appearing in media and education and in their authoritarian control. It is interesting that this conflict has been culturalized in Russia so that it is partly presented as a wider conflict between the western and eastern cultures, west identified particularly as NATO countries. Russian Orthodox religious culture has been effectively mobilized to support this conflict ideologically. Another hotspot for a potential future conflict is the border between China and Taiwan. I do not see current cultural dividing lines as a basis for a larger scale cultural conflict, especially now when ISIS has lost its power. Conflicts are thus ultimately (geo)political. Of course, the fact that the world is characterized by enormous uneven development gaps, might create some new conflicts, perhaps still in a state-centric framework. Similarly, climate change and its impacts on the viability of some world regions and related human mobilities may give rise to new conflicts.

**GV: After the optimism of possible cosmopolitanism in the early post-Cold War period, what were the main transformations that occurred, and what has cosmopolitanism transfigured into? Is there still space for it in today’s world, and if so, how would you describe it and where is it unfolding? Would it be fair to**

**issue a cosmopolitism vs. parochialism state of affairs in today's world, and if so, how does it affect borders and border spaces? How do cosmopolitism and parochialism inform identity-building in border spaces?**

After the collapse of the Cold War West-East divide at the turn of the 1990s certain elements of cosmopolitanism emerged, which also had an impact on border studies. Borders and related terminology suddenly became attracting, even central in many social science and humanities fields during the 1990s, from geography to political science and IR studies, from anthropology to global history, from literature studies to mobility and migration studies. The root causes for their new significance were obvious while at the same time they varied quite a lot. Anyway, it is easy to point at least to such contested processes and events as globalization, expanding international interaction, wars emerging in the post-Cold War situation, various forms of terrorism, fast progress in IC technologies, and the expanding forms of mobilities that seemed simultaneously to challenge the existing borders and territorial identities and gave rise to their new strengthening. These tendencies also motivated border scholars to open their dominant imagination regarding the supposed fixity of lines separating states and to focus critically on the increasing regulation of flows crossing such borders, as well as on the practices of bordering. Particularly the increased mobility of migrants and refugees following from climate change, population growth and violence became important. Border scholars, especially economists, were at times talking and writing about a "borderless world" in the 1990s. That was not literally implying that borders would disappear from the world, but rather that new economic realities characterizing capitalism did not respect borders. Business guru Kenichi Ohmae talked about region states that would emerge on certain borders, crossing them. Of course, this idea of a borderless cosmopolitan world has not totally died since the 1990s, even is the world is still very much, perhaps increasingly, divided into national blocks. Many migration scholars call for open borders on humanitarian grounds, in some extreme case, like in the case of "no borders" movement, its proponents want to reject idealistically not only borders but also the state and nation. And yet, at the same time we have witnessed the rise of nationalism and populism all around the world. This implies that these issues are part of the wider ideological battlefields where populist agitators and leaders play evermore important roles. When calls for stronger borders are declared, this of course has important roles in the creation and maintenance of borderlander's identities, often raising fears and xenophobia, rather than cosmopolitan feelings.

**GV: If the European Union once transformed and constituted the continent of Europe as the major context and laboratory for current border studies, how does the war in Ukraine re-elaborate this view? Is selective openness still a fair way to characterize European borders?**

European Union is an interesting entity since it has literally hijacked the idea of Europe, and given a new bounded, symbolic and institutional shape to this macro-regional idea. Old ideas of an experienced Europe and geographical Europe have been largely replaced by the idea of EU institution that defines this entity today. As you say, the EU has also established itself as a laboratory for border studies, by

putting huge amounts of resources for such studies. This funding has given rise to numerous border research institutes in this context. The major idea has been to lower the boundaries between the European states. In some cases, this has been more successful than in some others. Schengen area makes difference, of course. Frankly, there have been a lot of different institutions that have had the same ideal, for example, in spatial planning and in transport planning that have aimed to create visions of a dynamic, borderless European space. As to border studies, the war in Ukraine will very likely motivate border research in this context as soon as the war is over. It will certainly attract border scholars also from the outside of this context.

**GV: In theoretical terms, do you agree with David Newman when he states that there is a need for a theory that brings together the hierarchical nature of borders, both spatial and a-spatial aspects, and their multidisciplinary character?**

We have written some stuff together with David Newman but we have seemingly a bit different views on the role of theory. I have been interested in theorizing borders as part of the wider production of space and territoriality, but I do not believe in any separate and general theory of borders that would cover scalar issues and all possible spatial and a-spatial aspects. Of course, it is possible to argue like Ron Johnston that geography already has a theory for border, that is territory. However, this is not a very strong argument, since territory is also a contested idea with many different definitions, just like the notion of border is. It is interesting that almost uninterruptedly academic papers appear where authors call for a new border theory, whether it is general or less general theory. I think that this is at least partly related to the pressures created by the currently dominant neoliberal university and academic capitalism which call for “novelty” in research and at least implicitly supports the idea that theory is something particularly valuable and permanent compared with the results of concrete research work focusing on borders. This competitive aspect probably means that efforts towards a new border theory are with us also in the future. Also new generations will likely search for such theories to build their position in academia! I suppose that we need both well justified theoretical insights and strong and solid empirical research. As said, theory for me is conceptualization, not any firm structure.

**GV: Is your 2011 rhetorical question “Is border theory a realistic aim, an unattainable ideal, or perhaps something that is not needed at all, as the empiricist tradition of political geography has implied? Or is this a question crucially related to our concept of theory?”**

I think that my answer to the previous question makes this position clear. My aim in the paper that you mention in your question was to problematize the variegated ideas of what border theory is or could be. For many scholars, theory seems to mean an ordering framework that is adopted from literature, and this is then called theory. I suggest a more active perspective, accentuate the importance of conceptualization, the creation of abstractions and carrying related concrete research work. There are also certain general principles that I have emphasized since the beginning of my



research on borders. Firstly, borders are not any separate fixed entities, rather they should be understood as processes which are always part of wider ideological and practical projects of territory building or the institutionalization of territories. This idea is related not only to political practices and discourses but also to economic and cultural ones. This is also linked with various forms of memory politics. Likewise, the significance of borders cannot be taken for granted and reduced only to state territory, that is “embedded statism” and “territorial trap”, to employ the widely used concepts of Peter Taylor and John Agnew. This has important implications to the debates on borders. The issues related to scale are crucial for understanding the complexity of borders since borders stretch both in space and time.

**GV: What are the epistemological options, in your view, that better suit the theoretical ambitions of border studies nowadays? Are empirical processes such as massive migration unleashed by wars in the last twenty years facts that must be at the center of such ambitions?**

Contemporary border studies are a very wide and rich field leaning on diverse epistemologies. I have supported pluralism in epistemological issues, and I have not seen borders as normative matters, i.e. that we simply could declare that we are moving to a borderless world or that borders are eternal constants after they have been established or proposing other similar universalizing commentaries. Of course, such concrete issues as migration that you mention, have quite dramatically impacted and transformed border studies. I would say, and I am probably not the first person to accentuate this, that migration and border studies are today two sides of the same coin. We see this in many places around the world, in Americas, Asia, Africa, Southern Europe etc. Efforts to bring border studies and migration studies together have raised new exciting research questions and horizons, and, what is much more important, have also upraised the often neglected ethical and moral issues on agenda of border studies.

**GV: Spatial socialization is a key concept in understanding identity building in border spaces. It encompasses territory in its historical and contingent manifestations of materiality, symbolism, emotions, memories, and power (Paasi 2016). Could you elaborate more on spatial socialization? Specifically, how does it become, if so, part of the institutionalized process of nation-building? Can it also be considered part of inter-subjective relations in the territories where it is produced, not necessarily as part of nation-building?**

I developed the idea of spatial socialization in my book *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness* (1996) in which I tried to outline some new perspectives to border studies and, against this background, to provide a profound empirical analysis of the making of Finnish territory and the Finnish-Russian border. Spatial socialization was linked to sociologists Rob Shields' idea of social spatialization which referred to processes through which a society produces relevant ideas of spatiality and the practices of spatialities. Spatial socialization refers to the process through which a society socializes its citizens as members of its “bounded national space”, for example, through collective forms of education, memory politics, textbooks and

maps, all kinds of symbols and rituals, or the operations of media. These are normally crucial in the creation of an intersubjective community or “we”. In the Finnish case these processes were a critical part of nation-building processes. This idea seems to work also at sub-state level, as I have tried to show in my studies on Finnish provinces. Current autocratic states like Russia clearly show the significance of such tools of socialization that the state tries to control harshly.

**GV: How would you relate territory and spatial socialization to identity building in theoretical terms? Are the former two categorical imperatives for the latter?**

Spatial socialization becomes realized in the production and reproduction of territoriality, which I see (following Bob Sack) as a strategy to produce and maintain territory. If we talk about spatial identities, I would say yes to your second question. Of course, we have to keep in mind that there are numerous other identities based on different premises. Also, identities are constantly changing processes, not fixed even if national identity narratives tend to present them as fixed.

**GV: And last but certainly not least, are we bound to bounded spaces, even recognizing the mobility paradigm and the ontology of different places and peoples as well as the complex relationality of connections between them? Is there empirical or any other type of evidence of a post-borders world architecture?**

This is an important but of course a very tricky question. The world has gradually developed towards state-centrism where the state has become the dominating mode of governance, even if this varies a lot in global space. This state-centrism has been criticized severely in the course of years by academic representing political science and geography. They have demanded abandoning state-centrism, opening borders, etc. There are certainly differences in how such governance is organized and what is the role of civil society. Yet, things have not changed and states are perpetually characterized by a limited territory that is strictly secured and defended. Territory is partly constituted by borders. Borders are used also more widely to create and maintain dividing lines between spaces/places at and across various spatial scales, from local to supra-state level. Yet, the state is perpetually the stubborn keyword here. Think, for example, the United Nations which consists of states rather than nations. This is the case with innumerable international organizations that operate in a state-centric frame. The undeniable fact is that there are much more nations than states implies that there will be more states and borders in the future world. The world is at the same time very unevenly structured and well-doing western states enjoy privileges that most people in the world can only imagine. Affluent tourists cross borders without difficulties. Also, the ongoing debates on immigration occurring around the world and the resistance against immigrants display that borders, nationalism and racism persist. Borders are thus ultimately violent, as Reece Jones has noted. And yet, at the same time the world is becoming ever more relational and networked. In certain spheres of international action, for example geoeconomy, borders are not so much present but struggles over economic power continue in more complex ways. In cultural terms borders are dividing lines that still exist and

their meanings may persevere, even if people are increasingly mobile. At the moment, I can unfortunately not imagine the world without borders.

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### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION**

Gloria Maria Vargas, an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Brasília, conceived and conducted this interview, originally in English.

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