

Commentary

Scale and the limitations of ontological debate: a commentary on Marston, Jones and Woodward

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In their recent essay, 'Human Geography without Scale', Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005) take stock, albeit selectively, of almost 25 years of scale research and find it wanting. Given how substantial and influential the scale literature has become, not only in human geography but also now in political science, sociology and anthropology, we welcome their efforts to assess and critique this literature. We agree with a number of the specific concerns they raise, but disagree with their representation and diagnosis of the literature, as well as their call to 'expurgate scale from the geographic vocabulary' (422) and replace it with a flat ontology.

We share the concerns of Marston *et al.* regarding the recent tendency in human geography to privilege scale over other spatialities, such as networks, space, place, region and mobility, or to subsume these spatialities under a fetishized master concept of scale. To the extent that such privileging has occurred, e.g. when complex processes of resistance to neoliberal globalization are reduced to scale jumping, it has resulted in inadequate attention to the practices and spaces of everyday and not-so-everyday life. We concur that scalar discourses of globalization might contribute to the reification of the global scale and the suppression of resistance, and share their concern that certain discourses of globalization are used to obscure the particular spaces and places, e.g. boardrooms, where decisions are made. Finally, we concur with their critique of hierarchical, top-down, notions of scale that represent causal processes as necessarily high level and broad scale, 'touching down' locally. Such notions indeed obscure the myriad

local material and discursive practices through which the very fabric of globalization is produced.

Nevertheless, we take exception to their general characterization of the scale literature and the alternative they offer to remedy its purported deficiencies. Specifically, their analysis is flawed in five crucial ways. It

- 1 consistently conflates 'hierarchical' with 'vertical' scale and greatly overestimates the prevalence of accounts of the former;
- 2 ignores virtually all accounts of agency in the scale literature, painting it as not only structural but structuralist;
- 3 builds an argument for a flat ontology based on an analysis of abstract 'spatial imaginaries' that marginalizes the technologies of power employed in the social production of scale;
- 4 sets forth a flat ontology alternative that would entail an *a priori* 'expurgation' of scale from geographical research; and
- 5 points toward a political strategy that is unnecessarily constrained.

Conflation of 'hierarchical' and 'vertical' scale

Marston *et al.* claim that scale theorizing in geography is based on a 'foundational hierarchy – a verticality that structures the nesting so central to the concept of scale' (419) and that 'scalar hierarchies' possess a 'structuralist calculus' (423). Their interchangeable use of 'hierarchical' and 'vertical' ignores

an important distinction between these terms in much of the scale literature. The metaphor of verticality need not imply a top-down hierarchy, but rather refers to a relationship that may be 'bottom-up', 'top-down' or both simultaneously. Hierarchy is a particular form of verticality, suggestive of top-down power relations. In physical geography and ecology, scales are indeed often conceptualized this way, whereby geographically more extensive scales dominate smaller scales (Sheppard and McMaster 2004a 2004b).

According to what is known as hierarchy theory, slower moving, larger scale processes operate as constraints, limiting the operation of smaller scale, and faster, processes. Under these conditions broader scales shape conditions of possibility at local scales, making local agency subservient to macro-logics of structural power. (Leitner and Sheppard forthcoming)

Yet broad areas of the scale literature in human geography, not reviewed by Marston *et al.*, reject this assumption that scalar power simply operates through a top-down hierarchy (e.g. Herod 1991 1997 2001; Delaney and Leitner 1997; Swyngedouw 1997a; Miller 1997 2000; Kurtz 2003; Sheppard and McMaster 2004a 2004b; McCarthy 2005). These and many other authors do not equate scale with a top-down hierarchy, do not 'assume the hierarchy in advance' (422) and do not suggest that the global sets the rules and the local accommodates. Some reject any necessary existence of top-down power hierarchies linking scales (Swyngedouw 1997a). For others hierarchies are important, e.g. in the sense that neighbourhoods are embedded in national and global space, but the larger scale need not dominate such relationships (Collinge 1999; Martin 2003). As Leitner (1997) suggests, power asymmetries between different scales are always contested and subject to struggle, including not only human actors but also non-human actants (McCarthy 2005; Swyngedouw 2005).

Marston *et al.* use theories of globalization to exemplify their claim about the hierarchical nature of scale thinking. They write that

over the past 20 years, political and economic geographers have tended towards macro pronouncements that assigned the global more causal force, assumed it to be more orderly (if not law-like) and less contingent, and by implication relegated its other to the status of case study. (421)

While not completely unfounded, we take issue with the sweeping, exaggerated character of this claim and the way it ignores important differences within

the literature. Much of the research in geography and related disciplines during the past 10–15 years,¹ rather than reifying the all-embracing power of the global, has theorized how local and transnational processes and practices are producing (materially and discursively) the very fabric of the global (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Boudreau and Keil 2001; Katz 2001; Smith 2001; Amin 2002; Gibson-Graham 2002; Latham 2002; Nagar *et al.* 2002; Sheppard 2002; Goldmann 2005). A substantial literature analyses the roles states and institutional actors have played in creating global institutions and processes (Peck and Tickell 1994; Dicken *et al.* 1997; Weiss 1998; Yeung 1998; Swyngedouw 2000), denaturalizing any notion of globalization as a natural and immutable 'juggernaut' (427). Stressing the permeability of state territory and control (Agnew 1994; Adams 1996; Amin and Thrift 1997; Martin 1999; Sheppard 2002; Peck 2004), the power of the local in the context of globalization (Cox 1997; Escobar 2001; Miller 2004) and social struggle (Herod 1991 1998 2001; Swyngedouw 1997a 1997b 2000; Waterman and Wills 2001; Routledge 2003; Miller 2004), much of the scale and globalization/transnationalism literature foregrounds the central role of social struggle in the construction of scale and the fact that scales 'are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested, and restructured in terms of their extent, content, relative importance, and interrelations' (Swyngedouw 1997a, 141). We contend that the vast majority of the contemporary literature on scale and globalization in geography and beyond does not equate the 'global' with structure and the 'local' with agency. It does, however, clearly recognize the mutual constitution of structure and agency.

Missing agents

Reading Marston *et al.* (2005), one is led to believe that agents play virtually no role in the scale literature, that the literature is only about structures and, worse yet, it is structuralist. Indeed, a search of their text shows that 'agency' and 'agents' are referred to 12 times, but never in relationship to the scale literature. By contrast, 13 of their 15 uses of 'structures' and 'structuralist' are related to the scale literature. This extremely one-sided representation ignores the literature's central theme of the 'social construction of scale' (Marston 2000) and its attention to the roles of agents in struggles that construct scale. The basic idea of scalar analysis was succinctly stated by Neil Smith early on: the 'scale of struggle

and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin' (Smith 1992, 74). We take two basic points from this statement: the scalar characteristics of social struggles can have important implications for the dynamics and outcomes of those struggles; scales are themselves constructed through social struggles. While the pace of scalar change varies depending upon the context and dynamics of specific social struggles, scales are anything but 'rigid'.² The literature on these struggles and the actual practices of scale (re)construction by actors and institutions is so vast that we cannot hope to survey it here. Fortunately, others already have. Marston's extensive 2000 survey was followed by another insightful 2004 essay analysing the central role of the women's movement in constructing and shifting the scales of social welfare provision. In her 2004 essay she also discusses a diverse range of other agents involved in the production of scale: 'nonstate level political actors such as labor, . . . political parties, . . . political activists, . . . and ensembles of urban actors known as "urban regimes"' (2004, 174). Similarly, Howitt (2003) discusses a variety of agents constructing scalar relations, including indigenous peoples, trade unions, political parties, food corporations, urban planners, environmentalists and territorial movements. Paasi's (2004) recent survey provides another wide-ranging account of the complex processes of scale construction through agents' material and discursive practices. A recent and particularly insightful in-depth account of struggles over scale construction in the English context is provided by Jones and MacLeod (2004).

Given the prominent role of agency in the scale literature, we are at a loss to explain why all references to agency have been expurgated from Marston *et al.*'s 2005 account of the literature. It would appear they have selectively reframed the scale literature with 'scale' made to stand in for structuralism and their own 'flat ontology' standing in for agency, thus setting up a re-run of the 1980s structure–agency debate. It goes without saying that this was one of the most significant and influential debates in human geography (Gregory 1981 1994, 106–24; Duncan and Ley 1982; Chouinard and Fincher 1983; Thrift 1983; Giddens 1984; Storper 1985; Pred 1986). Frustration with deterministic structuralist formulations that denied a significant role to human agents, minimized their knowledgeability and reflexivity, reified structures as causal forces 'behind' human subjects and frequently offered functionalist explanations in which systems necessarily maintained their integrity, led

to a barrage of critiques followed by numerous innovations in social theory, ontology and epistemology. The debate fizzled out rather than being definitively resolved, but a loose consensus coalesced around: (1) the rejection of functionalism; (2) acknowledgement of agents as knowledgeable and reflexive; (3) acknowledgement of structure and agency as mutually constitutive, with agents enacting and transforming structures through their actions and structures enabling and constraining human action; and (4) recognition that social processes can be reduced neither to the sum of individual actions nor to a societal totality, rather, they must be understood as 'social practices ordered across space and time' (Giddens 1984, 2). Emphasis was placed on overcoming binaries and dualisms, seeking instead relationships and 'dualities'.

Marston *et al.* attempt to link scale research to structuralism by associating it with critical realism. But critical realism posits the mutual constitution of structures and agency; it is not structuralist. Indeed, Gregory associates the sea change that took place in human geography in the late 1980s with the rise of 'realism *rather than* structuralism' (2000, 797; emphasis added). Clearly, the structure–agency debate did not resolve all of the key dilemmas of human geography and was especially deficient with regard to epistemological issues of difference and positionality.³ But it did represent a major break with previous structuralist formulations and a clear recognition of importance of agency. The contemporary scale literature, which we trace back to Herod's 1991 agency-focused account of labour struggles, developed in the wake of this sea change and is, not surprisingly, suffused with relational accounts of agency and structure playing out in, as well as shaping, diverse geographical contexts.

An ontological critique based on 'spatial imaginaries'

While we find Marston *et al.*'s accounts of hierarchical scale and structure versus agency to be highly skewed, we believe they have raised some important questions about the ontological status of scale that deserve to be taken seriously. Specifically, what social practices are we talking about when we talk about the social construction of scale? Definitions of scale are frequently diverse and ambiguous. In what is probably the best overview of scale definitions and their ambiguities, Howitt (2003) identifies three dimensions of scale: size, level and relation. He does not, however,

define what is meant by these terms. These terms need to be interrogated and, indeed, Marston *et al.* ground their ontological critique in an interrogation of 'scale as size' and 'scale as level'. Noting their frequent conflation in the literature, they proceed to compare them as 'spatial imaginaries', pitting metaphors of 'horizontal geographies' against metaphors of 'vertical geographies'. Ultimately they conclude that there is no difference between 'scale as size' and 'scale as level' and that 'one of the terms might be simply and effectively collapsed into the other' (420). On this basis, they contend that a notion of 'horizontality' (420, 427) can do all of the analytical heavy lifting of 'scale as size' and 'scale as level'.

Their interrogation of 'imaginaries' is premised on the notion that scale is merely an 'epistemological ordering frame' or a representational practice (420). But it is *not only* these things. It is, above all, a diverse array of material and representational practices, shot through with power. Some of the scale literature is grounded in Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theorization of the social production of space. Lefebvre's work focuses on (a) material spatial practices, especially bureaucratization (primarily involving the state) and commodification (based on the expansion of capitalist market relations), (b) representations of space, produced first and foremost through instrumental and strategic discourses of institutions of the state and capital, and (c) spaces of representation, including a wide range of discourses of everyday life and emancipatory alternatives. The inextricable intertwining of the production of space and the production of power is the overriding theme of Lefebvre's work. But concepts of power are absent from the Marston *et al.* interrogation of 'scale as size' and 'scale as level'. Instead of examining the socio-spatial power relations these terms might represent, they conduct an idealist comparison of power-emptied spatial metaphors. Whether a term draws 'one's vision downward and outward' or 'upward and onwards' (420) tells us nothing about socio-spatial power relations at play.

Marston *et al.*'s 'imaginary' critique of the scale literature points us only toward bordering practices as a technology of scale production. For Marston *et al.* scale is 'the result of marking territories horizontally through boundaries and enclosures, documents and rules, enforcing agents and their authoritative resources' (420). How these practices shape socio-spatial power relations is left severely underdeveloped, as if the socio-spatiality of life can be reduced to

abstract questions of spatiality. Nonetheless, we concur that bordering practices are *one* technology of scale production. Social power is necessarily (re)constituted by bordering practices – both material and discursive – that regulate alliance building, resource mobilization, trade, investment, exploitation, labour mobility, identity construction, and more. But acknowledging this fact leads us to ask whether social power is imbricated in the social construction of scale in still other ways. Howitt (2003), after all, identifies size, level and relation as the key dimensions of scale. Bordering practices deal only with 'scale as size' or 'horizontal measure of "scope" or "extensiveness"' (420).

If one begins with the practices and power relations treated in the scale literature rather than abstract 'spatial imaginaries', one finds considerably more than bordering practices. While necessarily affected by relations of inclusion and exclusion across differentially permeable borders, power relations, processes and capacities within bounded spaces cannot be reduced to bordering practices. Processes and characteristics internal to borders also shape power relations and capacities. Different spaces, accordingly, may exhibit different socio-spatial power relations that are reducible neither to size nor bordering practices. Spaces, moreover, exist in nested relationship to other spaces, creating differential opportunities and constraints for practices of individual and collective agents. How then to conceive of these relationships? The notion of 'scale as level' points toward such differences in powers and capacities, opportunities and constraints, among nested spaces. To take a common example, a substantial portion of the scale literature deals with the regulatory practices of 'the state'. While the state is heavily implicated in bordering practices as well as entangled in power relations beyond its borders (Agnew 1994; Adams 1996; Cox 1998), its activities cannot be reduced to bordering practices. States engage in a wide range of regulatory practices relating to resource allocation, authorization, legitimation and signification. They invariably exhibit internal geographical differentiation by level, e.g. local, state/provincial, national, as well as differentiation in relationship to supra-national regional institutions and institutions of global governance, e.g. NAFTA, EU, WTO, IMF, World Bank (Peck and Tickell 1994; Goodwin and Painter 1996; Swyngedouw 1997a; Brenner 1998 2004; Swyngedouw *et al.* 2002). This differentiation is associated not only with geographically uneven development and geographically

differentiated processes of identity formation and struggle, but with differences in responsibilities and capacities that ultimately flow from social struggle. Responsibilities and capacities of different state levels, as well as relationships among these levels, are reconstituted on an on-going basis. Indeed, the scalar restructuring of state responsibilities and capacities has been one of the hallmarks of neoliberal globalization (Peck and Tickell 1994; Swyngedouw 1997a; Brenner 1998 2004). Differential resource allocation and authorization capacities, e.g. the power to tax income or profits or regulate trade, are commonly at issue. Responsibilities previously accorded to one level of the state have frequently been 'downloaded' or 'uploaded' to other levels, usually levels with considerably less capacity to allocate resources or issue authoritative rulings. This process of 'mismatched rescaling' has been integral to the neoliberal gutting of democratic institutions and their replacement by market institutions (Miller 2007). One result has been an evisceration of many forms of social welfare provision – e.g. daycare provision, social housing, education, healthcare, environmental protection, investment in public facilities – as state institutions assigned particular responsibilities lack the capacity to carry them out. Marston *et al.* will no doubt recognize a 'vertical imaginary' in this example. The far more important point, however, is that power relations have been altered through the differential restructuring of state responsibilities and capacities. The production of this new power geometry, while often intertwined with bordering practices,⁴ cannot be reduced to them.

These examples by no means exhaust the range of scalar power relations. Indeed, a vast array of relationships exist among not only structures, agents and institutions operating at various scalar 'levels', but also among individual and collective agents, and structures and institutions, across scales, e.g. through constitutional or legislative mandates. Keck and Sikkink (1998) in their now classic book, *Activists Beyond Borders*, succinctly capture the complex multi-scalar relationships of transnational social movement activism:

This focus on [transnational social movement] campaigns highlights *relationships* – how connections are established and maintained among network actors, and between activists and their allies and opponents. We can identify the kinds of *resources* that make a campaign possible, such as information, leadership, and symbolic or material capital. And we must consider the kinds of *institutional structures*, both domestic and international, that encourage

or impede particular kinds of transnational activism ... [These relationships must be] viewed dynamically, as ... changes in formal or informal political power relations over time. (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 7); emphasis in original.

We contend, then, that a variety of technologies of power are implicated in both the social construction of scale and the multi-scalar dynamics of social struggle. While bordering practices are an important technology of power, they are only one among several. As a corollary, 'scale as size' and 'scale as level' cannot simply be collapsed into a single 'spatiality of horizontality'.

Toward a flat ontology?

Nonetheless, Marston *et al.* argue that scale should be 'expurgate[d] ... from the geographic vocabulary' and replaced with a 'flat ontology' (422). Drawing on Deleuze, DeLanda and Schatzki, they sketch out a conceptualization of a flat ontology based on

analytics of composition and decomposition that resist the increasingly popular practice of representing the world as strictly a jumble of unfettered flows; attention to differential relations that constitute the driving forces of material composition and that problematize axiomatic tendencies to stratify and classify geographic objects; and a focus on localized and non-localized emergent events of differential relations actualized as temporary – often mobile – 'sites' in which the 'social' unfolds. (423)

Site is the master spatial concept in Marston *et al.*'s flat ontology. Site is conceptualized as a milieu composed of human and non-human practices and orders, an actor network that is always emergent and transformed through network connections.⁵

In so far we understand their conception of a flat ontology, it seems the authors present a framework analogous to a highly idealized actor network. In its earlier anti-scalar phase, actor-network theory (ANT) drew on a 'flat' ontology that represented networks as non-hierarchical, self-organizing, collaborative and flexible with a topological spatiality. A large literature now exists critiquing this network conception as propagating a highly selective representation of networks (e.g. Leitner and Sheppard 2002; Leitner *et al.* 2002; Grabher 2006). Critics argue that earlier versions of ANT ignored the power hierarchies that appear within networks, the emergence of internal cores and peripheries, and the tendency of networks to reproduce rather than challenge inequalities among network members, and contend that networks and

hierarchies are co-present in social life across space and time. Even the father of the actor-network approach, Bruno Latour (2005), has recently backed away from representing networks as 'flat lands'. As Ryan Holifield writes:

For Latour (2005: 176), adopting a 'flat ontology' does not mean proclaiming that hierarchies and scales do not exist: 'It's not that there is no hierarchy, no ups and downs, no rifts, no canyons, no high spots. It is simply that if you wish to go from one site to another, then you have to pay the full cost of relation, connection, displacement, and information.' (2006, 14–15)

Holifield goes on to argue that

In Latour's actor-network approach, the task is not to ignore or reject hierarchies, but to trace them to the sites of their production and the actors producing them. 'Flatness' is not a description of the world, but simply 'the default position of the observer': '... this flattening does not mean that the world of the actors themselves has been flattened out. Quite the contrary, they have been given enough space to deploy their own contradictory gerunds: scaling, zooming, embedding, 'panoraming,' individualizing, and so on. The metaphor of a flatland was simply a way for the ANT observers to clearly distinguish their job from the labor of those they follow around' (Latour 2005, 220). (Holifield 2006, 15)

Similarly, John Protevi, in his commentary on the Marston *et al.* paper at the 2005 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, argued that any understanding of a flat ontology, with its focus on differential relations, localization and sites, must also identify constraints to individual practices and behaviour in their spatial and temporal scales. Taking the example of globalization, he suggested we must ask questions about the disciplinary effects of IMF structural adjustment policies 'in creating an atomized and normalized, urbanized and de-skilled, work force' (Protevi 2005, 5).

These arguments resonate with the recent arguments of geographers critiquing scale centrism and the privileging of scale as *the* central ordering principle of space and time (Brenner 2001; Latham 2002; Leitner and Sheppard forthcoming). Arguing that we should not jettison scale, they advocate a focus on how diverse spatialities – place, region, mobility, networks, as well as scale – are co-implicated in the construction of social life across space and time (Leitner and Sheppard forthcoming).⁶

The flat ontology proposed by Marston *et al.* entails an *a priori* expurgation of scale. If we were to accept it, we would be left with an impoverished understanding not only of the power relations that

inhere in scale, but of the power relations that inhere in the intersections of diverse spatialities with scale. We favour an approach that recognizes a diversity of spatialities, not because every concept is equally important, but because decades of geographical research have demonstrated that many forms of spatiality shape our lives. We contend, moreover, that scale (and other spatialities) cannot be reduced to an explanandum with actants as the explanans (cf. Collinge 2006). Space, social life and nature are mutually constituted and inseparable. Actants are not only implicated in the production of spatialities, they are also enabled and constrained by them. The challenge that lies ahead is in understanding the articulation of diverse spatialities and, in turn, what this means for more effective emancipatory politics.

Political implications

A central claim of Marston *et al.* is that a flat ontology offers the potential to be politically transformative. They suggest that a flat ontology provides more entry points for progressive politics. We share Marston *et al.*'s desire to open spaces for progressive politics, but disagree with their assertion that scalar thinking and the acknowledgement of structural constraints necessarily 'delimit entry points into the political' (427). To the contrary, recognition of scalar orders and existing power asymmetries is crucial to a progressive politics, both in terms of the development of alternative political spaces and the deployment of socio-spatial strategies of resistance.⁷ Indeed, the recent scholarly literature on imaginaries and practices of progressive social movements challenging neoliberal globalization suggests that erasing scale and structure as theoretical notions in geographical inquiry is problematic and unproductive (Bond and McInnes 2007; Leitner *et al.* 2007a 2007c; Mayer 2007; Miller 2007; Oldfield and Stokke 2007; Sites 2007; Wainwright 2007). This literature shows how social movements decipher the structures and dynamics of neoliberal governance, its presence at a variety of scales, and relational and constitutive connections to extra-local sources, channels and agents of neoliberalization. On this basis terrains and targets for effective resistance are established. Scale is one important dimension of strategies of social action and is the subject of intense debate among many social movements. What is the most effective scale for organizing? Very often the conclusion reached is to pursue a coordinated multi-scalar politics to effectively respond to the shifting politics of neoliberalism.⁸

A multi-scalar politics implies operating simultaneously at multiple scales at multiple sites to expand the geographical and political reach. Bond and McInnes (2007), for example, describe how a place-based community group contesting electricity cut-offs, rising prices and service failures in Soweto, South Africa, joined forces with other local and national civic organizations to form a national alliance of 'Social Movements Indaba' to fight for a common agenda of 'turn[ing] basic needs into genuine human rights'. Yet scaling up must be complemented by attending to the local. Thus Mayer (2007) notes that transnational social movements, such as ATTAC, have recognized the need to build stronger, broader bases of support among residents in participating places. Similarly, Oldfield and Stokke (2007) stress the need for urban activists to 'scale down' to, and engage organically with, residents in neighbourhoods, both to keep them informed and to build stronger support (Leitner *et al.* 2007a).

This scholarship does not reduce the spaces of social movements to a scalar politics, but rather shows how social movement strategies draw on and are interleaved with diverse spatialities – networks of spatial connectivity, mobility, place, as well as scale. 'Those practicing contestation make use of multiple spatialities in complex and unpredictable ways to make new geographies' (Leitner *et al.* 2007c, 20). For example, the living wage and anti-WTO movements, as well as immigrants' rights initiatives, have shown how networking across space strengthens initiatives that initially operated independently in individual places around the globe. Networking prevents contestations from being contained spatially by stretching them to other places. Extensive networking among activists across space has allowed these movements to create new scales of organizing and action. For example, in the aftermath of the Immigrant Workers' Freedom Ride – an initiative to publicize a broad agenda for immigrants' rights and US immigration policy reform – sponsors of the ride formed the New American Opportunity Campaign (NAOC), which mobilizes, coordinates and organizes grassroots lobbying on immigrants' rights at the national scale (Sziarto and Leitner 2007).

In conclusion, we would like to suggest an alternative way forward that decentres abstract theorizing and ontological debates about space. Such debates can be important: different philosophies and theoretical frameworks alert us to and imply different ways of seeing and interpreting the world, yield distinctive insights and are suggestive of different political

strategies. Yet they may also distract our attention from the concrete spaces, practices and understandings of human and non-human agents, their power relations and their impacts. When this happens, debates about the superiority of one master concept over another become unproductive. We suggest it is more productive to ground conceptual arguments about the spatiality of social life in the study of practices and power relations, not just abstract ontological debate.

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Notes

- 1 Indeed, one has to go back to the 1980s to find many examples to support Marston *et al.*'s claim.
- 2 A key area of contention revolves around the question of whether relationships, generally speaking, have a degree of durability or are largely ephemeral, comprised only of events. We take this to be an empirical question that cannot be resolved through ontological assertion, flat or otherwise.
- 3 Drawing on Haraway (1991), Marston *et al.* ask 'How ... can a researcher write seriously about situated positionality after having just gone global?' (422). They argue that analysis of the global scale 'impl[ies] a transcendent position for the researcher [that] cannot help but undermine attempts at self-reflexivity' (422). While we absolutely agree that positionality and reflexivity are crucial epistemological concerns, we are not convinced by their argument. One response might be to ask at what scales does the researcher become sufficiently self-reflexive and cognizant of her position? We believe that Haraway goes a long way toward answering this question when she writes that 'The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits, i.e. the view from above, but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position' (1991, 196). From this statement we understand that it is indeed possible to comprehend processes that operate beyond the scales and life paths of situated personal experience, but such understandings always represent the 'joining' of a multitude of 'partial views', not transcendent knowledge gained from an Archimedean vantage point. To deny this would lead us to conclude, pace the Buddhist parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant, that an elephant is like a pot, winnowing basket, ploughshare, plough, granary, pillar, mortar, pestle and brush – all understandings based on the situated

- knowledge of the blind men. It is only by joining together our partial views that we come to understand what sort of object an elephant is.
- 4 Notable examples include the abolition of the Greater London Council and the abolition of the Alberta regional planning commissions.
 - 5 In our opinion it would have been helpful if the authors had elaborated on how their master concept is related not only to scale, but also to other spatial concepts that have been the mainstay of geographic research such as place and mobility.
 - 6 To their great credit, Marston *et al.* recognize and critique idealistic formulations of unencumbered spaces of flows commonly associated with pure agency positions and some varieties of post-structuralism. Instead, they argue that 'particular movements and practices in social sites are both enabled and delimited by orderings in the forms of arrangements of material objects' (2005, 425). Note the strong resonance with the consensus formed in the wake of the structure-agency debate.
 - 7 A politics that drops notions of structure and scale in favour of an agent-focused politics of someone to 'blame' (427) is a double-edged sword. Putting a face to oppression can indeed be a very effective mobilization strategy and agents should, of course, be held accountable for their actions. But ignoring the structures in which agents operate can lead us to call for the removal of particular corporate CEOs (not necessarily a bad thing), rather than changing the structure of corporate charters, to call for the removal of the Managing Director of the IMF (again not necessarily a bad thing), rather than changing the structures of global governance. These contrasting political strategies need not be posed as an either/or binary. Indeed, recognizing the mutual constitution of structure and agency, they should be seen as complementary. Similarly, concern with scalar relations is not a call to structural determinism, but rather to understanding how agents produce, and are affected by, a particular form of spatiality.
 - 8 Part of this argument and the examples draw on Leitner *et al.* (2007b).

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