

## SCIENTIFIC LIFE / TUDOMÁNYOS ÉLET

### Regional and Border Studies in Central and Eastern Europe Interview with James W. Scott

#### *Regionális és határkutatások Közép- és Kelet-Európában Interjú James W. Scott-tal*

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### Introduction

At the 195th General Assembly of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) – held on May 3, 2022 – the Assembly of the Ordinary Members elected its new members, whereby Professor James Wesley Scott – one of the most prominent international figures in Regional and Border Studies – also became honorary member of HAS.

James W. Scott was born on April 20, 1956 in Oakland, California. In addition to his three ‘mother tongues’ (English, Spanish, and German), he is also proficient in other languages (Finnish, Hungarian, French, and Russian). He obtained a BA in Biology in 1979 at Berkeley and an MA in Geography from Freie Universität Berlin in 1986, where he also defended his PhD dissertation and then habilitated in 2006. From 1992 up to 2008, he was a full-time scientific researcher at Leibniz-Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung in Erkner, as well as lecturer at Freie Universität Berlin. His early scientific



research, which gained him international attention and recognition, was both theoretical and applied research with a focus on spatial and urban planning.

Beyond his research and lecturing activities, between 1998–2007 James worked for several months in various European cities (Tampere, Joensuu, and Barcelona) and spent one year at Guadalajara and Berkeley. From the early 2000s on, he gradually became one of the key international figures in Border Studies and one of the most recognised leaders of cross-border co-operation research projects in the European Union. He also achieved a prominent position in Brussels with his high-level research and publishing activities on the subject. James is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* and *Carta Regional Económica* (University of Guadalajara), as well as series editor of *Routledge Borderlands Studies*. As of 2008, he has been Professor at the Karelian Institute of the University of Eastern Finland in Joensuu. Since 2013, he has been Research Associate at CERS Institute for Regional Studies, as well as head of the Research Group in Border and Borderlands Studies established with the support of the President of HAS.

From the point of view of Hungarian Regional Studies, it was important that in 2012–2013 James received a ten-month scholarship (Distinguished Scientist Fellowship) from HAS in the field of Border Studies. He primarily spent that period at the Institute for Regional Studies, but also got familiarised with all border sections of Hungary and other border research institutions in the region. Among Hungarian publications, James became member of the editorial board of *Tér és Társadalom* (Space and Society), *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin*, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Economics and Business*, and Editor-in-chief of *Cross-Border Review*. James is also a member of the Hungarian Regional Science Association (MRTT). Social sciences in Hungary have greatly benefitted from his helpfulness and passion, and he has co-authored numerous publications with many Hungarian colleagues. James is an active participant in several Hungarian research projects. Over the past decade, he has been visiting Hungary every two months.

The short semi-structured interview below was conducted at the end of May 2022 at the Institute for Regional Studies.

### **Interview**

*James, you grew up in California but moved to West Berlin in the 1980s. Did you have an interest in borders prior to this move, or was it perhaps triggered by your presence there?*

My interest in borders was spurred by visiting the US–Mexico borderlands frequently as a child and teenager. I was just fascinated by the obvious differences and the co-existence of what seemed to me to be parallel social, cultural, and economic worlds separated by a mere fence. The Berlin Wall was

also a source of endless fascination – even if often in a grim sort of way – and here again it was the total contrast and the close proximity that was most striking. I didn't acquire a research interest in borders until sometime later, but these early impressions helped me develop a long-term interest in the subject.

*What was life like in West Berlin in the 1980s – academically and otherwise? When did you first make it over the Iron Curtain? What did that feel like and what impressions – short- or long-term – did it leave you with?*

Life in West Berlin was highly stimulating and very different from the rest of (West) Germany which seemed, at least to me, to be more conservative, boring, and too well-organised. West Berlin was a very attractive place to live despite the marginal position and relative neglect the city suffered under Cold War conditions. I also enjoyed the strange adventure of crossing the East German transit zone to get to the West. The ideological confrontation between East and West left a real impression, and the artificiality of the East German regime – which was so obvious at an everyday level – was something I found intriguing. What was the lesson? Irrational or completely false ideologies and imaginaries are sources of power that can shape society, but only to an extent.

*You've spent considerable time in Hungary. When did you first visit this country, and why?*

My first visit to Hungary was in the summer of 1981. I was on a trip with my father and we stayed, I think, about four nights in Budapest. We enjoyed it immensely and I was more or less 'hooked'. After that I came back regularly as a tourist and visited more or less the whole country by train, bus, and bike.

*How did you come in contact with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre for Regional Studies (today CERS Institute for Regional Studies, better known as RKK)?*

My first visit to RKK was in 1987. I was doing my PhD on urban planning issues and was interested to know about how urban and regional planning worked in the Hungarian case. I was pleasantly surprised that the RKK researchers would be willing to meet with a PhD student from Berlin! This was not my experience in Germany, France, or elsewhere. I remember talking to Ilona Pálné Kovács, Ferenc Erdősi, and László Faragó.

*You've been engaged in Border Studies ever since its renaissance in the early 1990s, at a time when a relatively small number of experts were devoted to this field. How did contact between colleagues look like at the dawn of the digital revolution? This small number of specialists was geographically quite scattered, wasn't it?*

In the early 1990s, the main mode of communication was through international conferences and of course publications. Border Studies was rather confined regionally, with specific border contexts (US–Mexican, Upper Rhine, etc.) conditioning local research agendas. There was little interaction and, sadly, there

was also the widespread sense that everybody's own border situation was so special that there was no real possibility to learn from comparative studies of border issues. The annual Association of Borderlands Studies conferences were one of the venues that allowed the rather small international research community to develop.

*Could we (in retrospect) identify a few hotspots where Border Studies emerged?*

Integration in Europe and North America, globalisation, free trade, and the end of the Cold War – all which came together in the early 1990s – were the major turning points. But also, the problems associated with undocumented/forced migration created a sense of urgency that promoted international scholarship in Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

*While excellent research on borders can now appear just about anywhere, would you agree that countries that have had more troubled border relations have been somewhat more visible in the field? Not forgetting that research on borders fortunately doesn't just deal with tensions – as evidenced in the elaboration of concepts such as hybridity and borderscape.*

Yes, the level of border traumas and political crises related to borders influence where we study them. That is of course where much of the funding would be – although there are many regions with troubled borders that are hardly known, either for geographic reasons, accessibility issues, or Euro-Atlantic-centrist biases. However, much research has been conducted on peaceful cooperation across borders since the 1990s as a means to overcome past border traumas. As you know, the more recent border research paradigms are no longer necessarily fixed on geographical borders, but when you look at concrete research and case studies there is usually a specific territorial reference.

*You've now been able to closely follow, and even contribute to, the (partial?) integration of Central and Eastern Europe into western as well as global structures for over three decades. We have two questions related to this. One, how would you say this region has changed as a subject of study – within and outside of it? Are borders and their study different here than elsewhere? To what extent does for instance the old distinction – traditionally associated with East-West differences – between ethno-cultural and polity-based nationalism still have bearing?*

I think Central and Eastern Europe has contributed immensely to constructing Europe – not only in the past, but specifically, since the dramatic political, economic, and socio-cultural shifts already underway in the second half of the 20th century. This might not be self-evident to everyday people in the West (wherever it might be), as we still find deep-seated stereotypical thinking there. But in academic terms, Anglosphere dominance has tended to marginalise other experiences, including Francophone research! This has also promoted the idea of

deep-seated East–West differences. Brexit should have ended that illusion once and for all. CEE research is now fully contributing to the emergence of more socially relevant social science and humanities traditions, political problems notwithstanding. In terms of Border Studies, CEE has been a major contributor, and despite huge historical and contextual differences the main research question here is how to ‘reborder’ or ‘deborder’ national societies more effectively! This is in fact the Border Studies research question, if we want to go beyond mere description and critical analysis.

*The second and related question is whether you see any change in the status and outreach of research from the region during this relatively long time-span. To what extent have scholars from and in the region been integrating into the wider community of Border and Regional Studies?*

The Hungarian and wider CEE border research community has massively expanded since the early 1990s – reflecting wider trends – and they have become much more present internationally than was the case, say, even ten years ago. They are very much part of the wider European Border Studies community, and have been actively contributing to research investigating the role of borders and cross-border interaction within the context of European cohesion. There do remain some barriers to greater international visibility of Hungarian and CEE border scholars, which have to do with the high costs of international conferencing, although virtual and hybrid alternatives might help to change that. In addition, we still have very regionally clustered communities: this seems to be the backbone of border research, it is where the money is, and while we all are more open to international knowledge exchange, the parochial gaze upon the border can still be a limiting factor to internationally comparative research.

*Speaking of Border and Regional Studies, you may be one of the very few professors in the world with this particular combination in their titles. While both fields are rather large and diverse on their own, your work and that of Anssi Paasi have consistently pointed to the deep connections between them. Where do you see their intersections (and potentially divergences) in the near future?*

I personally think that interesting work remains to be done in linking borders and regions with everyday border-making practices, going beyond – but not ignoring – the conditioning role of the state and state institutions. This also means a closer link to the humanities, cognitive sciences, and other non-traditional sources of border scholarship. I think this kind of interdisciplinarity, or even trans-disciplinarity, will help us better understand the politics of borders and how everyday practices contribute to (re)bordering.

*Last but certainly not least, how do you think the current drawn-out Ukrainian-Russian war will impact Border and Regional Studies?*

This is hard to say. European geopolitics and security concerns are now shifting in new directions, but in terms of the geopolitics of borders this is part of a historical continuum. On the other hand, the war will certainly have an impact on the study of EU–Russia cooperation. We might also see a new and more substantial form of regional cooperation emerging with Ukraine and Moldova. What bordering impacts the war will have within the EU and between member states remains to be seen.

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