

---

# National atlases – deconstructing the complex meaning of „national“

Eric Losang

*Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, e\_losang@leibniz-ifl.de*

---

**Keywords:** Atlas, national atlas, concepts of nation, critical cartography

**Abstract:**

The publication of the Atlas de Finlande in 1899 is often praised as the manifestation of an atlas genre, that spread over the course of the 20th century in the aftermath of two world wars and in the era of decolonisation. Nowadays the term “national” is often veiled by similar publications to avoid possible associations with fascist, revanchist or separatist motivations.

It is this term “national” that also inspires the discussion of whether the Finnish national atlas can be taken as the first of its kind. Several cartographic scholars have discussed and defined alternative origins of the concept. Based on a variety of explanatory approaches they end up in differing definitions.

How national atlases fit into the different approaches has been a topic of academic cartographic considerations that often merely touched the important technological, institutional, economic, societal, political and user-centric developments, especially in the past decades. In addition, approaches to categorise atlases, which focuses solely on empirical or structural elements, such as the number and topics of maps and their temporal and spatial sequence, can reduce the scope of analysis.

This paper takes up a post structuralist approach, asking questions about the changing national narratives that drives national atlases over time by employing a critical approach that situates national atlases in their respective contexts based on a wider systematic consideration of changes in the meaning of the term “national”. Thus, not only historical contexts but their inscription as a “story” that atlases tell come to the fore in an analysis of production systems, self-definition and academic reception as well as aspects of how the use of toponyms drive and, inversely, are driven national narratives.

In conclusion, the paper contributes to discussions of canonical definitions of national atlases. By situating them in their respective historical contexts, it unveils how and under what circumstances concepts have changed and explains why recent developments need to be considered when talking about the definitions and the further development of national atlases.