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Neil Smith's Scale

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Abstract: In this essay, part of a special issue acknowledging the scholarship of Neil Smith, we trace his contributions to conceptualizing scale. From his important foundational text, *Uneven Development*, to his later works that fashioned a more malleable, constructivist, and socio-cultural approach, Neil Smith made lifelong contributions to our understanding of the processes of scale production—contributions that have forever altered how we understand the relationships among space, capitalism, and politics.

Keywords: Neil Smith, scale, social theory

Introduction

Q1

Neil Smith possessed a brilliant analytic mind along with a commitment to theory, writing, and teaching in support of social transformation. Part academic activist, he was known for the encouragement and support he provided to the critical scholars and activists he encountered on his travels. Neil—as we will refer to him here in recognition of his refusal of hierarchical nominations—loved Geography and deeply believed that space was central to revolution. His personality was large: to be with him was to experience the pull of his social gravity. Invariably he was at the center of the conversation, and yet his intellectual generosity prohibited all but perhaps a few the sin of envy. Yes, he transgressed and frustrated, and possessed contradictions and weaknesses, but through his unique combination of intellect, creativity, and enthusiasm, a generation of geographers knew no equal.

These talents—partly given, and partly shaped through life experience, the talents of his mentors, and his hard labor—enabled him to make major contributions to the discipline. He will have lasting influence over studies of uneven development, gentrification, the production of nature, the history of geographic thought, war and empire, and globalization. He also has profoundly revolutionized and shaped scholarly understandings of space through his conceptualization of scale, a theoretical

1 and political project that spanned two decades and that in no small way led to
2 Geography's popularity among theorists throughout the critical social sciences
3 and humanities.

4 We also have engaged with scale theory, albeit in ways that variously align and
5 deviate from his—and one another's—writings. For each of us, however, Neil's
6 own path through scale, itself a history of the concept's evolution in Geography,
7 has been foundational. That history can be briefly summarized. Like several other
8 concepts of space, scale was long entangled in Euclidean geographies. It assumed
9 a natural character through its utility as a conventional cartographic metric. But in
10 the late 1970s, space, place, and, shortly thereafter, scale, became caught up in
11 the force fields of relationality, dialectics, and constructivism. Geography has not
12 been the same since.

13 **Scale as Uneven Development**

14 Neil substantively engaged with the question of geographical scale in his 1983
15 doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins University, supervised by David Harvey and
16 subsequently published as *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production*
17 *of Space* (Smith 2008).¹ Yet his first published discussion of scale can be found in his
18 1982 paper on gentrification and uneven development (Smith 1982), presumably
19 written alongside his dissertation.² He introduces three scales at which uneven geo-
20 graphical development can be observed: the urban, the regional, and the national.³
21 At each scale, he argues, specifically capitalist relations connect developed and un-
22 derdeveloped areas via the spatial movements of capital. These movements have
23 different velocities and concentrations as capital responds to and produces its con-
24 tradictory landscape of equalization and differentiation (1982:142). Scalar produc-
25 tion is one outcome of these processes. Neil takes scales to be largely self-evident in
26 this early piece, although there is a hint, in his discussion of the urban scale (his pri-
27 mary focus herein being gentrification), that scales are produced rather than given:
28 “The urban scale as a distinct spatial scale is defined in practice in terms of the
29 reproduction of labor power and the journey to work” (1982:146).

30 *Uneven Development* takes these arguments several steps further, presenting the
31 production of scale as Neil's distinctive contribution to theorizing uneven
32 geographical development. The leitmotif of the book, of course, is how both space
33 and nature are produced rather than given—produced distinctively in capitalism by
34 comparison to other social formations. His discussion of “the production of space”
35 draws on Lefebvre, whose book of that title had yet to be translated into English.
36 The production of nature he sees as an extension, to which “Lefebvre may well
37 not have objected” (2008:250).

38 The culminating chapter of *Uneven Development* is devoted to scale and its
39 production, understanding the origins of which, Neil argues, is necessary to under-
40 stand the uneven development of capitalism. He chides his mentor for having
41 neglected scale in *Limits to Capital* (Harvey 1982), “resulting in the misleading im-
42 pression that while a systematic if inherently contradictory logic guides the capital-
43 ist production of space, the product does not reflect the organization of the
44 process” (2008:180). Harvey's oversight, Neil argues, results in a treatment of
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1 space as a mosaic of exchange spaces; under capitalism, however, those spaces are
2 organized by processes of abstraction and the development of a world market into
3 a multi-scalar system: “We tend to take for granted the division of the world into
4 some combination of urban, regional, national and international scales, but rarely
5 if ever explain how they came about” (2008:180). Neil’s explanation directly links
6 the production of scale to the unevenness of capitalist development:

7 I think it is possible to use the dialectic of differentiation and equalization to derive the
8 actual spatial scales produced by capital, and to show that the result of uneven develop-
9 ment is simultaneously more complex and [simpler] than a mosaic. There is little doubt
10 about the impossibility of a spatial fix for the internal contradictions of capital, but in the
11 doomed attempt to realize this spatial fix, capital achieves a degree of spatial fixity orga-
12 nized into identifiably separate scales of social activity (2008:180).

13 Neil places three of these scales at the center of his analysis of capitalist uneven de-
14 velopment. The urban scale is one of spatial differentiation, between spaces of pro-
15 duction and of reproduction, a conceptualization that he uses to critique Castells
16 (1977) for his neglect of cities as spaces of production. The urban scale is thus si-
17 multaneously a labor market and a commuting shed; it is “the daily geographical
18 sphere of abstract labor” (a somewhat contradictory formulation), whose size is
19 an emergent feature of the trade-off between a labor force that is “comparatively
20 limited” (2008:183) and an overextended labor market threatening “fragmentation
21 and disequilibrium in the universalization of abstract labor” (2008:183).

22 By contrast, the global scale, which is produced through capitalism’s permanent
23 search for new markets but constrained by the “geographical limits of global
24 space” (2008:185), is “purely the product of the tendency toward equalization ...
25 universalizing the law of value” (2008:186). Neil argues that capital, faced with
26 contradictory needs to limit wages and promote consumption:

27 appears to have emphasized the possibilities for accumulation rather than consumption
28 ... As a result, the geographical differentiation of the globe according to the value of
29 labor power ... is replicated ... in a pronounced international division of labor and
30 systematic differentiation between ... developed and underdeveloped areas (2008:188).

31 The third scale, the nation-state, is political rather than economic—produced less
32 through capitalism than through its already-existing national political organization
33 and international competition “between different capitals on the world market ...
34 This [competition] leads to a hierarchy of nationally based laws of value more or less
35 integrated within a larger international law of value” (2008:189). At the same time,
36 Neil argues that capitalism has the capacity to produce nation-states where they do
37 not yet exist: “With the increased scale of the productive forces and the internation-
38 alization of capital, the capitalist state generally combines a number of these
39 smaller states into a nation-state” (2008:190). The limits to this scale are not set
40 by differentiation and equalization, but “by a series of historical deals,
41 compromises, and wars” (2008:190). Clearly, Neil is struggling here to absorb
42 inter-national territorial politics into a narrative of globalizing capital (Marxist theo-
43 ries of the state at this point still being plagued by the national territorial trap; cf.
44 Agnew and Corbridge 1995).

Two further scales enter the stage toward the end of that last chapter, with bit parts. The sub-national regional scale, an emergent territorial division of labor, “has the same function as the global division between the developed and underdeveloped worlds ... geographically fixed (relatively) sources of wage labor ... under the more direct control of the national capital” (2008:193).⁴ Thus far, scales are strictly spatially nested, one within the other. Yet, with an eye on the emergence of a putative European Union, Neil’s final scale jumps these tracks by way of supra-national regions:

Given the expansion in the scale of the productive forces, the continued internationalization of capital, and the fossilization of nation-state boundaries as a means of political control, the development of supranational regions may be an economic necessity among all but the largest nation states (2008:195).

The production of scales shaping the spatiality of globalizing capital—in the form of territorial economies persistently differentiated at each scale along lines of production/consumption, prosperity/stagnation or development/underdevelopment—lays the groundwork for what Neil dubbed the seesaw theory of uneven geographical development. He writes: “[W]e can think of the world as a ‘profit surface’ produced by capital itself, at three separate scales” (2008:197). At each scale, processes of development in privileged territories have a tendency to create barriers for accumulation in peripheral spaces: “lower unemployment, an increase in the wage rate, the development of unions, and so forth” occur in some areas, while others simultaneously experience underdevelopment, with “high unemployment rates, low wages, and reduced levels of workers’ organization” (2008:198). At a certain point, capital switches from the former spaces to the latter, where profits will ultimately be higher. Yet the result is never convergence to spatial equilibrium: peripheries become cores and cores peripheries, and the see-saw process repeats itself.⁵ Channeling Harvey (1982), Neil is at pains to point out that such spatial fixes are only ever temporary, unable to overcome the defining contradictions of a capitalist mode of production as described by Marx. Thus:

... however fixed these scales are made, they are subject to change, and it is through the continual determination and internal differentiation of spatial scale that the uneven development of capitalism is organized. The vital point here is not simply to take these spatial scales as given, no matter how self-evident they appear, but to understand the origins, determination and inner coherence and differentiation of each scale as already contained within the structure of capital (2008:181).

In our view, Neil was absolutely correct in his argument that Harvey’s spatial focus on *places* of production is too limiting, as it does not sufficiently emphasize the broader interconnecting spatialities of scale (we would also add connectivities/mobilities). Neil’s first extensive formulation of what has come to be known as scale theory is economic in focus—a theory of uneven geographical development driven by capitalist dynamics in the spirit of Marx. As for Harvey, Neil’s grounding in classical value theory, and his assertion that produced spatialities (spatial fixes for Harvey, scale for Neil) cannot ultimately resolve capitalism’s deepest contradictions, has been critiqued from within geographical political economy

(Sheppard 2004; Soja 1980). In these initial forays, there is a rigidity and functionalism to Neil's theorization of scale. He describes economic processes through which territories are produced at each scale, whereby the co-production of the urban and global scales is a necessity for globalizing capitalism (with cities as the nodes of commodity production in an increasingly globally interconnected system). The nation-state scale does not fit neatly into this framework, because he has difficulty recognizing political processes that exceed capitalism, yet its role in shaping globalizing capitalism is clear. At the same time, however, there is a fixed menu of scales, largely nested, within which processes operate in parallel—a less-than-dialectical categorization. Constrained by the nested geographies of census data, his one empirical demonstration of scale and uneven geographical development reproduces this nesting without critical reflection (Smith and Dennis 1987). While recognizing supranational regions, Neil does not pursue the disruptive implications of these for the nesting and parallelism characterizing his preceding analysis. He also presents the production of scale as the prime produced spatiality—a forgivable move, perhaps, for a young scholar seeking to articulate his originality as a thinker, and one that subsequent scale theorists tended to reinforce, at least until recently (Jessop et al. 2008; Leitner et al. 2008).

The Political Construction of Scale

If Neil's initial scholarship on scale emphasized questions of accumulation, issues of politics are inescapable within the political economy tradition. Building on the theoretical insights of Neil's scholarship, a new trajectory of scale research emerged around questions of how the construction of scale also is attempted or accomplished by a diverse set of actors engaged in political transformations—the practice of a politics of scale. Such practices draw attention to the uneven relationships between space and power, but also to conceptions and ideologies that situated social actors bring to their efforts to change the world and, of course, to resist undesirable change (Delaney and Leitner 1997). Some of this had to do with classical questions of political economy anticipated by Neil: the state and class politics, for example (Smith 1992a, 2008). For Neil and co-author Ward Dennis, for example, the so-called Sunbelt-Snowbelt regional economic transformations of the 1980s might be better understood as a scalar transformation of *regionalization* based on the uneven powers of capital and labor:

... in short, there is a political struggle over the uneven attribution of the costs of crisis, and one dimension of this unevenness is geographical. In particular, there is a strong effort on the part of employers to discipline the working class, both politically and economically, through layoffs, wage takebacks, runaway shops, plant closures, detrimental safety conditions and work rules, and union busting. If this political attack can be concentrated regionally, thus freeing up other regions for much needed expansion, so much the better (Smith and Dennis 1987:187).

Rather than taking regions at face value, it “may not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that the question of scale comprises the ground on which a new regional geography will either flourish or fail” (1987:167).

1 Others extended the space/power framework to non-state, non-capital actors,
2 including non-class based social movements and contentious politics, mobilized
3 around questions of culture, identity and environment. Social movements may
4 deploy scalar strategies to make their voices heard and to expand and secure their
5 political and geographical power. For example, in order to overcome the limitations
6 of their localness, social movements may engage in what Neil termed “scale
7 jumping”: turning local into regional, national and global movements, escaping
8 the traps of localism, parochialism, and particularism through an expansion of geo-
9 graphic and political reach (Smith 1992a). Movements ranging from the Zapatistas,
10 to labor unions, indigenous peoples, feminists, environmental activists and others
11 have successfully used scalar strategies to advance their cause (cf. Fröhling 1999;
12 Herod 1997; Miller 2000). Yet scaling up should be complemented by down-scal-
13 ing (Leitner et al. 2007), a strategy that Neil had too little time for given his critiques
14 of localism (Smith 1987). Such localization strategies often rely on attachments to
15 place and culture, seeking to reaffirm the importance of local particularity as neces-
16 sary to successful broader-scale strategies. For example, Escobar (2001) suggests
17 that place-based cultural, ecological, and economic practices are important sources
18 of inspiration for alternative imaginaries of, and practices for, reconstructing local
19 and regional worlds, no matter how produced by “the global” they might also
20 already be. Multi-scalar strategies also frequently are employed, simultaneously
21 broadening the scale of action while drawing strength from reinforcing the local
22 scale.

23 Scale also matters in terms of representation: scale frames are deployed by differ-
24 ent actors as discursive practices to locate problems, causes and solutions at partic-
25 ular scales and to legitimize the exclusion of certain actors and ideas from debates
26 (Kurtz 2003; Martin and Miller 2003). For example, opposition to the concentration
27 of power over immigration policy at the supra-national scale of the European Union
28 has come from nationalist right-wing political parties presenting themselves as the
29 guardians of national identity and interest under threat of being obliterated by the
30 European Union (Leitner 1997)—with reinforced emphasis and resonance since the
31 2015 refugee crisis.

32 Scales of Difference

33 By the mid-1990s, Neil had begun to appreciate that social difference, both as a
34 conceptual lever and a set of embodied and micro-spatialized social markers,
35 needed to be incorporated into his thinking about scale. This led him to arguments
36 about an alternative politics of scale, wherein he interpreted some activities of social
37 movements as scalar productions specifically designed to confront fixities put in
38 place by capital and the state. Never one to see scalar categories as given, this focus
39 on social difference co-evolved with Neil’s more expansive view of the spatial differ-
40 entiations possible in the production of scale. He wrote a series of publications
41 reflecting these parallel concerns during and after the 1990s. These demonstrate
42 how his thinking about spatial difference might resonate with, while move beyond,
43 the capitalist forces of differentiation that drove his early work on regional political-
44 economic theory. These efforts engaged with the body, the home and the street,
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1 including how social reproduction, culture, and social differences of, for example,
2 gender and race, play into and are shaped by the wider processes of scalar produc-
3 tion (Smith 1992b, 1996). At every step in these analyses, scalar production be-
4 comes more, rather than less, central to the project of comprehending complex
5 spatial differentiation.

6 In “Contours of a Spatialized Politics”, published in *Social Text* in 1992, Neil
7 reaches beyond the geography of uneven development to the uneven realm of
8 art (Smith 1992b). Writing for a broad audience of social and cultural theorists,
9 the paper begins with a sympathetic critique of an ironic construction—a mobile
10 and secure enclosure for limited but functional mobility for homeless people—by
11 New York artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. Neil reads Wodiczko’s “Homeless Vehicle”
12 and “Poliscar” as “an impertinent invention that empowers the evicted to erase
13 their own erasure” (1992b:58). Little more than enclosed shopping carts, and
14 appearing well before the Geography’s object turn, these materialist contrap-
15 tions are his “vehicles” for both downsizing scalar analysis and for demonstrating
16 that scalar politics can be both dominant and oppositional. As he renders it, the
17 vehicles:

18 ... appropriate and express the political ambition of these struggles [over encampment
19 and eviction] from the perspective of many homeless people, and they express the cen-
20 tral realization that political liberation requires spatial access. They provide oppositional
21 means for reinscribing and reorganizing the urban geography of the city, but they do so
22 in a very specific way. They ... stretch the urban space of productive and reproductive
23 activity, fracture previous boundaries of daily intercourse, and establish new ones. They
24 convert spaces of exclusion into the known, the made, the constructed. In short, they
25 redefine the scale of everyday life for homeless people (1992b:60).

26
27 Neil goes on to argue that the political empowerment facilitated by the shock of the
28 vehicles lies precisely in their “contradiction between absurdity and functionality”
29 and, finally, on the “reinscription of geographical scale” they promise as they
30 “expand the scale of self-centered control and at the same time contract the scale
31 of official control” (1992b:60). In this mobile metal work of art, Neil spies the
32 production and reproduction of geographical scale as a political strategy, one that
33 enables the evicted to “jump scales”, that is, “to organize the production and
34 reproduction of daily life and to resist oppression and exploitation at a higher
35 scale—over a wider geographical field” (1992b:60).

36 Towards the second half of the paper, we see how the cultural critique has
37 moved Neil—or perhaps it is the other way around—to widen both the range of
38 scales under analysis in Geography and to rethink the politics inscribed. In separate
39 subsections Neil addresses the social, cultural, economic and political processes at
40 every level of scale: the body, home, community, urban space, region, nation
41 and global boundaries. If there was ever a valid argument that specific processes
42 have their attendant scalar levels, Neil dismissed that here. *Social Text* is of course
43 an ideal venue for excursions into areas where space and scale meet cultural theory,
44 anti-racist theory, feminist theory, and art, and Neil makes the most of it, all the
45 while holding firm on his belief that, when it comes to space, materiality trumps
46 metaphor (cf. Smith and Katz 1993).

1 This last point is echoed in a later work, in *Critique of Anthropology* (Smith 1996).
2 This also uses Wodiczko's Poliscar as a jumping off point, but instead is directed to-
3 ward the increasing tendency to speak (following Castells and others) of a "space of
4 flows". The flow analogy—with its simultaneous appropriation and unpacking of
5 globalization's information networks and mobile forms of production and
6 consumption—would seem to contrast with the staid "space of places" that charac-
7 terizes less fluid forms of capitalist development and spatial politics. While Neil
8 certainly works the fluidity/fixity opposition in this paper, "[i]t is not so much that
9 place is deracinated in the space of flows than that the relationship between the flu-
10 idity and the fixity of space is itself restructured—often in surprising ways, and cer-
11 tainly not in a unidirectional manner" (1996:71). In contrast to flow-thinking's
12 "spatial maze of cities, regions, and nations submerged in" and "deposited out
13 of" a "spatial swirl of capital and information" (1996:71–72), Neil asks: "What if
14 ... the scale of the city, the scale of the region, and the scale of the nation are them-
15 selves so restructured that it makes little sense to cling uncritically to these concepts
16 of geographical scale?". The result, in other words, is not the "fantasy of
17 spacelessness" nor the "extinction of place"—concepts hard to imagine for anyone
18 who spent time discussing Geography with Neil—"but *the reinvention of place at a*
19 *different scale*" (1996:72). He captures this spatial transformation by elaborating
20 on the concept of scale jumping, a process not unimaginable within the context
21 of *Uneven Development* some dozen years earlier, but now more explicitly aligned
22 to the shifting contours of spatial restructuring under "so-called globalization"
23 (1996:68). As he puts it: "A stronger recognition of the power of the production
24 of scale should significantly mitigate any vision of a space of flows" (1996:72).

25 Another of Neil's contributions to scale's endless malleability is captured in the
26 concept of scale bending, which he uses to capture geopolitical power shifts (cf.
27 Brenner 2005), all the while maintaining an eye on the political potentials of social
28 movements that re-work scale:

29
30 Cities and states are not supposed to have their own foreign policy, presumably the
31 prerogative of national states. Private individuals are not supposed to dwarf nation-
32 states in bankrolling other national and transnational state institutions. In the home of
33 the free, "domestic" activists are not supposed to jump scale and appeal to international
34 authority for the resolution of local complaints. And since when did global corporations
35 displace nation-states as the proper purveyors of diplomatic emissaries? Taken together,
36 these events suggest intense "scale bending" in the contemporary political and social
37 economy. Entrenched assumptions about what kinds of social activities fit properly at
38 which scales are being systematically challenged and upset (Smith 2004:193).

39 If fixity/fluidity was the most important successor to *Uneven Development's* driving
40 opposition of differentiation/equalization, it was the production/reproduction dia-
41 lectic that took Neil into his collaboration with Sallie Marston in the early 2000s.
42 Marston (2000) built on Smith's emerging interest in scale and social difference
43 as it exists in the micro-spaces of the home.⁶ Expanding upon socialist feminists'
44 theories of social reproduction, she argued that most scale theory in the discipline
45 through the 1990s had been: "largely unresponsive to questions of difference in
46 human agents and how power relations outside the relations of capital and
47

1 labormight also influence scale-making” (Marston 2000:238). Using the historical
2 case of the expanding consciousness and political roles of US women involved in
3 the Progressive Movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries, she shows how
4 the home is a significant scale at which the everyday relations of patriarchy, racism,
5 and citizenship connect to wider scales of capitalist production and consumption.
6 Her contention was that:

7 A discourse about women as “female citizens” operated among and between scales
8 from the household out to the globe and provided these subjects with a consciousness
9 that enabled a particular negotiation of patriarchal subordination and began a gender
10 transformation of the public sphere through a reconstitution of the private sphere of
11 the home. In short, the home was utilized as a scale of social and political identity forma-
12 tion that eventually enabled American middle-class urban women to extend their influ-
13 ence beyond the home to other scales of social life (2000:235).

14
15 Neil Brenner (2001) reacted with concern to Marston’s expansive theorization,
16 worrying that scale would become another chaotic concept in the discipline, as
17 any spatial phenomenon might come to be identified as a scale. His aim in
18 launching a critique was to:

19 contribute to the development of an approach to sociospatial theory in which the
20 specifically scalar dimensions of social spatiality—in contradistinction to its many other
21 dimensions, such as localization, place-making, territorialization, spatial distancing,
22 the formation of spatial networks, the production of environment/nature and so forth
23 —may be adequately recognized and theorized (Brenner 2001:593).

24
25 In arguing for “a more precise and hence analytically narrower conception of
26 geographical scale” (2001:593), Brenner’s reply, though strategically directed
27 at Marston, was meant to rein in the widening circle of interventions that were
28 then expanding both the theoretical framing and empirical utility of scale (e.g.
29 Howitt 1998; Jonas 1994; Swyngedouw 2000). Through these and other exten-
30 sions, the concept of scale was becoming more processually inclusive (e.g.
31 through a focus on the politics of scale and the inclusion of social reproduction
32 and environmental processes in scale theory), as well as, relatedly, more spatially
33 complex (e.g. by including horizontal networks and households). For Brenner,
34 the key to understanding what scale is and how it operates was through “rela-
35 tions of hierarchization and rehierarchization among vertically differentiated spa-
36 tial units”, such that they can be distinguished “from other forms of sociospatial
37 structuration” (2001:603). Thus, in order to appreciate how scale might be tied
38 to “an explicit causal argument linking the substantive social content of the spa-
39 tial unit in question to its *embeddedness* or *positionality* within a broader scalar hi-
40 erarchy” (2001:600), it was necessary to limit scalar processes to already
41 established and well recognized spatial units such as those specified by the likes
42 of Peter Taylor (1982) and the early Smith (2008), and, it might be argued, to
43 the more conventional levels acknowledged by planners, development experts,
44 and states.

45 Marston co-authored her reply to Brenner with Neil (Marston and Smith 2001).
46 They concede the point that Geography needs analytic precision around scale,
47

1 but they conclude that Brenner will not find the tools for that by maintaining
2 boundaries between scalar production and the wider social production of space
3 (à la Lefebvre). They wrote:

4 [S]cale is a produced societal metric that differentiates space; it is not space *per se*. Yet
5 “geographical scale” is not simply a “hierarchically ordered system” placed over pre-
6 existing space, however much that hierarchical ordering may itself be fluid. Rather the
7 production of scale is integral to the production of space, all the way down. Scaled social
8 processes pupate specific productions of space while the production of space generates
9 distinct structures of geographical scale. The process is highly fluid and dynamic, its
10 social authorship broad-based, and the scale of the household (or the home) is integral
11 to this process. So too, we contend, is the scale of the body (Marston and Smith
12 2001:615–616).

13 In addition to their theoretical response—which is centrally directed to the question
14 (also posed by Delaney and Leitner 1997) of what kind of space scale *is*—Marston
15 and Smith criticize Brenner for an “inability to see the theoretical relevance of the
16 social reproduction argument” (2001:617). Noting that it is “arbitrary that the
17 home is relegated to a ‘place’ or ‘arena’, while the state gets to be a multifaceted
18 ‘scale’” (2001:618), they argue that while “[f]uture historical research may yet
19 reveal the household to be a ‘stable background structure’ in all of this ... the smart
20 money will be wagered elsewhere” (2001:618).

21 22 23 24 **The Scale Debates**

25 For Marston, adopting a post-structuralist feminist response with Neil to Brenner’s
26 structural Marxist arguments presaged her later move toward a non-scalar
27 ontology. Indeed, this move was already signaled *in* the 2000 paper, which openly
28 entertained the “the rejection of scale as an ontologically given category” (Marston
29 2000:220). Marston subsequently wrote, with Jones and Keith Woodward, a paper
30 that attempted to dismantle scale theory under the provocative title of “Human geo-
31 geography without scale” (Marston et al. 2005). Without rehearsing the complexities
32 of the analysis therein, the fundamental argument advanced is that scale is not an
33 ontological category of space but a spatial imaginary, an analytic for making sense
34 of the world. In contrast to a scalar epistemology, they draw on Deleuze and others
35 in articulating a non-scalar, “flat” ontology consisting of:

36 analytics of composition and decomposition that resist the increasingly popular practice of
37 representing the world as strictly a jumble of unfettered flows; attention to differential
38 relations that constitute the driving forces of material composition and that problematize
39 axiomatic tendencies to stratify and classify geographic objects; and a focus on localized
40 and non-localized emergent events of differential relations actualized as temporary—often
41 mobile—“sites” in which the social unfolds (2005:422–423).

42
43 This view comes with its own spatial politics, one centered not at legal, juridical, or
44 organizational structures “at some level once removed, ‘up there’ in a vertical
45 imaginary, but on the ground, in practice, the result of marking territories horizon-
46 tally through boundaries and enclosures, documents and rules, enforcing agents
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1 and their authoritative resources" (2005:420).⁷ This argument was premised on the
2 move, prompted by Marston and Smith's paper, away from a productivist orienta-
3 tion (*Uneven Development* being the apogee) and toward a more social
4 reproductivist/feminist position that focuses attention on embodied practice, inti-
5 macy, and intelligibility.

6 "Human geography without scale" sparked intense debate in the mid-2000s,
7 particularly in the pages of *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. A
8 2005 AAG panel was convened in Denver to discuss the Marston, Jones and Wood-
9 ward paper, which included, alongside the authors, Neil, Helga, and philosopher
10 John Protevi. At the session, Neil refused to accept the epistemic argument made
11 in the paper. He declared, somewhat contradictorily but perhaps understandably
12 so in light of all the friendships shared: "Look, I agree with you, but you still have
13 to understand that scale exists!". Beyond that session there were few other public
14 discussions about this intellectual disagreement, but there were many debates in
15 private where Neil continued to disagree with the ontological reorientation argued
16 for in the paper and subsequent articles. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a
17 posthumous 2015 publication by Neil titled "The future is radically open", edited
18 by Don Mitchell, he reasserts the salience of scale. He writes: "The post-structural
19 critique seems to abolish any concept of scale in favour of what the critics want
20 to call a horizontal space, abolishing any social and political difference, creating,
21 effectively, a flat earth. Power differences are abolished in an act of wishful thinking"
22 (Smith 2015:964). In the midst of the debates, Leitner and Miller (2007:121) made
23 a very similar point, expressing concern that the flat ontology argument entails "an
24 impoverished understanding not only of the power relations that inhere in scale,
25 but of the power relations that inhere in the intersections of diverse spatialities with
26 scale".⁸

27 The last 10 years have seen two further shifts with respect to scale theory. First,
28 reflecting persistent disjunctures between political economic and poststructural
29 accounts, one finds attempts to rethink scale that follow two strands of thought.
30 From the perspective of political economy, MacKinnon (2010) exemplifies efforts
31 to examine scale as a boundary object enabling engaged pluralism with
32 poststructuralism. For example, in reflecting on Moore's (2008) intervention,
33 MacKinnon seeks to disavow attempts to brand political economic approaches as
34 reifying scale (a trap that Neil was not the only one to avoid). He seeks common
35 ground with poststructuralism around how scales are an emergent effect of "mate-
36 rial production and capitalist restructuring on the one hand, and social practice and
37 discourse, on the other" (MacKinnon 2010:28). The alternative, avowedly
38 poststructural, strand of thought stresses immanent ontological and political ac-
39 counts (Ansell 2009; Escobar 2007; Hiller 2008; Isin 2007; McFarlane 2009; Shaw
40 2010; Woodward et al. 2010, 2012). Second, there are those seeking to decenter
41 scale as the overarching spatiality—in this sense, writing back against Neil. Some ar-
42 gue, in different ways, that scale is just one spatiality among many that need to be
43 placed in conversation with one another (Jessop et al. 2008; Leitner et al. 2008).
44 Others prioritize alternative spatialities, with assemblage, mobility, phase space, to-
45 pology, grey and partitioned space receiving particular attention (Anderson et al.
46 2012; Cresswell and Merriman 2011; Jones 2009; Merriman et al. 2012; Roy
47

2011; Yiftachel 2009). Having access to Neil's views on these unfolding debates and alternative spatialities would be instructive. What we can assume is that he would prioritize scale as part of a broader argument that spatialities are material, and matter.

Conclusion

The entire discipline of Geography owes a tremendous intellectual debt to Neil Smith, as do spatial thinkers throughout the social sciences and humanities. His focus on scale transformed socio-spatial theory. While he did not neglect such related spatialities as place, region, city, nation-state and the rest, for him scale was always integral to understanding the production of space. This is itself a novel contribution. Neither Lefebvre, nor Harvey, nor any other spatial theorist who had sought to elaborate the production of space would so forcefully make scale both the driving dynamic and outcome. Neil's conceptualization of scale was determinately Marxist in origin, and consistent with this was his lifelong adherence to dialectical thinking. Throughout his evolving thinking on scale, one can witness a long list of dialectics at work, including: differentiation/equalization; accumulation/consumption; production/reproduction; process/outcome; abstract/concrete; materiality/metaphor; expansion/contraction; and mobility/constraint. Other, more meta-level and specifically spatial outcomes, such as developed/underdeveloped, core/periphery, and global/local, follow in the wake of these interconnected processes—it was never one nor the other, but always both/and. With this powerful conceptual apparatus, it is little wonder that the traditional nesting of scales fell to the wayside early on his thinking. While his thinking was clear, precise, and analytic, for Neil nothing was ever “given” or “fixed”, whether in space or in politics.

For us, his influence is ineradicable even as we came to see our thinking as moving beyond Neil's writing on scale—toward a flat ontology for Sallie and JP, toward scale's intersections with other, also non-territorial, spatialities for Helga and Eric. We are, if you will, post-Smithian, sharing his broader critical sensibility about what is wrong with today's world. This enables us to engage in productive exchange, notwithstanding the occasional spirited intellectual disagreement.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted material is from the widely accessible 2008 third edition published by the University of Georgia Press. The first edition was published by Basil Blackwell in 1984; the second in 1990.

² This theme would reappear in Neil's later works, such as his 2002 paper linking globalization to a rescaled “new urbanism” focused in Africa, Asia and Latin America: “The urban’ is being redefined just as dramatically as the global; the old conceptual containers—our old 1970s assumptions about what ‘the urban’ is or was—no longer hold water. The new concatenation of urban functions and activities vis-à-vis the national and the global changes not only the make-up of the city but the very definition of what constitutes—literally—the urban scale” (2002:431).

³ Contrast these levels to those proposed by Peter Taylor (1982:24) in the same year: “the scale of reality (global), the scale of ideology (state) and the scale of experience (urban)”. In *Uneven Development*, Smith would propose the same levels (see below) but criticize Taylor for his reliance upon Wallerstein's exchange-based world-systems theory (2008:289). Unlike

Taylor, Smith would not argue that the global level is the primary determinant, nor did he assign a specific and allied social process to different scales (e.g. ideology to the nation state, experience to the urban). Rather, capitalism *produces* scales at all levels as part-and-parcel of its endless shifting between equilibrium and disequilibrium.

⁴ In *Spatial Divisions of Labor* (Massey 1984), published almost simultaneously with *Uneven Development*, Doreen Massey differentiates sub-national regions in the same way. Eschewing scale, however, her explanation stresses geological metaphors of territorial layering.

⁵ For Neil, gentrification offers a paradigmatic example of such see-sawing: the suburbanization of production and the middle classes/whites in the US is part and parcel of an underdevelopment of central cities, creating a rent gap that eventually attracts capital and middle classes back to the central city, displacing its poorer, non-white residents (Slater 2015).

⁶ Marston's paper was titled "The social construction of scale". Tellingly, Neil had suggested that she substitute "production" for "construction" in the title, but she declined. Along the same lines, Delaney and Leitner (1997:93) had previously advocated for the term "constructionist", titling their intervention "The political construction of scale", so as to emphasize the connections between power, practice and scale also among a wider universe of actors and sites.

⁷ Interestingly, Neil made a similar argument when critiquing Castells' and others' concepts of "spaces of flows" (Smith 1996).

⁸ Jones et al. (2007) offer a reply to Leitner and Miller (2007) as well as to the other critics and sympathizers in *Transactions'* "scale debates".

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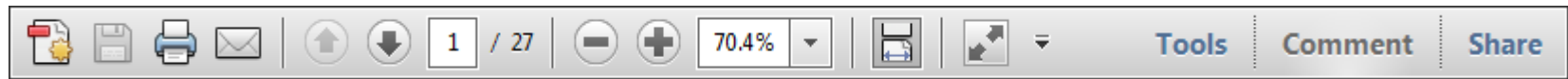
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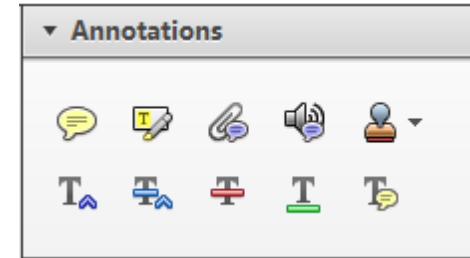
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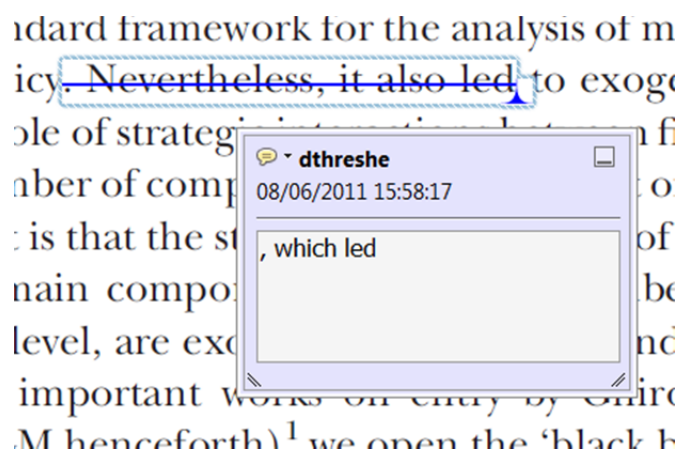
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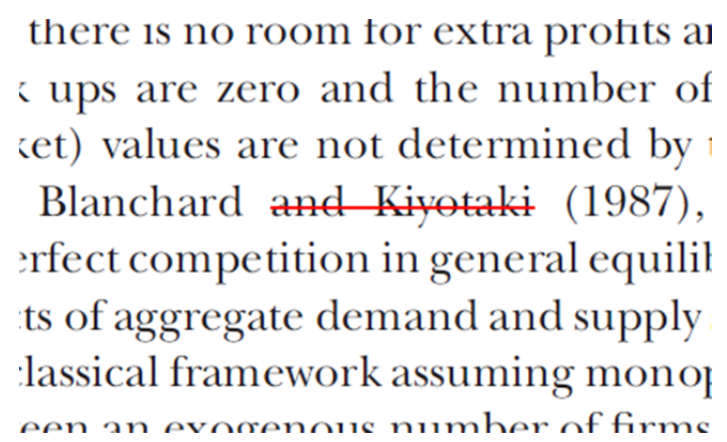
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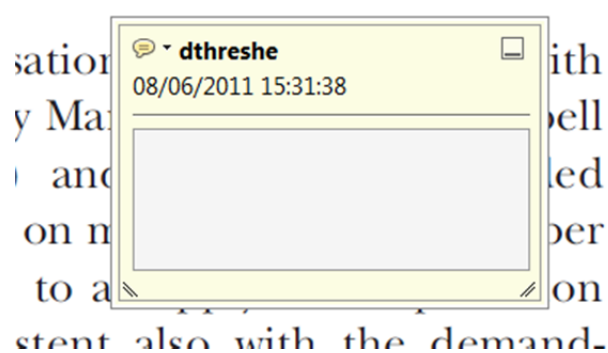
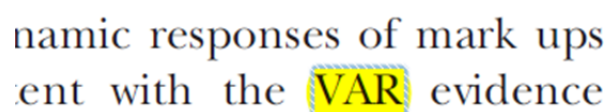
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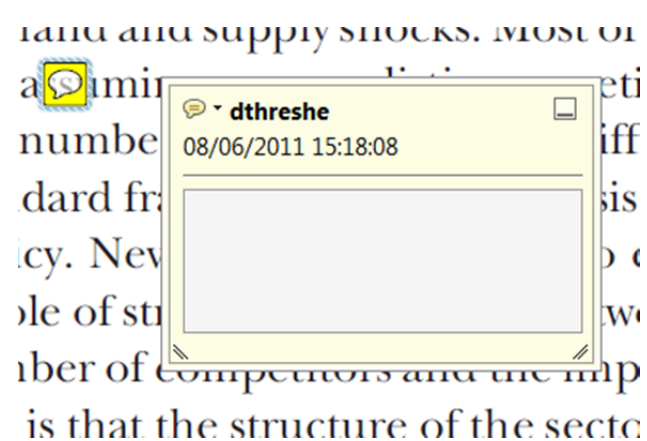
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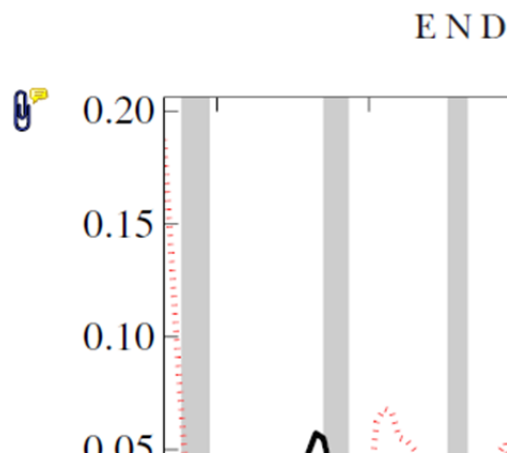
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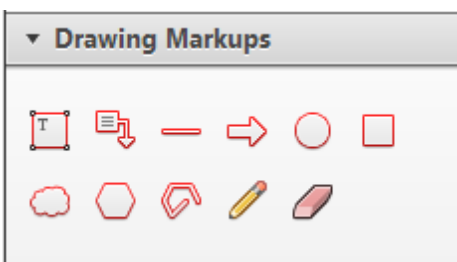


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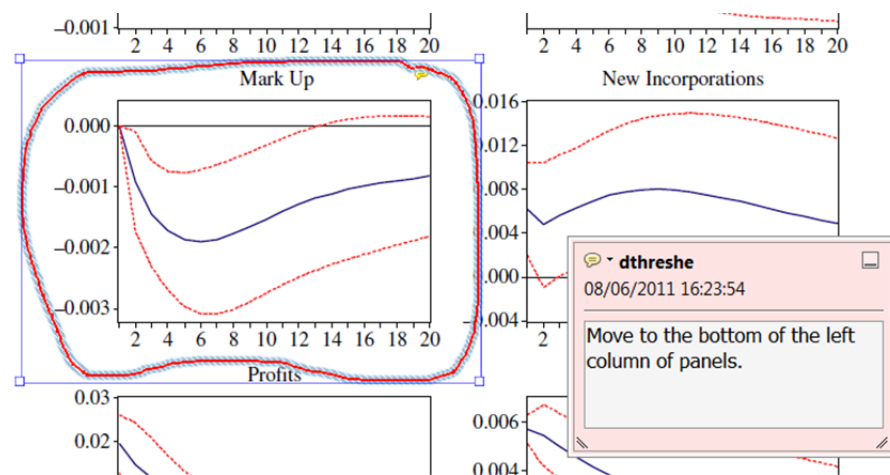


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