



Pergamon

*Political Geography*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 93–97, 1997  
Copyright © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd  
Printed in Great Britain. All rights reserved  
0962–6298/97 \$17.00 + 0.00

S0962–6298(96)00045-5

# The political construction of scale

DAVID DELANEY

*Department of Law, Jurisprudence and Social Thought, Amherst College,  
Amherst, MA 01002, USA*

AND

HELGA LEITNER

*Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55454, USA*

Geographic scale, referring to the nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size, such as the local, regional, national and global, is a familiar and taken-for-granted concept for political geographers and political analysts. In much contemporary analysis of political organization and action, geographic scale is treated simply as different levels of analysis (from local to global) in which the investigation of political processes is set. Recently this notion of geographic scale as an unproblematic, pre-given and fixed hierarchy of bounded spaces has been challenged. Geographers have shown that the geographic scale at which, for example, economic activities and political authority are constituted, is not fixed but periodically transformed (Smith and Dennis, 1987; Herod, 1991). Attention has been drawn to the relations between, and influences of, processes operating at different geographic scales (such as the local and global), and how they interact to produce incentives and motives for political action (Miller, 1994). Alternatively, geographers have sought to illustrate aspects of the construction of scale by drawing attention to what are essentially rhetorical stances of political actors. For example, Jonas (1994) discusses the attempt by a multinational corporation headquartered in Worcester, Massachusetts, to portray itself as a local operation attached to the local community in order to create support for its resistance of a takeover bid by a conglomerate with British headquarters. The common ground of this body of research is that geographic scale is conceptualized as socially constructed rather than ontologically pre-given, and that the geographic scales constructed are themselves implicated in the constitution of social, economic and political processes.

The papers in this issue of *Political Geography* contribute to this emerging project of developing a constructionist perspective of scale. Building on the theoretical insights of scholars such as Smith (1992, 1993), Taylor (1982, 1993), Agnew (1993) and Herod (1991) on questions of scale and the political construction of scale, the specific contribution of the four papers is that they represent detailed case studies of the practice of the construction of scale. To date, little empirical work has been offered showing how the construction of scale is attempted or accomplished by actors engaged in political transformations, or demonstrating the significance of these practices for our under-

standing of societal change. The case studies, two set in Europe and two in the USA, reveal how the discourses and actions constituting the politics of scale are a fundamental ingredient of the ways in which we go about creating, revising and living within a complex set of power relations, and illuminate, in different ways, elements of what John Agnew (1993) has called 'hidden geographies'. The authors also recognize that 'politics' is not exhausted by state actions, implying that political geography might legitimately concern itself with spatial aspects of power involving non-state as well as state actors. While acknowledging that discourse and representation are important to understanding how power relations are structured and how the dynamics of power unfolds over time and space, the authors argue that such issues should be grounded in consideration of actual political agendas and actions to effect change.

As an explicit theoretical project, a constructionist perspective on scale is a recent development in professional political geographic thought. Its emergence may be traced to changes in social theory more generally, such as different understandings of power and practice and wider acceptance of some version of 'social constructivism', and as a response to the inadequacy of inherited conceptions of geographic scale for understanding profound and perplexing transformations in the contemporary world. However, it is important to note that while the theoretical problem is novel, the practical problems that it refers to are by no means new. This means both that new theoretical insights can be used to reinterpret previous practices and that historical events can illuminate critical aspects of our current efforts to understand. By way of demonstrating the progress we have made and the questions which remain, we will examine the familiar, perhaps paradigmatic emblem of political scale—federalism.

In eastern North America in the late 18th century the victors in one of the earliest successful modern anti-colonial wars engaged in fundamental debate about scalar allocations of political and economic power. We would say that Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Patrick Henry and George Mason, and dozens of other participants in pre-constitutional American politics, were engaged in the construction of scale (see Duncan, 1995). The fact that Federalists prevailed over Anti-Federalists—or, more neutrally, localists—should not confer an element of inevitability on the contest. The arguments were real, and the outcome anything but foregone. Most importantly for us, the consequences of what was, in fact, 'constructed' were real and significant. They are still with us, as can be seen in the events analyzed by Herod and Miller in this issue.

Integral to the politics of creating 'a more perfect union' were not only divergent understandings of the consequences of alternative constructions—or, literally, constitutions—of scale, but contending ideologies of social life and human relatedness. Arguments about 'the differences that scale makes' were bound up with and expressed different conceptions of localness, mobility, identity and 'corruption'. The politics of scale involved the politics of interests and of consciousness, and their connections. But the arguments themselves cannot be reduced to a simple set of pros and cons of adopting a centralized federal political structure. The arguments advanced and the interpretations presented can be seen as practical efforts to persuade or convince; to create in the minds of others a kind of mental map or image of the difference that scale makes. Arguments are among the principal 'tools' that political actors use to shape understandings. Although the authors in this issue give such concerns different degrees of prominence, this is a theme that occurs in all four papers. It bears mention that in all of these cases arguments are deployed strategically and instrumentally with the purpose of effecting change. 'Scale', then, is not simply an external fact awaiting discovery but a way of framing conceptions

of reality. The politics of scale may often take the form of contending 'framings', as is evident in the situations examined by Agnew and Miller in this issue.

As we know, the Federalists prevailed in the 1780s, but not without significant compromises. The resultant formal allocation of power was not what anyone had set out to construct, and in important respects the meaning and practical significance of federalism in the USA has been open to question ever since. It has continually been contested, rethought and refashioned. Periodically these refashionings have been accomplished violently, more often through the politics of constitutional interpretation. All of this suggests that the politics involved in the social construction of scale is frequently an on-going, perhaps unending chain of events, and our investigation of the process should not be confined to inceptive events. The 'product' of the politics of scale may be fluid and revisable and consequences of such politics open-ended. This, of course, complicates our efforts at understanding. Thus, while the case studies presented in this issue come to a close, the politics they are extracted from keep going.

Using federalism as a paradigmatic illustration of the political construction of scale has its limitations, because of its overly restrictive view of politics as centered on formal state structures and governmental institutions. Some of what is distinctive and important about the approach adopted by the contributors to this issue is that actions that constitute the political construction of scale are by no means confined to circumstances attending to the allocation or re-allocation of formal state power. While the state, and intra- and inter-state relations are of fundamental significance to most of the case studies, the authors also show that a more expansive and productive conception of 'politics' requires an examination of the connections between power, practice and scale among a wider universe of actors. We can imagine pushing much further along these lines to better understand the political construction of economic scale (for example, NAFTA, deregulation, 'flexible' scales of sourcing and marketing); the cultural politics of scale (such as diasporic or postcolonial consciousness or indigenous struggles against ethnocide); or the scalar politics integral to the maintenance and transformation of patriarchy (such as the deployment and critique of separate sphere ideology which confined women to domestic, private spaces and reserved for men access to the wider public spheres of the market and polity). In short, once our conception of scale is freed from the fixed categories inherited from the past and our conception of politics is similarly expanded and enlivened, the questions multiply and the analytic or interpretive problems involved in relating scale to politics become more obvious. The research presented here starts us off in the direction of grappling with these difficult issues.

These four papers highlight some of the range of contexts, actors, strategies, maneuvers, stakes, ideologies and time frames that should be part of a fuller understanding of how the political construction of scale takes place. While all authors approach the question of scale from a constructionist perspective, there remains a diversity of ideas about its precise meaning.

John Agnew examines a specific critical moment in recent Italian political history: the collapse and reformation of political parties between 1992 and 1994. He shows that constructions of geographic scale are integral to the options presented by political parties for the reconstruction of Italian politics. Of the major parties emerging from the 1994 national election, for example, the Northern League proposes a strong federalism with the 'Republic of the North' as the prototype; the National Alliance offers a 'return' to strong national government; Forza Italia sells a mix of national consumerism, austerity and strong leadership, and the Democratic Party of the Left propounds a mix of municipalism and national welfarism. These competing conceptions of how to organize political power

and authority, and potential constituencies and interests in space, are used to differentiate party ideologies. The stakes in the contest between political parties involved a share in formal political power; the critical practices were rhetorical and organizational.

Like John Agnew, Helga Leitner examines the political construction of scale at a critical moment. Her piece focuses on the on-going conflicts within the emerging supra-state space of the European Union (EU) over policy concerning immigration of non-EU nationals. This case study has affinities with the construction of federalism and, indeed, a critical point of contestation is divergent conceptions of 'sovereignty'. More sharply than the others, Leitner's article draws attention to connections between the construction of scale, the territorialization of power, and the politics of mobility. The supra-national immigration framework instituted by intergovernmental agreements and conventions, both 'inside' and 'outside' formal EU structures, creates a complex territorial structure of governance intended to ensure better control of joint external borders. As she notes, the alternatives proposed by participants in the construction of scale draw on and aim to instantiate divergent conceptions of justice, democracy and identity.

In contrast, Andrew Herod presents a chain of events which unfolds over the course of more than a generation. The focus of his study is scalar strategies deployed in the context of labor contract negotiations. He describes the complicated emergence of a 'national' scale of contractual coverage for the International Longshoreman Association out of prior port-by-port and regional agreements. The strategic issue concerned the scale at which bargaining takes place, but the ultimate objective was equalization of working conditions during an era of profound change in the nature (and politics) of shipping. Scale, it might be noted, becomes formalized in agreements over which issues should be covered by the master contract and which should be left to local bargaining units. The critical practices that produced this scalar division of responsibilities were negotiations backed up by direct actions of workers.

Byron Miller examines the politics of defense investment and peace in Massachusetts during the early 1980s. The focus of the paper is the relationship between rhetorical strategies and actual policy practices of political actors operating and situating themselves at different geographic scales. He shows the scalar disjuncture between the rhetoric and practice of defense spending in Massachusetts employed by federal and state politicians, and how their rhetorical strategies were used to impede the growth of the peace movement. Conceptions of geographic scale were also crucial to the demands of the peace movement that an expanding hierarchy of geographic scales—municipalities, states, and eventually the entire country— should be freed from nuclear weapons and the imperatives of the Cold War in which the central state was engaged. He suggests that the defeat of the 1983 Nuclear Free Cambridge referendum, which called for a binding halt of all nuclear-weapons-related activities in a defense-dependent municipality, was due to the failure of the peace movement to identify alternative economic activities to replace defense industries at the scale of the municipality.

It may be worth noting here that none of the studies in this issue adopts a simple dualistic notion of politics. In all the studies there is a multiplicity of actors whose interests and ideologies may, from time to time, coincide or diverge. Whatever is produced or constructed from these encounters bears the traces of compromise, of multiple contradiction and tension, of critical ambiguity and of potential instability.

As these papers show, the political construction of scale as a theoretical project necessarily involves attention to relationships between space and power, and to conceptions and ideologies of space and power that social actors bring to practical efforts to change the world and, of course, to resist change. The problematic of scale in this

context arises from the difficulties of answering the question: once scale is constructed or produced, where in the world is it? Scale is not as easily objectified as two-dimensional territorial space, such as state borders. We cannot touch it or take a picture of it. Likewise scale exists not simply in the eye or political consciousness of the beholder. Where scale emerges is in the fusion of ideologies and practices. By contributing to a wider questioning of the fixity and rigidity of political space, this project may also have practical relevance; creating room for maneuver for those whose lives are shaped by dominant geopolitical practices and socio-spatial relations.

## References

- AGNEW, J. (1993) Representing space: space, scale and culture in social science. In *Place/Culture/Representation*. (J. Duncan and D. Ley eds). London: Routledge.
- DUNCAN, C. (1995) *The Anti-federalists and early American Political Thought*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.
- HEROD, A. (1991) The production of scale in US labour relations. *Area* 23, 82–88.
- JONAS, A. (1994) Editorial: the scale politics of spatiality. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, 257–264.
- MILLER, B. (1994) Political empowerment, local–central state relations, and geographically shifting political opportunity structures: strategies of the Cambridge, Massachusetts peace movement. *Political Geography* 13 (5), 393–406.
- SMITH, N. AND DENNIS, W. (1987) The restructuring of geographical scale: coalescence and fragmentation of the northern core region. *Economic Geography* 63, 160–182.
- SMITH, N. (1992) Geography, difference and the politics of scale. In *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* (J. Doherty, E. Graham and M. Malek eds) pp. 57–79. London: Macmillan.
- SMITH, N. (1993) Homeless/global: scaling places. In *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (J. Bird et al.). London and New York: Routledge.
- TAYLOR, P. J. (1982) A materialist framework for political geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 7, 15–34.
- TAYLOR, P. J. (1993) *Political Geography: World Economy, Nation State and Locality*. 3rd edn. Harlow: Longman.