

Towards an Anthropology Theory of Borders: The Case of Finnish-Russian Border Community, Värtsilä

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Abstract

Borders are commonly considered by political agents to be physical entities determining states' territorial parameters. This positivist perspective differs significantly from the anthropology theory of borders, which maintains that borders are complex social processes. These constitute dynamic sites of interactions whereby local border practices create bodies of knowledge, producing localized forms of power. This paper adopts Foucault's concept of power: Rather than power being perceived as a 'thing' which can be gained and lost through both national and international macro-political positioning, it is intricately woven through the tapestry of society and manifests through micro-social dynamics and daily social practices. The paper examines the Finnish-Russian border commune Värtsilä. This provides an excellent site of investigation because as the analysis demonstrates, local border practices significantly influenced Russia and Finland's shifting national historical geo-political and ideological border processes. This reflects how borders are heterogeneous complex social realities and as such, need to be considered within their respective evolving geo-political contexts.

Keywords: Borders, Russia, Finland, Värtsilä, Power, Geo-politics

Border Theories: Arbitrary lines imposed from above

Personal histories and experiences continually re-produced a cross-border web of exchanges through which individuals navigated shifting territorial dynamics and socio-political interests (Paasi, 1997: 254). Thus, borders are critical sites of social change and therefore, this paper adopts the above anthropogenic definition to allow for a multi-dimensional critical analysis. This paper argues that the claim drawing borders is 'easy', while their construction is 'not the same', cannot be universally applied across multiple border processes (St. Johns, 2011). Furthermore, this perspective is theoretically founded in a single-dimensional, state-centred view of top-down capitalist power processes, from which borders derive their legitimacy (Anderson, 1996). Instead, this paper contends that power transcends these macro-political dynamics and plays out across more nuanced micro-social dynamics in local border practices. Each border has complex historical socio-economic, cultural, geo-political, and power dynamics, which in turn, produce heterogeneous outcomes for both their conceptualization and physical formation (Popescu, 2012). These realities are reflected in the Russian-Finnish border commune Värtsilä: The drawing of the border itself was heavily contested and fluctuated throughout history as both countries responded to their respective shifting positions in the international political arena (as evident in post-WWII).

Further, St. Johns' (Popescu, 2012) proposition that borders are simply conceptualized while their construction differs, emerged from a macro-historical analysis of how and why the US-Mexico border materialized⁶. According to St. Johns (ibid: 13-14), the concept of the US- Mexico border emerged from a common western political vision of how the US could acquire and maintain hegemonic power: 'With a stroke of a pen [treaty negotiators] began to transform [borders] into sites of national significance and contested power [...] shaped by forces of capitalism and state power [...] what began as a line on a map became a space of evolving and multiple meanings and forms'. In other words, the US-Mexican border is the product of the ideological historical development of the capitalist state which in turn, produced multiple complex fields of interaction between individuals, institutions, and corporations (Hilgers and Mangezs, 2015).

However, this paper argues that this top-down theory of borders presents multiple issues. Firstly, St. Johns (ibid: 13-14) fails to de-construct what the 'forces of capitalism and state power' entail, and how they shape border processes. Instead, state power and capitalism are presented as homogenous entities from which borders automatically derive their conceptual and material legitimacy. Thus, because St. Johns (ibid) aggregates capitalist power bordering processes, no attempt is made to decimate the conceptualization and socially-constructed entity of the nation-state system. This is a significant analytical shortcoming because St. Johns is thus unable to critically examine how divergent micro-dynamics of state-power imposed arbitrary ethnic, and geo-political categories in which individuals were subordinated under and navigated across heterogeneous border processes (Alvarez Jr, 1995). Secondly, St. Johns (2011: 14) fails to critically analyse how and why border processes transitioned from a 'line on a map' to a 'space of evolving and multiple meanings and forms'. Further, the line itself is accepted as an entity with no attempt made to consider the intricate composites of family dynamics, daily social practices, and expressions which constitute threads woven into border conceptualization and construction (Alvarez Jr, 1995: 463). Additionally, the diverse spatial meanings produced by the line and how they evolve are not considered beyond the capitalist state vs population dichotomy⁷. This presents a considerable analytical problem as diverse border activities transcend the capitalist vs worker dichotomy, which is evident in the social practices and daily interactions between individuals (for example, through family and personal relationships). Crucially, these micro- dynamics of cross-border relations produce divergent hierarchies within relationships which is fundamentally, where micro-dynamics of power play across divergent border processes (ibid: 462). This paper proposes an alternative micro-social theory of borders, which is introduced below.

In contrast to St Johns' (2011) macro-historical theory of the US-Mexican border, Alvarez Jr (1995: 450) argues that because traditional studies of the US-Mexican border focus on homogenous political and historical constructs, this overlooks social practices of people at the border. Crucially, this top-down approach to borders fails to analytically capture how individuals continually re-negotiate multiple identities through manoeuvring across shifting micro-power dynamics (ibid). Thus, this paper contends that Alvarez Jr's anthropology theory of borders is best placed within the following analysis of the Russian-Finnish border. This is because by challenging socially-constructed categories of race, gender, ethnicity and class, which produce the nation-state

⁶ Perrier-Bruslé (2007) and Wilson (2015) share a similar perspective of borders in their respective analyses of colonial borders in Latin American and Central Asia.

⁷ The capitalist state refers to a state which functions primarily through socio-economic and political institutions encouraging multiple market exchanges and the private consumption of goods and services.

as a unit of analysis, enables a critical inquiry into how the complexities and variations of life at both sides of a border are expressed through daily behavioural practices and micro-power dynamics within the global political economy. Thus, the object of study is how these diverse micro-social dynamics of power are continually expressed, distributed, and re-imagined across deconstructed patterns of human behaviour. Furthermore, these shifting social realities are evident in the following analysis of the Russian-Finnish border town Värtsilä, whose history is introduced below.

The Russian-Finnish Border: Värtsilä's History

Before WWII, Värtsilä was a key industrial community fuelling Finland's capitalist development. Moreover, over 1,000 of the 6,000 inhabitants sustained livelihoods from Finland's largest industrial site: Värtsilä (Paasi, 1997: 226). Thus, industry became the centre of socio-economic life in Värtsilä. However, as an outcome of WWII, the industrial border community was split in two, leaving Finland with a mere third of the community's previous territory, while Russia kept the iron industry (as displayed in figure 1 below) (ibid). Crucially, this paper argues that contrary to St. Johns' (2011) theory, the re-drawing of the Russian-Finnish border in the Värtsilä community was not 'easy' but significantly complex and highly contested by both Russian and Finnish agents. Further, this reality is evident in the micro-dynamics of social practices and power employed by people as the border was physically produced. This critical analysis is conducted below.

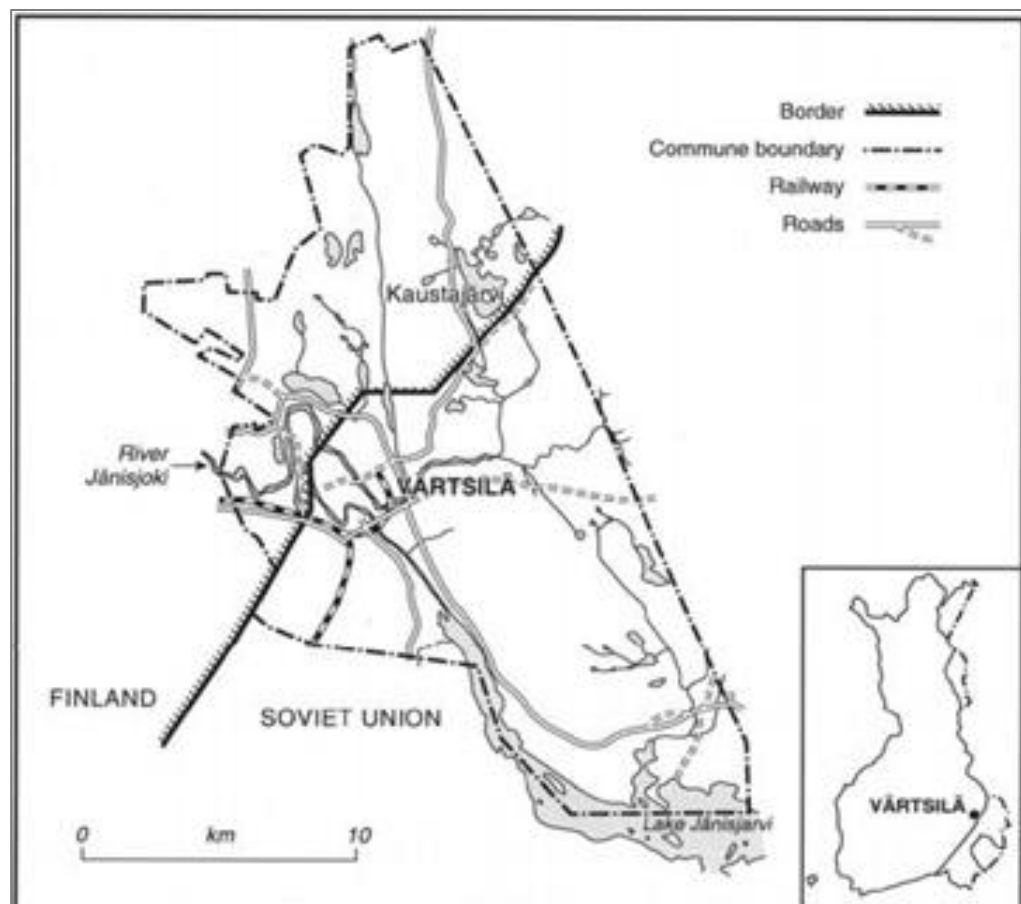


Figure 1: The Post-WWII Värtsilä border (Paasi, 1997)

Värtsilä: Micro-Social Border Power and Practices

At the heart of the intricate social texture of the industrial border community Värtsilä, lay the factory (Paasi, 1997: 227). Furthermore, the factory itself was composed of a jungle of social exchanges including: daily physical rituals carried out by workers (using machinery and equipment), social exchanges between factory workers, spatial acts of work (varying stages of production in different parts of the factory), time-specific social activities (lunch breaks), and economic exchanges enabling family members to meet their basic material needs for survival (factory wages spent on food). Thus, the border community was not produced by the factory which then created macro-power and political cross-border relations; rather, the factory itself was a complex field of multi-diverse interactions within which each individual was uniquely positioned. More crucially, this paper contends that these daily social interactions constitute micro-power dynamics within which border-community members created socio-spatial identities specific to their respective personal experiences and histories. Further, these micro-power dynamics constituting the factory, created shifting tensions among Finnish and Soviet Union individuals regarding the conceptualization and creation of the border. The micro-power and social dynamics constituting the heavily contested re-drawing of the post-WWII Finnish-Russian border are best illustrated by the activities of Finnish director of Värtsilä: Wilhelm Wahlfors (ibid: 231). Crucially, Wahlfors was a local figure who in addition to directing the factory, represented and negotiated local Finnish interests during the 1947 Paris peace negotiations (ibid: 233). Furthermore, Wahlfors attempted to influence the location of the local border line to include the factory within Finnish territory.

However, although Wahlfors' efforts failed as the border was redrawn to include the factory within Soviet Union territory, the strategic socio-economic and political significance encompassing the contestation of the border, demonstrates two critical micro-dynamics of borders' re-drawing and building. Firstly, the localized border negotiation practices between Wahlfors and Soviet Union representatives, reflects how power is diffused throughout micro-social interactions which created contested re-conceptualizations of the border. Further, these nuanced manifestations of power spread throughout the rest of the community, as former Finnish employees were made redundant, lost their livelihoods, and thus had to resort to agricultural subsistence to ensure their survival. This led towards a de-industrialization of the split Finnish community which in turn, ignited the wrath of national Finnish politicians. Thus, the drawing of the border was not easy, but produced the above adverse outcomes for many members of the former Finnish community, as individuals attempted to navigate shifting socio-economic and spatial realities. Secondly, because the new border was drawn and built through Soviet Union and Finnish negotiations, it presents a physical manifestation of complex social processes within which individuals construct a territorial-spatial narrative, thus producing national identities. This is evident in interviews conducted by Paasi (1997), in which he exposes how the WWII generation community members still feel resentful and hostile towards the former Soviet Union (present day Russia), due to the 1947 border cutting off Finnish access to factory employment, essential goods and services, and railway links. Thus, this created a nationalist narrative of 'us' and 'them' whereby symbolic and physical divisions were continually produced, re-produced, and dispersed as the Soviet Union was

characterised as the ‘eastern threat’ to ‘western Finland’⁸. More fundamentally, this nationalist narrative persisted into the Cold War as Finland remained the only western country to border a socialist country, which became known as the iron curtain (Medvedev, 1999).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that contrary to St. Johns’ (2011) claim that drawing borders is ‘easy’ while their construction is ‘not the same’ cannot be applied across multiple border processes. This is evident in a survey of the theoretical roots of St. Johns’ (ibid) proposition, which fails to deconstruct capitalist power processes, and analyse how divergent social and power dynamics enable borders to transform from a line drawn, to physical entities. In light of these analytical shortcomings, this paper adopted Alvarez Jr’s (1995) anthropology theory, which places borders within their respective micro-social and power dynamic positions. This theory was then applied to the Russian-Finnish industrial border commune Värtsilä, which revolved around intricate social-relations of the factory. Additionally, the micro-social dynamics evident in post-WII border negotiations, reflected how both the conceptualisation and construction of borders can be contested. Crucially, this reality re-emphasises how borders are heterogeneous and complex social realities, composed of divergent micro-social realities and imagined power dynamics. Thus, this paper calls for each border process to be placed within their respective realities, only then can their respective historical and evolving geo-political and economic positions be understood.

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⁸ This perspective of nationalism as socially-constructed through complex multidimensional processes of othering, is also shared by Anderson (2015) which she applies to current European perspectives of migration.

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