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Scale, social production of

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One of geography’s core concepts, scale has become a hotly contested, even chaotic, concept. Until the 1980s scales such as the national scale or regional scale were frequently employed, but little or no time was devoted to theorising scale itself. Scale was a taken-for-granted concept used to impose organisation and order on the world. Over the past thirty years, a much vaunted ‘scale debate’ emerged during the 1980s, developed through the 1990s, and erupted in the early-2000s. The debate centres on whether scale is a mental device for categorising and ordering the world or whether scales exist as material social products.

1980s – A Marxist ‘theory of scale’

Linked to processes of globalisation, localisation and regionalisation, scale became a fundamental concept for political geographers in the 1980s. The work of Peter Taylor and Neil Smith was pivotal in identifying critical scales (different levels) at which processes of the world economy are manifest. In their contributions, both identify a nested hierarchy of scales running from the global to the local. Taylor’s three level model of the modern world system identified the world economy, nation-state and locality while Smith highlighted urban, regional, national and global as the critical scale categories.

Introducing for the first time a ‘theory of scale’, this approach was not without its critics. Scales were rather more fixed than is commonly accepted today. The result saw scale categories reified as distinct levels of analysis, each with
their own disciplinary following. Integration of analysis across scales and/or at multiple scales therefore proved difficult with many arguing that scale lacked practical as well as rhetorical value. Finally, this first cut at a theory of how scales are produced was heavily inscribed with Marxist ideas of materialism. This is to say that scales are real social products (not handy conceptual mechanisms for ordering the world) and they emerged out of the dynamics of capitalist accumulation.

1990s – Scale as a dynamic construct

Rather than see scale as a nested hierarchy, debate in the 1990s focused on discursive and relational notions of scale that moved away from scale as taken-for-granted to scale as a dynamic concept. This debate took place largely in the journal Political Geography, with constructivist approaches demonstrating how scales are the negotiated outcome of social and political struggle. More than this, they showed how scales are always in the process of being produced and reproduced and it was in this context that the concept of a politics of scale was introduced and developed. To compensate for the over reliance on the rhetorical value of scale in the 1980s, accounts from the 1990s also argued that scale politics are not found in theoretical discourse but in real-world practices of social conflict and struggle. Notable empirical studies from this time focused on telecommunications, labour restructuring, and political parties to highlight how scales are socially constructed not ontologically pre-given. Scales such as the national scale and regional scale were no longer seen to be part of some logical hierarchy between global and
local, but as actively created by political and economic processes. In other words, scales are not ‘out there’ waiting to be utilised but must be brought into being and given meaning.

In such an approach, the scales at which social actors and processes operate cannot be conceived of as disconnected from the actors and processes that create them. Often quoted here is the example of the transnational corporation, for these firms do not simply adapt their activities to a pre-defined global scale but must themselves become ‘global’ by actively constructing their own global scale of operation. Emphasising this constructivist approach to scale is the notion that firms go ‘global’ by globalising their operations to keep up with the increased hypermobility of globalised capital. One criticism to emerge from this was the assumption made by some materialists that the local is a ‘natural’ or ‘default’ scale. In making this argument, all social actors begin as ‘local’ actors before then moving on to become regional, national, and finally, global actors. The global scale was thus something for actors to aspire to. Being ‘global’ was a measure of success and reinforced this hierarchy of scales from local to global. In response, the local was deemed no more natural than the other scales and is produced in the same way. In a world where many predicted the ‘death of distance’ and the ‘end of geography’, authors quickly highlighted the importance of nurturing place-based and site-specific nodes of dense economic, social and political activity in a globalising world. Understanding the processes by which social actors embed themselves locally was thus seen to be as important as how they extend themselves globally. In sum, scales were not conceived of as fixed
entities static in space, but in terms of a process where social life is constantly being made and re-made by social actions.

**2000s – Scale or no scale: that is the question?**

The most recent debates over scale have been found in the pages of *Progress in Human Geography* and latterly the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. Reviewing nearly two decades of work on theorising scale, work at the beginning of the twenty-first century has focused on moving the debate outside the narrow economic confines of theorising how scales are forged out of struggles around capitalist production and its uneven development. These productionist views were criticised for overlooking how issues of (social) reproduction and consumption have shaped, and continue to shape, the construction of scales. In expanding concepts of scale to encompass issues of reproduction and consumption, non-capitalist social relations (such as patriarchy) have been shown to underpin the production of certain key spaces (the home) and scales (the household/domestic scale). However, this expansion has not been without its critics. Calls for household, domestic and neighbourhood to be more centrally located alongside the local, regional, national, and global in a broader scalar lexicon raised concerns over the degree to which geographers use scale when referring to things that could just as easily be deemed place, locality, territory or space. Most recent work has thus centred on the degree to which the analytical powers of the concept of scale have been diluted by its perceived overuse and misuse, and most
important of all, what this means for the future of the concept in human
geography.

Arguing that the concept of scale has been misused and, therefore, diluted by
those seeking to understand political struggles taking place *within* relatively
self-enclosed spatial units (such as the household or territory), those seeking
to ‘protect’ the concept of the politics of scale suggest that its analytical power
should be maintained and can be retained if applied only to exploring
processes of spatial scaling *among* geographical scales. In other words, the
geographical concepts of place, locality, territory and space should be invoked
to refer to political struggles taking place within relatively self-enclosed spatial
units and the concept of the politics of scale be used to refer specifically to the
process of scaling, where multiple spatial units are established, differentiated,
and hierarchised in relation to one another. Drawing distinction between the
‘production of space’ and the ‘production of scale’ – to affirm the analytical
power of the concept of the politics of scale – has, however, been challenged
by those who continue to see notions of scale as privileging a view of the
world that sees it as hierarchically constituted. Notions of scale are hereby
seen to convey the sense that activism and politics operate through vertical
hierarchies and a related tendency to see one scale (especially ‘the global’)(privileged over others. From this perspective the problem with scale is not
misuse of the concept but the concept itself. All points that, in 2005, led Sallie
Marston, John Paul Jones III and Keith Woodward to take the previously
unheralded step of calling for scale to be expurgated from the geographic
vocabulary and notions of scale to be abandoned. For them scalar analysis
operates within a conceptual straight-jacket, limited to viewing change as either downwards (from global-to-local) or upwards (from local-to-global), while attempts to overcome this weakness by integrating vertical imaginaries with network formulations are deemed inadequate for overcoming this ‘foundational weakness’ of hierarchical scale. Rejecting the ‘up-down vertical imaginary’, but also the ‘radiating (out from here) spatiality’ of horizontal thought, Marston et al. argue for an alternative ‘site-based’ ontology which does not rely on any transcendent predetermination – be it the ‘local-to-global continuum’ in vertical thought or the ‘origin-to-edge imaginary’ in horizontal thought. Put forward as an alternative to scale, this site-based ontology is deemed to flatten space into multiple interconnected sites and thus render scale a redundant concept in human geography.

The most provocative of interventions into the scale debate has witnessed an explosion of interest in scale and scalar geographies. Most published reactions argue for a retention of scale, despite its weaknesses and varying degrees of sympathy with the authors’ frustration with these. One point most critics agree on is the false dualism created by debunking scale and privileging site (i.e. scale versus site), a symptom of what many are coming to see as the theoretical, methodological and empirical trap of one-dimensionalism – the privileging of a single dimension of socio-spatial relations (in this case ‘networks’) over another (‘scale’). This, it is argued, sees the bending of a concept to expand its analytical and empirical scope to include an ever increasing portfolio of phenomena, a process which over time renders the concept increasingly imprecise, diluted, and blunt. With this in
mind, perhaps the question for the next decade is not scale or no scale, but how a carefully defined abstraction of scale interconnects with the other dimensions of socio-spatial relations (e.g. territory, place, networks).

**John Harrison**

**See also**  
Neil Smith  
Peter Taylor  
Territory  
Globalisation  
Glocalisation  
Locality  
Regions and regionalism  
State

**Further readings:**


