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# **Nests, Webs and Constructs: contested concepts of scale in political geography**

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Contested ideas about space and scale have been influential in important recent debates in social science. Divergent concepts of space and ideas about its implications for social processes have been widely canvassed and hotly debated. Indeed, the emergence of new ideas about space is widely credited with challenging the previous dominance of historicism in the social sciences. While ideas of space remain important debating points, ideas of scale emerged in the 1990s to challenge dominant understandings of social and political processes. There has been vigorous debate about scale and its implications within political geography in particular. It is clear that scale certainly matters for critical geopolitics. This is particularly clear when one considers the words written about globalization, the nation state, regionalism and localism. Yet, for all this, scale remains a troubling and even chaotic concept.

There is a wide consensus amongst human geographers that the social construction of scale affects cultural and political landscapes. This is particularly obvious in the debates about both globalization and localism. Within economic geography, the dominance of a production-centered discourse has often reduced 'politics' to consideration of the ways in which states and corporations have constructed scales for their economic or strategic benefit at the expense of workers or others. In this discourse, issues of social reproduction, cultural dimensions and non-economic issues of identity politics relatively unexplored. Yet in a wider notion of politics and political geography, it is these same issues that have gained prominence in the 1990s. The assertion of a 'cultural turn', for example, was accompanied in many studies with a return to consideration of localism, specificity and diversity. It is tempting indeed, many have been tempted to deal with this tension between economic and cultural discourses as a binary, and to conflate it with the simplified global-local scale binary. Discussing the politics of scale in this framework becomes a relatively simple matter, identifying the ways in which relatively local groups constitute their identity within a relatively local politics, and how they seek to counteract disempowerment by jumping scales to assert their specific concerns at a wider, more general scale. This seems attractive. For activist politics, it provides a way of engaging with the challenge of thinking globally and acting locally. Yet, like all binaries, this one has its limits. Conflating the global-economic-general and contrasting it with the local-cultural-specific obscures important dimensions that an alternative approach to scale might bring to critical geopolitical analysis, and responses built from it.

Part of the problem facing any contemporary discussion of scale issues in political geography, however, commences with an effort to explain just what this powerful concept actually means. While there is clarity about the nature of social construction, there is much less clarity about just what sort of a thing scale might be. This chapter reviews the ideas of scale that have emerged in political and economic geography, and their implications for critical geopolitics. It argues that one of the implications of the discipline's increasing awareness of the 'politics of scale' is that in trying to understand, participate in or influence spatial politics, one needs to conceptualize and analyze interconnections between scales and the simultaneity of those connections. This chapter considers in turn the implications of contested notions of scale for the critical geopolitics of environment, difference, place and power. Using the experience of indigenous peoples efforts to secure recognition of their rights and to influence contested

cultural landscapes, it argues that a critical geopolitics that engages with the scale politics of power, identity and sustainability offers dispossessed, marginalized and disadvantaged peoples a better framework for political action across and between multiple scales. This, in turn, requires geopolitical analysis to articulate and apply more sophisticated approaches to questions of scale. [\[1\]](#)

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## The idea of scale

Within human geography, there has been a robust discussion of the concept of scale in recent years. Two figures dominated discussion of scale in the 1980s Peter J Taylor (eg. 1982, 1987, 1988, 1993, 1994, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) and Neil Smith (eg 1984, 1988, 1992, 1993, Smith & Ward 1987). Both argued scale was a fundamental concept in political geography, and their ideas have strongly influenced the terms of more recent debate. Drawing on Wallerstein's world systems theory, Taylor advocated a three level model of scale in geopolitics. He identifies 'world-economy', 'nation-state' and 'locality' as the three critical scales at which the processes of the world economy are manifest (eg 1993: 43-48). Smith, who maintains Taylor's notion of a hierarchy of scales, highlights urban, regional, national and global as the critical scale categories in his analyses. In their contributions, Taylor and Smith both advocated a politics of engagement that was oriented to a practical geopolitics consistent with Harvey's earlier advocacy of an 'applied people's geography' (Harvey 1984). For both, however, scale categories remained rather more fixed than more recent debate has suggested. Agnew (1993) argued against reification of specific scales as distinct levels of analysis, but acknowledged that because different disciplines had come to specialize in analysis at different scales, integration of analysis across scales had become increasingly difficult. It is precisely this issue, of undertaking meaningful analysis across scales or at multiple scales, that has been so troubling in operationalizing scale as a fundamental concept with practical rather than merely rhetorical value.

In contrast to the rather rigid concepts advocated previously, more discursive and relational notions of scale have emerged since the early-1990s. Howitt (1993) rejected the idea that scale categories are ontological givens, and questioned the previously unquestioned assumption that scale was necessarily a matter of nested hierarchies. An editorial in *Society and Space* (Jonas 1994) marked a new point of departure for discussing social relations as an element of scale. Jonas emphasized that the political dimensions of spatiality constitute a core issue in conceptualizing scale. Taking up Massey's challenge (1992) to develop a dynamic concept of the spatial in the domains of politics, he sought to untangle the links between 'scale as abstraction' and 'scale as metaphor', pointing out that the tension between globalization and locality research was often a research frameworks that were having trouble dealing with the simultaneity and complexity of power relations, identity and difference that Massey saw as challenging naïve notions of space. Jonas' piece clearly reflected a rapidly growing momentum to move beyond rigid scale labels and naïve conceptualizations of scale itself. His call for a move towards a more sophisticated discussion of the "scale politics of spatiality" was quickly added to by both theoretical and empirical contributions.

In 1997 the journal *Political Geography* ran a special issue under the title 'Political Geography of Scale'. Guest editors Delaney and Leitner suggested "scale is a familiar and taken-for-granted concept for political geographers and political analysts" (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 93). They opened with a confident definition of scale as "the nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size, such as the local, regional, national and global" (p93) and asserted scales are periodically transformed and constructed. The four papers in this special issue advocated a 'constructivist' approach to scale and taken together they provide a powerful opening in what the editors saw as "a theoretical project that necessarily involves attention to the relationships between space and power" (p96). But despite their best efforts, they found

scale remained elusive:

*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* (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 96-97)

Since that special issue, scale has been an almost constant presence in the pages of *Political Geography*. Some eighteen papers have considered scale as their theoretical focus. Clearly, scale has been accepted as a central and contested idea in both the journal and the discipline. In 1998 scale was a major concern of Cox's contribution and a series of commentaries (Cox 1998a, 1998b; Jones 1998; Judd 1998, MP Smith 1998). In 1999, a paper by Morrill raised considerable comment concerning the role of jurisdictional issues in mediating conflicts across scales (Morrill 1999a, 1999b; Swanstrom 1999; Martin 1999; Fanstein 1999). In 2000, Taylor's paper on 'world cities and territorial states' in conditions of globalization raised important issues of the role of nation states and trade blocs as a "nexus of power which straddles geographical scales" (Taylor 2000a: 28; see also Vasanyi 2000; Shapiro 2000; Douglass 2000; Taylor 2000b).

Cox (1998a) pointed out that scale is a central concept in political discourse. In seeking to clarify the 'spaces of engagement' that constitute local politics, he also sought to unsettle previously dominant concepts of scale (also 1993, 1997, 1998b, Cox & Mair 1989, 1991). His paper argued that there is a scale division of politics in which it is relationships between scales rather than just jumping between them that offers a new view of local politics. Commentary on Cox's paper highlighted the importance of context in dealing with ideas of scale. K Jones (1998) considered the way that jumping scales really involves a politics of representation, with local groups "actively reshaping the discourses within which their struggles are constituted (and) discursively re-present(ing) their political struggles across scales" (1998: 26). She also notes the epistemological concerns about scale categories, and the way that certain concepts of scale render some questions simply un-askable. Judd (1998) responds by reminding us that the power relations that are constructed by the state's construction of scales in material forms through jurisdictional, administrative and regulatory structures, restricts the flexibility of resistance considerably more than Cox allows. MP Smith (1998) takes Cox to task for being too vague in terms such as "more global". He criticizes Cox for relegating the 'global' to a conflated presence with "scales like the regional and the national" (1998: 35). He draws on his own work on cross-border, transnational migrant identities (eg MP Smith 1994) to remind us that it is the social construction of networks, identities and relationships that constitute the scaled spaces of engagement that Cox highlights.

In the same journal, Morrill considered how different jurisdictional scales are harnessed by powerful vested interests to their own purposes. In particular, Morrill was concerned to address the question of "whether there is an optimum or appropriate level of decision-making or balance of power across geographical scales" (1999a: 1). Using a case study of decision-making about future uses of the Hanford nuclear reservation site in Washington state, Morrill argues that in the USA higher levels of government are increasingly harnessed (usually by capital) to preempt local decision-making and impose "metropolitan values and preferences" (1999a: 2). He points out that federal regulation of the nuclear industry circumscribes local autonomy at Hanford from the start, but that planning processes generally favouring metropolitan priorities over rural concerns reinforces this. Swanstrom (1999) contradicts Morrill's conclusion by suggesting that the absence of local planning and land use regulation from central authorities characterizes the decision-making process in the USA, and suggests that Morrill's policy suggestions to support local autonomy are flawed. Martin (1999) unpacks the assumed congruence of local interest groups and local government, advocating a view of cross-scale relationships that is based on a more careful consideration of multiple interests and social identities at each scale implicated in a decision-making chain. Fanstein (1999) suggests that Morrill has misread some aspects of the Hanford case as demonstrating the power of higher levels of government, because the outcomes at Hanford represent a reduction of federal

control of the site. Perhaps the most interesting issue emerging from the discussion of Morrill's paper is the assertion that one scale (the local) does or does not warrant privileging as more politically or environmentally 'correct' (Morrill 1999b: 48).

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## Ideas into practice: empirical studies of scale

This debate about the practical implications of theoretical work is perhaps one of the most important issues of debate in the recent scale literature. Even before there is consensus on the 'what' of geographical scale, there is plenty of heated discussion of the 'so what' questions. Many commentators have struggled with the apparent paradox of scale that it matters, but is almost meaningless as a stand-alone concept: it only matters in context as a co-constituent of complex and dynamic geographical totalities. This paradox leads us back to the issue of 'social construction', and a number of studies that seek to clarify the ways in which scale jumping strategies allow us to better conceptualize the construction of scale. Drawing on N Smith's work on the social production of scales, Swyngedouw argues that "theoretical and political priority ... never resides in a particular geographical scale, but rather in the process through which particular scales become (re)constituted" (1997a: 169). Unlike Smith, however, Swyngedouw incorporates Massey's innovative ideas of the "geometry of power" (eg 1993a, see also 1992, 1993b, 1994, 1995) and takes seriously the considerable tension between the economic, political and cultural domains in relation to the social construction of scale (see also Swyngedouw 1992, 1997b). His awkward neologism 'glocalization', the simultaneous and contested shift up-scale towards the global and downscale to the local as a response to changing economic, political and cultural pressures is one of many he coins to meet the needs of a new scale vocabulary. Swyngedouw's great contribution has been his insistence that the nature of scale politics is to be found not in a theoretical discourse, but in the real-world practices of social conflict and struggle. Although he maintains an unexplained commitment to nesting of scales<sup>[2]</sup>, Swyngedouw's efforts to provide a new vocabulary of scale has been extremely helpful.

In moving from the abstract discourses of a 'theory of scale', there have been many efforts to clarify the sort of impacts scale has in practice. Adams' investigation of the way telecommunications create new linkages across space (1996) emphasized the importance of networks of relations rather than areally-bounded and hierarchically nested places as a constituent of scales. He considers the scale at which protest, resistance, autonomy and consent might be constructed. He considers the networks and flows of information, recognition and support constructed through telecommunications technology in Tiananmen Square in 1989, in the popular movement for democracy in the Philippines in the mid-1980s, and the US civil rights movement in the mid-1950s. Each of these examples demonstrates the ways in which scaled and territorially-bounded jurisdictions are unable to contain or control protest movements' abilities to jump between scales. The paradoxical and simultaneous harnessing-of and harnessing-by mass media constructs new audiences for (and supporters of or participants in) protest. There is no nested hierarchical vision of scale relations in Adams' account. Kelly also rejects the idea of hierarchy in his investigation of the place-based politics of a power station in Manila, Philippines to advocate the case for a view of scales as constructed rather than absolute categories (1997) His paper offered the sort of detailed reading of the "translation of the globalization discourse into development policies" (1997: 151) needed to get beyond a rhetorical consideration of scale in the emergent discourse of globalization. Leitner adopts a "constructionist perspective" on scale, understood as a "nested hierarchy of political spaces" (1997 125) to consider the institutional context of migration in Europe. Herod and Agnew have also provided widely cited empirical studies. Herod's work on the scale politics of labor restructuring in the United States (eg 1991, 1997a, 1997b) and Agnew's work on post-1992 political restructuring in Italy (eg 1997) have both cast considerable light on the processes referred to as 'social construction'. Herod considers the way in which

organized labor's approach to contract bargaining in the eastern USA in the 1970s constructed new geographical scales. In the first instance, inter-union rivalry and technological change in the late-1950s produced a national scale bargaining strategy which pushed the International Longshoreman's Association's focus upscale from regional agreements to a master national agreement. By the mid-1980s, employer reorganization and changes in working conditions around the USA produced a scale politics, in which the use of non-union labor in southern ports undermined the power of the master contract to meet the needs of many of its intended beneficiaries. Herod's analysis provides a powerful demonstration of how it is particular relationships, developed in specific institutional, technological, political and economic contexts that constitute the scales which themselves become institutionalized as self-evident and embedded in real world economic geographies. Rather than organized labor, Agnew focuses on political parties and how they are implicated in "writing the scripts of geographical scale" (1997: 101), focuses on the role of political parties in linking individuals to collective action by articulating goals around which people can be mobilized. The institutional organization of electoral processes link parties, policies and populations to particular places in particular ways, and bring them together in organized political relationships. Their mediation and utilization of the politics of difference, identity and territoriality contribute to the constitution of the state whether this is in terms of local, regional, national or supra-state governance. The collapse of old-style parties and the emergence of new style parties in 1994 defined new scale relationships even if they fitted within the old spatial boundaries of the nation.

Although less cited that work from North America and Europe, Fagan (eg 1995, 1997, Sadler and Fagan 2000), Howitt (eg 1993a, 1998a), McGuirk (1997) and others have forged an Australian perspective on scale issues which advocates a radically relational approach. Howitt's (1993a) critique of the dominant thinking about scale suggested that the idea of scale as a set of nested hierarchies was totally inadequate for understanding scale politics, and that the widespread conflation of scaled ideas had produced conceptual confusion in many presentations. He advocated an empirically grounded dialectical approach to investigation of scale issues. Fagan (1995) offered a powerful critique of the difficulty geographers were having in handling the idea of globalization and its implications for action, resistance and responses at other scales and geographers' analysis of and contributions to them. He pointed out that the very processes that were being rhetorically constructed as fundamental to an irresistible globalization "can be constructed as *local*" (1995: 7 his emphasis). His careful examination of 'the region as political discourse' provided a scaled analysis of political economic changes in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region that considered the nature of power relations within and across scales as critical to political process and real-world geographies. Howitt et al (1996) argued that indigenous and other resistance to the New World Order advocated by the USA in the Gulf War was in large part a the contestation of resources, identity and territory and was producing new geopolitical relationships across scales. Such shifts in scale produces new analytical interest in scales, places and relationships that were previously of only marginal interest to political geography (Goldfrank 1993, Routledge 1996). McGuirk (1997) was also concerned to move beyond rhetorical discussion and applied a relational view of scale to her careful analysis of urban planning issues in the western suburbs of Adelaide. Contra the widely advocated view that globalization was driving development processes on the ground and subordinating local relationships, McGuirk's paper demonstrates just how wrong it is "to regard localities and regions as being at the mercy of external uncontrollable and mythologised global forces, because they are themselves a formative part of global processes" (1997: 493). Fagan (1997) reflected on the way in which the local-global debate in academic circles was paralleled in political circles. His examination of restructuring the Australian food processing industry returned to his theme of the need to integrate global and local analyses in a non-deterministic and politically-informed way.

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## Social construction the consensus view of scale

## Domestic scale and social constructionism

A recent review by Marston focused on the issue of social construction. She argues, correctly, that much of the recent literature reinforces the separation of the economic domain, and specifically a productionist view of the economic, from wider issues of social reproduction and consumption. Indeed, despite the so-called 'cultural turn' in geography, attention to cultural (and cross-cultural) issues in the discussion of scale, remains limited. In advocating a view of scale as having (at least) three dimensions size, level and relation Howitt (1998a) re-emphasized the importance of social relationships in space as fundamental in constructing geographical scales. Following Howitt, and Swyngedouw (1997), Marston (2000) offers an expanded concept of scale that encompasses the domains of reproduction and consumption as well as production, as a synthesis of the recent debates.<sup>[3]</sup> Her presentation of gender dynamics points out that changes in women's roles in social reproduction and consumption in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries in the USA not only created new spaces new domestic spaces, new retailing spaces, new social spaces but also new scales by organizing social relationships in new ways. Marston convincingly explores the ways that the dynamics of these social processes and networks are embedded in the changing relationships between public and private domains, between retailing, production, media, politics and the institutions of governance. She suggests that we can see these processes producing new scales such as 'home' and 'neighborhood' in ways that echo loudly not just in the political geographies of the USA in the early-20<sup>th</sup> Century, but throughout the contemporary world.

## Social constructionism and the scales of justice

Since the Marxist and behaviourist challenges in the 1970s to positivist efforts to constitute geography as a spatial science, social justice as been a key concern of politically engaged geographers (Swyngedouw 2000). The traditional image of 'blind justice' finding solutions to conflict without fear or favour using mechanical scales offers a fortuitous starting point for our discussion of geographical scale. The image of scale as a relatively straightforward mechanism that juxtaposes, compares or relates phenomena in space and time is consistent with the image of geographical scale as a set of distinct platforms upon which geopolitics (and other social phenomena) are performed. Building on this image, it has been easy to privilege one scale or another as the preeminent platform for political action. International relations, for example, posits the nation state and its interaction with other nation states as preeminent, as did conventional geopolitics. World systems theory posits the global sphere as the most significant scale Taylor 1988, 1993, 2000). Locality studies have privileged the local as the scale at which meaning or lived-experience is constructed. The paradoxical positions taken on local, national and global scales was a starting point for much of the critical discourse on scale referred to above.

In contradiction of the neat schemas of scale as a nested hierarchy, neither geopolitics nor social justice is not reducible to a single dimension in space, in time, or in cultural relations. Peoples' struggles for justice, their efforts to construct new geographies of justice, are always multifaceted. They always reflect (at least) economic, cultural and environmental politics. In her seminal paper on social justice, Fraser (1995, also 1997) used a bi-polar tension between the old-style socialist (economic) politics of distribution and the new post-socialist (cultural) politics of identity to make the point that a new, 'post-socialist' dynamic had to be addressed in the social justice movement. In proposing a contradiction between the strategies of redistribution and recognition, Fraser's analytical framework lost sight of geography, territory and scale as key constituents of political relationships in the real world. Like the 'level playing field' of the free market imaginary, Fraser's placeless analytical framework has powerful pedagogic and rhetorical value, but it misses the point that concrete social relationships are always placed and scaled. Critical geopolitics has sought to meet the challenge of dealing simultaneously with issues of justice, equity and sustainability at multiple scales.

No simple schema that privileges a singular scale as the essential scale at which justice can

be achieved is reasonable. And no schema that excludes the scale politics of place, territory and power, will adequately address the nature of geopolitics or the struggle for social and environmental justice. Again, these concerns return us to the issue of the social construction of scale. Harvey tackles this issue, and follows N Smith in conceptualizing social processes operating in a way that produces “a nested hierarchy of scales (from global to local) leaving us always with the political-ecological question of how to ‘arbitrate and translate between them’” (1996 203-4, quoting N Smith 1992: 72). Harvey usefully goes on to discuss the ways in which social conceptions of space and time are constructed in social processes and simultaneously become objectified as pervasive “facts of nature” (1996: 211) that regulate social practices. Yet neither Smith nor Harvey are clear as to why the social construction of scale produces a nested hierarchy of scales. Howitt (1993a) argued against the notion of both nesting and hierarchy as adequate metaphors for geographical scale, suggesting that it was in cross-scale linkages, awkward juxtapositions and jumps, and non-hierarchical dialectics that the nature and significance of scale is to be found. Swyngedouw (1997) follows a similar approach, but retains a notion of ‘nesting’ while rejecting some aspects of ‘hierarchy’.

### **Reconsidering social construction indigenous and environmental issues**

So, what are the mechanisms of social construction of scale? Using struggles for social and environmental justice, let us take a step deeper into this issue. Cox (1998a) suggests that it is not the social construction of scale that matters, but the social construction of the politics of scale. Using a focus on the institutions of local governance, Cox identifies a “scale division of politics” (1998a: 1). He advocates a shift away from an “areal concept of scale” (1998: 19) to a view of scale as the spatial form of social networks. Marston’s weaving of social reproduction and consumption into her ideas about the construction of scale, alongside issues of economic and political processes, accusing those who have focused on the political and economic dimensions of scale of telling “only part of a much more complex story” (2000: 233). She emphasizes also the way in which the social construction of this less-than-local scale in turn influenced the practices of social reproduction and consumption in ways that were quite profound, and which “reached out beyond the home to the city, the country and the globe” (2000: 238).

Silvern takes another United States example the efforts by Wisconsin Ojibwe to utilize treaty rights to influence natural resource conflicts to consider how the scale at which sovereignty is constituted reflects an ongoing struggle “over the control of territory and the political construction of geographical scale” (1999: 664). In Silvern’s study, as in Marston’s, scale is simultaneously constructing and reflecting the spatial form of social relations. In Marston’s study it is gender politics that takes priority in understanding the construction of the domestic scale in emergent US capitalism, while in Silvern’s study it is the ethno-politics of conquest and dispossession that underscores the creation of Federal and state sovereignties in US legal proceedings, while denying the legitimacy of tribal sovereignty. Despite the long standing doctrine of a tribal sovereignty, constrained by European legal principles of ‘discovery’, derived from the decisions of US Chief Justice Marshall in the 1820s and 1830s (see eg Canby 1988), Silvern reports the state of Wisconsin sought to restrict the exercise of tribal rights to co-manage natural resources by severely circumscribing the geography of Ojibwe treaty rights. Like Marshall’s court 150 years earlier, the state’s courts found that it was non-tribal principles that defined their jurisdiction and the scope of their capacity to recognize a sovereign entity constructed external to that jurisdiction. Despite some success in securing co-management standing through the courts, the Ojibwe were unable to establish what Silvern refers to as “scale equivalency to the state when it came to management of ... resources” (1999: 661). Notzke (1995), from a Canadian perspective, similarly sees questions of co-management rights, as representing a challenge to jurisdictional and constitutional sovereignty. McHugh (1996) suggests that indigenous peoples’ efforts to establish recognition of tribal sovereignty in New Zealand, Canada and Australia has established significant constraints on the institution of the Crown in those jurisdictions. Following Silvern’s reasoning, this affects the ability of state, provincial and national governments in those countries to construct hierarchical scale systems

that exclude or deny the existence of 'tribal' as a geographical scale. It is colonial (and post-colonial) states that have assembled instruments of power and institutions of state administration into nested, hierarchical geographical scales that "facilitate the power of the dominant society to control, exclude and marginalize native populations" (Silvern 1999: 665).

Jhappan (1992) offers another example, this time at the level of international relations, of the ways in which the indigenous peoples movement has succeeded in upsetting such taken-for-granted nested hierarchies of control, exclusion and marginalization, and in the process, have challenged the dominant view of scale as an areal concept (scale as size) or a hierarchical concept (scale as level). Drawing on alliances with organized labour, international organizations within the United Nations and European Community, environmental organizations and consumer groups in other jurisdictions, and diverse political alliances within Québec, Canada and the international indigenous peoples movement, the James Bay Cree lobbied to stop the massive Great Whale River hydro-electric project. Weaving together a potent combination of local tribal governance and political action, jurisdictional standing as regulators based on modern treaty rights, and effective provincial, national and international campaigning, Jhappan sees the Cree as modifying Québec and Canadian government policy options, and, in the process, challenging the "nation state's uncontested sovereignty over domestic policy" (1992: 61). Cohen (1994) offers an account of the cross-border alliances between the Cree and environmental and energy consumer groups in the northeast United States and the ways in which institutions developed as part of the 1975 treaty settlement provided the vehicle for a new tribal scale to influence the fate of the Great Whale project twenty years later, while Puddicombe (1991) suggests that Inuit institutions developed in the same way adopted a very different scale politics in response to the Great Whale project.

Williams (1999) uses scale as a tool to explore the politics of environmental racism in the USA, and suggests that scale is not only socially produced, but also produces social outcomes (socially generative). He identifies a scale politics that "centers on an antagonistic relationship between a societal problem and its political resolution" (1999: 56). The acceptance of common ground between environmental justice advocates and the objects of their criticism often focuses on ideological notions of procedural fairness and equitable distribution of costs and benefits. Williams notes, in relation to distributional issues affecting environmental risk, that the ability of powerful institutions to convince regulators and a wider public that they have followed fair procedures allows an impersonal (and highly-valued) 'market' to justify distributional outcomes reducing critics to rather self-interested and locally myopic players. In the process, Williams suggests, industry 'wins' the scale politics of environmental justice (1999: 66). It is worth observing that powerful institutions (governments, corporations, even some social justice groups) are also able to re-write the local scale politics as constituted by much wider scale forces recall, for example, Fagan's suggestion (1997) of the way that manipulation of brands by global food producing companies reconstitutes a powerful global corporation as a local heritage value. [\[4\]](#)

Silvern (1999) also opens a window on an environmental politics of scale in his consideration of tribal efforts to argue that they have regulatory standing in state decision-making about mining and other environmentally degrading activities. This parallels Morrill's concern (1999a) with the issue of jurisdictional scale in planning and land use decisions. M Jones (1998) takes up similar issues in relation to the changing nature of local governance in the United Kingdom, calling for 'relational theory of the state to adequately address the shift from local government to local governance. MacLeod and Goodwin suggest that many of the institutional responses to globalization, regional restructuring and localism in Europe, have failed to problematize scale and consequently "appear to treat as ontologically 'pre-given' the scalar context" of their work (1999: 711). [\[5\]](#)

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## Social construction as social action: lessons about scale from the indigenous rights movement

The need for a scaled analysis in critical geopolitics is particularly obvious in the case of indigenous rights, where the construction of postcolonial nation states was predicated on the dispossession and marginalization of indigenous peoples. The construction of territorial authority over indigenous domains has involved the construction of specific scales of social control (the mission, the community, the reservation), political representation and participation (the 'tribe' defined by government), service delivery, governance and recognition (the department, the Bureau, the Commission). At national and sub-national levels, governments established legislation and systems of social control that sought to define indigenous peoples as people without geography (Howitt 1993c; Dodson 1994). At the scale of the body, indigenous people were disciplined to conform or be punished. Disciplined through banishment or integration, indigenous identities were subject to the most invasive levels of control removals of children from families, outlawing of languages and cultural practices, replacement of names, imposition of mission- or government-arranged marriages, special controls on wages, movement and activities. At the scale of family and clan, indigenous peoples were disciplined by processes of territorial domination, displacement and relocations, threats and exercise of force and the spatial discipline of new settlements and 'communities'. At the scale of the nation, indigenous societies were disciplined by dishonoured treaties<sup>[6]</sup>, legal frameworks which took their ancestral domains from them, political systems which simply excluded them from democratic process, and economic practices that ignored or by-passed their property rights, skills and aspirations. At the scale of the international system, the club of nation states that had dispossessed them established new institutions that restricted their access to international arenas for legal and political redress.

Despite this, indigenous politics provides many examples of the harnessing of scale analysis to the purposes of social transformation to simultaneously pursue the economic politics of redistribution, the cultural politics of recognition and the environmental politics of sustainability. In my own experience, the issue of just what scale is has been greatly clarified in my work alongside indigenous colleagues in actually re-building the scales of family, clan, language group, tribe and peoples in the wake of Australia's unacknowledged genocide (Tatz 1999, also Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). In Australia, Aboriginal groups have long struggled to overcome the legacies of the colonial and post-colonial fragmentation of their traditional domains. This has never been just a matter of jurisdictional recognition of property rights. Official indifference to more radical aspects of a reconciliation agenda including a naïve and self-interested assertion that negotiating treaties in Australia would divide national sovereignty<sup>[7]</sup> have left little room for political maneuver. Yet it is in the scale politics of identity, difference, territory and governance that opportunities can be found.

In re-building indigenous governance, the process of social construction of geographical scales is laid bare. To construct the means of new forms of social, economic or political participation, the networks and relationships that bring people together must undergo transformation through their confrontation with, marginalization from and interpenetration by the institutions, relations and processes of existing complexes of territory-governance-identity. In Québec, for example, the 1975 negotiation of the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement provided for new institutional arrangements for local governance and participation among the Cree and Inuit peoples. In 1971 these communities were brought together for the first time as a people in response to Hydro-Québec's proposal to regulate every single river in the north:

*For the first time in history, the Cree sat down together to discuss their common problem - the James Bay Hydroelectric Project. But we found out much more than that we found out that we all survive on the land and we all have respect for the land. Our Cree Chiefs also found out that our rights to land, our rights to hunt, fish and trap and our right to remain Cree were considered as privileges [not rights] by the governments of Canada and Québec*

*(Billy Diamond, then Cree Chief at Rupert House and later lead negotiator in the James Bay and Northern Québec negotiations, quoted in Feit 1985: 40).*

Twenty-four years later, the Cree institutions established through negotiation of Canada's first modern treaty were advocating secession from Québec if Québec seceded from Canada (Grand Council of the Crees 1995). By bringing together cultural, territorial, environmental, economic and jurisdictional concerns and by doing this in the context of on-going transformational relations with provincial, federal and international authorities (see eg Cohen 1994; Jhappan 1992; also Howitt forthcoming) the Cree succeeded in constructing a new scale.

This scale of tribal governance is clearly not an ontological given. It never appears in the standard scale lists of 'local', 'national', 'global'.<sup>[8]</sup> It does not even appear in those extended lists that include the scale of 'the body', 'home' and 'infinity' (see Howitt 2000). In recent work in South Australia, the reality of constructing such a new scale has been driven home to me yet again. In preparing for negotiations with the state government of South Australia, native title claimants<sup>[9]</sup> have been brought together as a congress to discuss how they might construct a way of negotiating with a united voice that did not subsume their local autonomy as distinct groups, with distinct traditions, values, histories and experiences. As I have noted elsewhere (Howitt 1997), in pursuing 'regional agreements' to recognize native title, the 'region' cannot be assumed. The spatial, social and political scale (which best see as co-constituents of 'geographical scale', perhaps along with ecological, economic and other dimensions of scale) must be negotiated as concrete relationships of mutual recognition, accountability and acceptance in order for them to become a meaningful vehicle for engaging with the transformational politics of negotiation with state, corporate or other interests about native title, reconciliation or sovereignty. Current discussion of a single national treaty in Australia is doomed to fail until there is some success in realizing the national scale as a meaningful scale of indigenous identity. In South Australia, the nascent state 'Congress' will rely upon a dialectical engagement with its own Aboriginal constituents, and its state and industry negotiation partners. A group that claims representativeness without the concrete network of relationships that constitute a geographical scale of 'statewide indigenous congress' will soon find itself criticized as discredited in the communities. Similarly, a well-developed statewide network that is not recognized by the state and other powerful groups, will soon fall prey to fragmentation and division.

In other words, the social and political construction of scale is precisely social action the concrete processes of organizing a political response, a vehicle for participation, recognition and change. This is always, as so much of the work cited above demonstrates, a matter of links within and across scales to provide opportunities for transformation of existing power relations. What is crystal clear in indigenous politics is the need to link social, cultural, territorial and institutional relations in constructing geographical scales at which social action may occur. For other groups, access to existing institutions has perhaps masked some aspects of the political construction of scale. Or, as Marston (2000) points out in relation to women's actions in the construction of new geographical scales, the blindness of the dominant productionist paradigm has rendered their action virtually invisible. But of course, Herod's trade unions, Agnew's political parties, Fagan's food corporations, McQuirk's urban planners, Kelly's Philippine activists, and the other scale-builders whose actions are to be glimpsed through the literature trying to make more sense of their activity, are all engaged in the same sorts of processes. They seek to mobilize social networks, political institutions, economic resources and territorial rights to the task of creating new geographies new landscapes of power and recognition and opportunity.

[Intro](#); [The Idea of Scale](#); [Ideas into Practice](#); [Social Construction the consensus view](#); [Social Construction as Social Action](#); [Conclusion](#); [References](#)

## Conclusion: scale and critical geopolitics

If critical geopolitics is about some form of 'critical engagement' (Routledge 1996) or 'situated

engagement' (Suchet 1999) and supporting dissent understanding it, fomenting it, participating it, responding to it it is apparent that scale is an important issue because both analysis and dissent are necessarily engaged in addressing and crossing scales. Whether it is a question of organized labor seeking an appropriate forum to contest employers' privileges in setting wages, working conditions or other issues; or marginalized indigenous peoples seeking to rewrite the rules of engagement with post-colonial societies and states; or environmentalists seeking to curtail the impacts of globalization on ecological sustainability, relationships and issues at one scale are actually reconstituted and need new tools of engagement, analysis and response.

The challenge of scale in contemporary political geography is that it presents a paradox. On the one hand it seems self evident. Scale is a term that easily slips into our discussion because the scaled processes of 'globalization', 'national sovereignty' and 'local action' that are the taken-for-granted focus of so much political geography are so obvious. Similarly, it is equally obvious that scales are socially and politically constructed. Yet, when one tries to offer a definition of just what is being constructed, most attempts are unsatisfactory. In the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, N Smith (2000: 727) takes 2½ pages to arrive at the statement that the "question of scale will become one of mounting theoretical and practical relevance", but does not provide a definition. The nature of scale, then, is paradoxical. But the recent literature on scale has rendered the reason for this much clearer. For a long time, it was assumed that scale was a question of either size or level (eg of complexity). What emerges from the recent literature is that scale is preeminently a matter of relation, and that approaches which seek to summarize this dimension with the gloss of labels such as 'global' or 'local' without engaging with what is actually encompassed in context by the term, will actually miss the substance of the term and the phenomenon it represents. Like the other quintessentially geographical term 'place', 'scale' is rendered most meaningful in its development as an empirical generalization a concept made real by building up an understanding of complex and dynamic relationships and processes in context. As an theoretical abstraction the risk is that 'scale' is reduced to a set of meaningless labels that say something about size and complexity, but which hide precisely the terrain with which critical geopolitics is most interested the terrain of real landscapes in which spaces of engagement offer a myriad of transformational opportunities at a myriad of scales.

What is paradoxical, perhaps, is not the nature of scale, but geographers' efforts to theorize scale in some way that divorces it from its geographical context. If the role of our theory is to better equip us for our situated engagement in struggles for justice, sustainability and transformation, theory divorced from the scaled landscapes of change are probably of limited value.

[Intro](#); [The Idea of Scale](#); [Ideas into Practice](#); [Social Construction the consensus view](#); [Social Construction as Social Action](#); [Conclusion](#); [References](#)

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[1] Despite the broad literature drawn upon in geographers' discussions of scale, it remains a poorly understood concept within the discipline, and virtually unacknowledged beyond it. For example, a recent literature in *Ecological Economics* (Clark et al 2000) limits its consideration to quantitative concerns, citing only

the rather naïve Meyer et al (1992), Harvey (1969), Jammer (1954) and Forer (1974) to represent discussion of scale issues in geography!

[2] For example, in the conclusion to his 1997 paper in Cox's collection (1997), Swyngedouw refers to "a nested set of related and interpenetrating spatial scales that define the arena of struggle, where conflict is mediated and regulated and compromises settled" (1997: 160). The inclusion of the term "nested" in this passage is not supported by much of his previous discussion and seems more a legacy of earlier assumptions than a product of the reflection presented in the paper.

[3] It is not only in ecological economics that much of the literature Marston reviews is missed. In their 1999 discussion of geopolitics, identity and scale, Herb (1999) and Kaplan (1999) refer to none of this conceptual debate, other than Taylor's work. Their interesting discussion of the interdependence of territoriality, identity and geopolitics, and their reliance on the idea of scale, ultimately reproduces a complex nesting metaphor, in contrast to the relational notions of contested sovereignties discussed below.

[4] I have made a parallel point in discussion of the scale politics of social and environmental impact assessment, where benefits of a proposed development are aggregated to present persuasive 'state' or 'national' benefits, while social and environmental costs are often represented as 'merely local' and parochial (1993b). See also a similar point about the political tension between 'vested' and 'representative' interests in the Australian mining industry (Howitt 1991).

[5] A related question is raised by Wilson et al (1999) in their consideration of "scale misperceptions" in the management of social-ecological systems. The imposition of conservation area and other jurisdictional boundaries on the development of ecological relations such as non-human populations, clearly affects management options. This common mismatch has increased the pressure for bioregional planning as a way of matching ecological and administrative boundaries (see eg Brunckhorst 2000).

[6] The irony, of course, is that the revolutionary pariah state of another century was the USA, whose existence was first acknowledged in international law by treaties with First Nations that were later to be subsumed as 'domestic dependent nations' (see eg Williams 1990)

[7] Australia is a federal state, with national sovereignty already divided between six colonial states, each of which retains a direct link to the Queen of the Australian Commonwealth, who is, of course, also the Head of State of the United Kingdom. This division of sovereignty never troubles conservative and racist criticism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander efforts to reassert their own sovereignty. Indeed, a recent referendum on a shift from monarchy to republic status for the Commonwealth was rejected. These issues are taken up in more detail in Howitt 1998b).

[8] Indeed, in one of the key early texts that raises issues of scale, N Smith renders First Nations completely invisible in his rendering of the American landscape as "poetic nature" (1984: 7). In a later paper Smith reinforces his marginalization of First Nations in a throw away reference where he suggests that "the whole Lower East Side, not just the park, had become 'Indian Country'" (1993: 93). This did not mean that there had been a recognition of tribal ownership of the neighborhood. Indeed, Smith's reference is a careless reinforcement of indigenous invisibility (1989). It parallels Soja's cacophonous blindness to the First Nations of California in his influential account of the history of Los Angeles which, like so much ostensibly 'radical' geography, placed indigenous peoples quite literally outside geography! (see also Howitt 1993c).

[9] Native title rights were formally recognized in Australia by a High Court decision in 1992. Indigenous claimants must lodge native title claims for adjudication under new legislation, enacted in 1993 and amended in ways that many, including the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (W Jonas 2000: ch 2), found racially discriminating.