Commentary

Flat ontology and the deconstruction of scale: a response to Marston, Jones and Woodward

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Structural space

To identify the subject matter of human geography it is generally necessary to draw spatial boundaries at some level of abstraction. Whether the focus is upon patriarchalism or the new imperialism, areal differentiation or economic integration, the determination of such boundaries will usually be required at some stage in the proceedings. Spaces do not however occur in the singular; each locality, for example, is defined not only by contrast with other localities, but also with non-local territories of different sizes (such as bodies or regions). Indeed, it is by codifying this system, projecting a world that is divided not only into a ‘horizontal’ structure (in which similar activities are organized at similar scales in different places) but also a ‘vertical’ structure (in which different activities are organized at different scales covering the same places), that scale analysis acquires its conceptual power. The framework of nested scales was introduced during the 1950s and 1960s as a categorical device for describing spatial patterns at different levels of aggregation. From the early 1980s it was however argued that scales reflect real differences in the territorial organization of society, and it is on this basis that scale analysis (including perhaps the body, home, locality, region, nation, supranational and global levels) has extended its influence: ‘integral to the production of space, capital produces certain distinct spatial scales of social organisation’ (Smith 1984, 87; see also Taylor 1982; Kurtz 2003; Gough 2004; Uitermark 2005; for a useful review see Sheppard and McMaster 2004). But whether it is composed of nominal categories or real territories, the scale analytic cannot be segregated from the rest of traditional human geography but is symptomatic of this, and of the spatial structuralism with which it is generally imbued.

Over broadly the same period, however, the writings of Lacan and Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, Cixous and Irigaray have informed a post-structural critique of presence and identity that challenges the coherence of abstract structures. Feminists have argued, for example, that the spaces of structural geography, the spaces that can be exhaustively analysed scale by scale, express the territorial logic of patriarchy (Rose 1993, 149; 1996, 62). The masculine desire to stabilize meaning leads therefore to the drawing of boundaries around territories: ‘envelopes are another solid then; they depend on a certain kind of space to constitute the masculine subject and his feminine (m)other’ (Rose 1996, 71). Indeed, in her deconstruction of these boundaries Rose pursues the language of a ‘paradoxical space’, a space that lurks beneath the bounded space of geography, a space of flows and melding that (for example) undermines the distinction between the real and the metaphorical: ‘It is to write as if the mirrors were not solid but permeable, as if the tain could move . . .’ (Rose 1996, 72; 1993, 140–1). But perhaps the first deconstruction of spatial structuralism – after that of Derrida himself – was provided by actor-network theory, which acknowledges the reality of macrostructures (such as nested scales).
whilst showing that these are sustained through networks of heterogeneous association (Callon and Latour 1981).

In their recent article Marston, Jones and Woodward develop an approach that is informed less by feminism or ANT, more by Schatzki and Deleuze, and that pursues not so much the deconstruction of scale as its elimination from the lexicon of human geography. Their article begins with a critique of scale, then sketches an alternative flat ontology, and in both respects makes an important contribution that reaches well beyond the scale debate to the wider investigation of social space. In developing a response, however, I have drawn out two particular strands from their argument – one strand, from their critique, that is informed by the work of Derrida; and another, from their proposed alternative, that is informed by Latour – and have used these to produce some critical leverage.

The critique of scale
Marston et al. open their paper by reviewing in particular the neo-Marxist scale writings of Taylor and Smith, Swyngedouw and Brenner, and by showing that in each case these project a framework of nested scales that rises vertically, providing a spatial scaffold up and down which social processes can supposedly flow (Marston et al. 2005, 418). But as the authors point out, this vertical formulation has a number of deficiencies. First of all it relies upon a confusion between scale as spatial size and scale as institutional or boundary level, confusion in which the two meanings are conflated:

hierarchical scale cum boundary-making invites a mishmash of scalar talk with boundary talk, and until we can sort out the differences, we might as well use extensivity and bordering as separates. (Marston et al. 2005, 428, note 10)

Secondly, scalar hierarchies and the local/global distinction are confused in this context with the distinction between micro/macro levels of social analysis, or between agency/structure or concrete/abstract. Regarding the local/global, they note in particular that

it is easy to see how this fundamental opposition could enter into the terrain of scale theorizing, for in one sense the local-global distinction is merely the spatial version of micro-macro. (Marston et al. 2005, 421)

Thirdly, they argue that hierarchical scales are taken for granted as units of analysis that shape our thinking in implicit ways: ‘once these layers are presupposed, it is difficult not to think in terms of social relations and institutional arrangements that somehow fit their contours’ (Marston et al. 2005, 422). Fourthly, they claim that hierarchical scales provide an apparently transcendental perspective which discourages researchers from acknowledging their own positionality: ‘How, we might ask, can a researcher write seriously about situated positionality after having just gone global’ (Marston et al. 2005, 422). On the basis of this critique the authors suggest that the concept of scale is inherently hierarchical and should be eliminated from the terminology of human geography:

These problems, we believe, are inherent to hierarchies and cannot be resolved by integrating them with network formulations. For these reasons we elect to expunge scale from the geographical vocabulary. (Marston et al. 2005, 422)

Strand 1: the analogic of deconstruction
Such criticisms are surely correct as far as they go. But before moving on it is perhaps worth seeing if they, especially the suggestion that local–global is merely a spatial version of micro–macro, can be extended further by reference (for example) to the writings of Neil Smith. Throughout his scale writings Smith draws a distinction between space and society – asserting a ‘historical dialectic’ between these, arguing that different societies produce space, that space is a repository of social assumptions – and suggests that the relationship between these is mediated dialectically through the production of scale, a process in which society produces scales that reproduce society:

scales should be seen as materially real frames of social action. As such, geographical scales are historically mutable and are the products of social activity. (Smith 1995, 60; see also 1979, 376; 1984, 77; 1990, 169; 1992, 73; 2004, 197)

Smith also draws a distinction between material and metaphorical space, develops a critique of spatial metaphor for undermining the reality of space, and argues that such metaphors must be harnessed to material space within a geographical language that he describes as a ‘spatial grammar’ (Smith 1984, 75; 1990, 169; 1992, 66; Smith and Katz 1993). Metaphor is defined here by the use of homology: ‘metaphor functions by asserting the homology or at least resemblance between something to be known and something assumed as
already known’ (Smith 1992, 66). But despite this critique, when we examine Smith’s writings about scale, then alongside the differences between society and space we find a series of homologies – metaphors – between these spheres, a series that is central to his conceptual architecture:

1 In 1984 Smith presents his spatial concepts as analogous to a series of social concepts that he derives from Marxism, identifying parallels between (for example) immobile/mobile capital and fixed/circulating capital, between the spatial and the social concentration/centralization of capital, between spatial scale and the scale of production (e.g. Smith 1984, 89, 119, 122, 129, 142, 146).

2 In 1984 and 1990 Smith proposes a homology between spatial scales and social functions, with ‘the home’ viewed as ‘the inscription primarily of the reproduction of social relations’, whilst the global space ‘is the product of the economic relations of the market’ (Smith 1990, 173).

3 In 1990 and 1992 the phrase ‘contained in space’ identifies the different scales as spatial mechanisms of political regulation, and highlights the equation that is made in these texts between spatial and social notions of ‘scale’, between scales as categories of spatial size and scales as instruments of political control (in which they apparently distil ‘the oppressive and emancipatory possibilities of space’) (Smith 1990, 173–4; 1992, 70).

4 In 1992 Smith broaches his analysis of spatial scale through the homology between hierarchies of spatial size and hierarchies of social power: for example, between hierarchical space and divisions of race and class, gender and ethnicity; and between the local–global and the agency–structure distinctions (Smith 1992, 67–70, 73, 78; see also 2004, 197).

5 In 1992 it is a one-to-one correspondence between spatial scales and social functions (between the globe and financial capital, the nation and politics, the locality and social reproduction, the home and gender construction) that forms the basis of Smith’s theoretical framework whereby ‘systematically different social processes are involved in the arbitration and construction of different scales of social activity’ (Smith 1992, 73, see also 70, 75–6; Marston and Smith 2001).

6 In 2004 key economic concepts such as the ‘expansion and centralisation of capital’ and ‘scale of economic accumulation’ are once again placed in a spatial context and used in ways that encourage a spatial interpretation (e.g. Smith 2004, 206).

7 A homology is identified in 2004 between spatial scales and political agents (city governments, nation states, global corporations, private individuals, neighbourhood organizations) organized at different levels, a homology that forms the basis of Smith’s argument about ‘scale bending’ (e.g. Smith 2004, 193–4).

Taken together these parallels betoken a more general homology between Smith’s geography and Marxian sociology. But unfortunately this homology opens the door to a series of displacements and substitutions between spatial and social concepts within the texts concerned, substitutions that create uncertainty as to which sense (the spatial, or the social, or the-spatial-and-the-social) is being invoked on any particular occasion. So by using economic terms such as ‘fixed/circulating capital’ or ‘concentration and centralisation of capital’ to describe spatial patterns without at the same time foreclosing their economic usage (in 1984 and again in 2004), Smith superimposes spatial upon social meanings and creates uncertainty in the application of these terms. By using ‘scale’ (in 1990 and 1992) without distinction to describe not only categories of spatial size but also instruments of political control, Smith addresses political and spatial referents in the same terms and confuses the spatial form of a struggle with its political oppression through the imposition of spatial boundaries. By using ‘scale’ (in 1992) to cover not only hierarchies of spatial size but also hierarchies of social power, Smith assimilates social meanings to spatial terms, and creates uncertainty as to whether on particular occasions ‘hierarchial space’ refers simply to a hierarchy of spatial sizes, or to a hierarchy of spatial size that is by virtue of this also a hierarchy of social power. The homology between spatial scales and social functions (in 1990 and 1992) produces confusion by assimilating the latter to the former, with ‘interpersonal interactions’ treated as ‘local’ interactions and inter-state relationships as ‘global’ relationships, the global scale treated as ‘the scale of finance’ whilst the local scale is ‘the scale of reproduction’. By asserting (in 2004) that the hierarchy of spatial scales is at the same time a hierarchy of political status, in which it is improper for political agents at smaller spatial scales to engage on equal terms with those embracing larger
scales, Smith assumes a homology which (as in 1992) permits political status and spatial size to be addressed in the same terms.

The homologies between space and society that inform Smith’s writings therefore produce a series of homonyms in which key terms (‘the centralisation of capital’, ‘hierarchial space’, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, ‘spatial scale’) cover both social and spatial meanings. Indeed, by extending the scope of social concepts to include spatial objects or patterns, Smith produces a series of what are in his terms social metaphors, in which (for example) the term ‘centralisation of capital’ is applied to spatial processes (capital collocation), whilst at the same time also retaining its social meaning (capital consolidation). But, despite his critique of spatial metaphor, most of the metaphors that emerge from the analysis of Smith’s texts (and the homologies they involve) are spatial in character. To use ‘spatial scale’ for a measure of spatial size and an instrument of political control (or a measure of social function or social power or political status) is to encompass spatial and social meanings within the same (spatial) term. Indeed, in the context of Smith’s project of grounding spatial metaphors in material space, each of the metaphors identified above is used here to draw their social or metaphorical referents back into the material or literal space that is the milieu of Smith’s geography. It is precisely by means of such metaphorical folds that Smith attempts to secure the material grounding of metaphorical space, and so the spatial grounding of society. But through the operation of these metaphors Smith conflates the social and spatial phenomena which at the same time he distinguishes, eliding the difference between society and space upon which his analysis depends. A recurrent pattern of undecidability is therefore produced – in which spatial scale (for example) is undecidable between metaphorical and literal and metaphorical-and-literal meanings, between social and spatial and social-and-spatial meanings – an undecidability that renders Smith’s theoretical formulations indeterminate.

Through the work of this undecidability Smith’s texts systematically deconstruct themselves, both asserting and eroding the distinction between society and space – and between metaphor and material – upon which they depend. With time this analysis could no doubt be developed in a direction similar to that which I have set out elsewhere (Collinge 2005). But for present purposes it is enough to note that a perverse logic works itself out across Smith’s texts – and indeed across those of Taylor and Swyngedouw – a paradoxical analogic by which their composition depends upon manoeuvres that at the same time bring their decomposition. The implications of this deconstructive logic go well beyond mere error and point, as Derrida has shown, towards the general conditions of all metaphysical understanding (see, for example, Derrida 1973 1976 1978 1982). But by addressing them simply as mistakes Marston et al. miss these wider implications and the relevance they may have for their own project of eliminating the metaphysical concept of scale and (by implication) the structural spatiality with which this concept is bound up.

A flat ontology

Having set out their critique, Marston et al. move on to propose their own model. Citing not only Deleuze but also Latour as sources, they suggest an alternative, flat ontology of self-organizing systems where the dynamic properties of matter produce a multiplicity of complex relations and singularities that sometimes lead to the creation of new, unique events and entities, but more often to relatively redundant orders and practices. (Marston et al. 2005, 422)

The authors hope that by focusing upon both material composition and decomposition, by accommodating the differential relations that drive this process, and by acknowledging that complex systems generate both systematic orderings and open creative events, they will avoid the excessive voluntarism associated with pure openness. They argue convincingly that we must invent new spatial concepts to address the materialities and singularities of space, the ‘localized and non-localized event-relations productive of event-spaces’ (Marston et al. 2005, 424). A flat ontology must be rich enough to account for socio-spatiality without reproducing static conceptual categories or ‘bordered zones’ that require ‘higher’ spatial categories to bound them (Marston et al. 2005, 425).

To this end they draw upon Schatzki’s ontology whereby a ‘site’ is a milieu within which some or all of its inhabitants are inherently incorporated, and a ‘social site’ is ‘the site specific to human coexistence: the context, or wider expanse of phenomena, in and as part of which humans co-exist’ (Schatzki 2002, 146–7). Social sites are dynamic contexts that allow inhabitants (including stable objects and practices) to hang together in event-relations by
virtue of the activities which take place, and that are rendered determinate through the working out of certain latent tendencies. For Schatzki social sites are necessarily human centred: ‘I agree with Laclau and Mouffe that practices are human activity and that causality in social affairs is centred in such activity’ (2001, 46). But practices within these sites are enabled and delimited by the arrangement of material objects, including the layout of the built environment and of those things regarded as ‘nature’:

nature, consequently, is part of the arrangements that constitute the site of the social: Organisms and things of nature number among the phenomena through, around, and by reference to which human coexistence transpires. (Schatzki 2002, 181)

Each site is therefore a ‘manifold’ that does not precede the interactive processes which assemble it but emerges from the interactions of its human and non-human inhabitants, and to discuss its composition requires a processual mode of thought: ‘we can talk about the existence of a given site only in so far as we can follow interactive practices through their localized connections’ (Marston et al. 2005, 425).

The emphasis of the argument then shifts somewhat towards Deleuze. In Deleuzian terms the bodies composed within the world are material actualizations resolved through the play of differential virtualities that, given other combinations of potential and actual relations, would resolve themselves differently (Deleuze 1994). Through this step the authors hope they can acknowledge not only the extensive repetitiousness of the world, but also its intensive capacity for change and newness, and they recommend that we think of the complex potentialities that inher in the actualization of event-relations in even the most banal of sites, to make them problematic, complex and dynamic. The virtual, or potentiality, draws the forces of a site into intensive relations that are actualised in extensity. It is thus through the event that we find the expression of the differential in the unfolding of space. (Marston et al. 2005, 426)

Localization, for example, is not conceived in terms of the ‘local’, but as the site actualized out of a complex number of connective potential processes: ‘through the activity of intensive relations, extensive space finds moments of coherence’ (Marston et al. 2005, 426). The authors suggest that approached as manifolds, neighbourhoods are not discrete, permanent, and linked ‘locales’, but the localized expressions of endo-events and exo-events, the ‘inside-of’ and ‘outside-of’ force relations that continuously enfold the social sites they compose. (Marston et al. 2005, 426)

Marston et al. therefore conclude that consideration should be given to what is problematic about spatiality, and that by leaving the emergence of space folded within its own relations site approaches avoid predetermining or concealing its contents:

in the spirit of this project, we suggest an approach that begins with the recognition that scale and its derivatives like globalisation are axiomatics: less than the sum of their parts, epistemological trompe l’œil devoid of explanatory power. In contrast, a flat ontology problematizes a world in which ‘all contemporaneous lives’ (Schatzki 2002, 149) are linked through the unfolding of intermeshed sites. (Marston et al. 2005, 426)

Strand 2: the scaled Leviathan

From its inception in the early 1980s actor-network theory has challenged the ontological status of macroscopic structures such as nested scales, arguing that these are composed as realities within the practices of everyday life. Indeed, over the years ANT and post ANT writings on complexity have developed sophisticated accounts of the performance of scale differences in bodies of various sorts (e.g. Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 1994; Thrift 1995; Law 2004). Given the strength of its own challenge to spatial structuralism, and given certain affinities which are acknowledged between this and Marston et al.’s flat ontology, it is perhaps worth drawing a comparison with actor-network theory – as an alternative alternative to political economy – and (in this context) to do so by imagining what an ANT or post ANT approach to scale would look like.

ANT was developed by radicalizing the sociology of knowledge, bracketing out not only the ‘reality’ to which knowledge refers but also the ‘social’ from which it was said to derive, leaving behind the phenomenal immanence of meaning in all its forms. The material semiotics of actor-network theory has developed a language for exploring the constitution of meanings (of, for example, dualistic identities) through the discourses, devices and practices that comprise heterogeneous networks (Akrich and Latour 1992). Indeed, Latour has suggested that actor-network theory involves a change in the metaphor used to describe essences, a change in which the ‘real’ space of traditional geography is replaced by a space that is articulated within networks and proximity is defined by connectability (Latour 1998, 3). Spatial structures of
the sort that are embodied within nested scales involve a ‘regional’ as against networked or fluid spatiality, a topology ‘in which objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each cluster’, and homogeneities are identified within boundaries (Mol and Law 1994, 643). The existence of regional spaces is from this perspective a function of network connections, connections in which physical boundaries and differences of scale are achieved through the differential enrolment of objects within these networks, enrolments that (for example) produce differences in the size measurements of the spaces concerned (Callon and Latour 1981, 286; Law 2004). A system of nested scales does not therefore inhere as such within terra firma but is performed through the practices that comprise actant-networks:

- in the maintenance of street signs that agencies erect to produce thresholds between places, and between places within places;
- in the practices of postal workers who, referring to the nested hierarchies that comprise addresses, assign letters through different pathways to different destinations;
- within the strategy documents, structure charts and dispersed communications of (for example) HSBC, communications in which differences of status and power between employees – and the status of HSBC as a global entity – are constituted;
- within the writings of civil servants who maintain official definitions of addresses in (for example) lists of postcodes that correlate with grid references, and with physical landmarks, as things mutate on the ground;
- in the activities and products of statistical departments which assemble census returns and produce documents in which these are linked to boundaries and the identities of places are constituted;
- in the allocation of tasks between agencies – perhaps between police forces – in dealing with problems, with (say) crimes that whilst linked are physically remote;
- in the ideas that people have about their locations at different levels of abstraction, about the identities which attach to these locations and to themselves in these contexts;
- in the writings and other practices of academic geographers which produce differences of scope and power by assembling data that enrolls spaces within systems of (say) uneven development or multi-level governance: ‘to state that there is a system is to make an actor grow by disarming the forces which he or she “systematizes” or “unifies”’ (Callon and Latour 1981, 294).

These practices and the nested scales which they deploy need not be consistent with one another, for as Law has observed there is no general logic of emergence:

the global is situated, specific, and materially constructed in the practices which make each specificity . . . It is specific to each location, and if it is bigger or smaller then it is because it can be made bigger or smaller at this site or that. (Law 2004, 24)

There are therefore as many globals and locals, and as many ways of relating these to one another, as there are sites that project such objects, and the relationships between such relations – between scale schema – is not resolved in advance in favour of consistency:

there is no possibility whatsoever of an emergent overview . . . because there is no final coherence. There is no system, global order, or network. These are at best partially enacted romantic aspirations. Instead there are local complexities and local globalities, and the relations between them are uncertain. (Law 2004, 23–4)

Indeed, drawing upon Callon and Latour’s reading of Hobbes we can interpret each system of nested scales – each system of postal addresses and each organizational chart – as a Leviathan, a durable sovereign or macro-actant that interpellates a compound body through a complex sequence of translations. But neither Leviathans nor scale systems exist in the singular, as can be seen from the plurality of these produced across the different practices set out above:

there is not just one Leviathan but many, interlocked one into another like chimera, each one claiming to represent the reality of all, the programme of the whole. (Callon and Latour 1981, 294, 297)

**Conclusion**

In developing a critique of scale and in proposing a flat ontology, Marston, Jones and Woodward have made an important and challenging contribution, not only to the scale debate, but to the analysis of space more generally – and indeed to the reception of Deleuze’s work within human geography (on this latter point see, for example, Doel 2000). In reading their article, however, I have drawn out two strands of argument – one from their critique and another from their revised model – that are informed by the work of Derrida and Latour respectively, and that suggest different directions from those which the
authors have taken. There are on this basis several observations to be made.

First of all, Schatzki’s site ontology resembles actor-network theory in viewing sites like networks as self-organizing processes in which order is always tenuous and does not precede the practices through which it is composed. Schatzki’s ontology also resembles Latour’s in acknowledging that the material (e.g. technological) content of heterogeneous orders not only mediates but also stabilizes their composition and renders these durable, overcoming the problem of evanescence that are encountered in baboon society (Callon and Latour 1981). That said, however, Schatzki does not follow Latour in treating humans and nonhumans symmetrically – in allowing the source of agency as between humans and nonhumans to be resolved reflexively through network formation – but makes the (metaphysical, sociological) assumption that initiative resides primarily with humans within human society. This approach assumes a distinction and discontinuity between human and non-human materiality that is, however, difficult to sustain in practice, involves an act of faith that prejudices circumstances, and indicates that (of the two) Latour’s work is not only the more radical but also the more realistic.

Callon and Latour have criticized sociologists because they either help macro-actors to grow more vigorous by asserting that these really do exist (macrosociologists), or they deny that such actors exist and on this basis deny us the right to exist (macrosociologists), or they deny that such are bigger than or superior to micro-actors . . . (Callon and Latour 1981, 280; see also Latour 1990; Thrift 1995) elude analysis if we presume a priori that macro-actors relations and the constructions of networks that will produce the kind of empirical focus that is offered by ANT. The critique of scale writings that the authors develop also points, however, towards a different kind of deconstruction – one that raises other questions about their paper, about the project of eliminating scale and of purging structural ontology.

Indeed, the deconstruction which is sketched out above suggests that the problems with scale analysis go well beyond simple error and express a wider tendency, a wider logocentrism or metaphysics of presence within the language of human geography. The lesson of Derrida’s many deconstructions is, however, that it is impossible to jump clear of metaphysics in one bound, that it is necessary rather to work metaphysical terminology back against itself, to displace and reinscribe this terminology into the context from which it has come:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive
proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (Derrida 1978, 280–1)

There is therefore a danger that by purging scale too hastily its replacement will remain within the metaphysical circuit, and within the spatial structuralism, from which it seeks to escape.

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