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Progress in Human Geography
2021, Vol. 45(4) 623–640
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DOI: 10.1177/0309132520944487
journals.sagepub.com/home/phg

The politics of scale through Rancière

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Abstract
This paper argues that human geography's scale debate has arrived at somewhat of an impasse surrounding scale's relative position to ontology. Divides are most evident between those that see scales as 'already existing' and those considering this as a form of 'ontological reification' that stifles our understanding of politics. I suggest that reading the 'politics of scale' through Jacques Rancière's political thinking, and in particular his aesthetic approach to the problem of ontological reductionism, can offer one way forward. It enables geographers to take existing 'common-sense' ideas around scale seriously whilst also being sensitive to emergent politics.

Keywords
scale, aesthetics, politics, Rancière, the political

> Hierarchical scale carries with it presuppositions that can delimit entry points into politics – and the openness of the political – by pre-assigning to it a cordoned register for resistance. (Marston et al., 2005: 427)

I Introduction

The 'politics of scale' is a term coined by Neil Smith (2010 [1984]: 229) to attend to the processes through which scales are constructed and contested. But the concept is steeped in complexity and has been subject to extensive disciplinary debate. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a deluge of literature debating 'the nature of scale': what it is, is not, and how it ought to be deployed (Brenner, 2001; Jones, 1998; Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008: 538; Marston, 2000; Marston et al., 2005). By the mid-2000s scale was increasingly seen as a 'chaotic conception' (Howitt, 2003), even prompting discussions of its disciplinary expulsion (Marston et al., 2005). human geography's scale debate had arrived at an impasse. Divisions took hold around scale's relationship with ontology and the political consequences of our conceptions. Separately, and more recently, disciplinary debates surrounding 'politics', 'the political' and how they relate to ontology have also deepened (Barnett, 2017; Dikeç, 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Featherstone and Korf, 2012; Meyer et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2010, 2013). But herein, I suggest, lies an opportunity. This paper develops the thought of Jacques Rancière, a key thinker infusing recent debates on the political, to offer one way forward for human geography's scale debate and its divides around politics and ontology.

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Both the idea of scale as socially-constructed and 'the rejection of scale as an ontologically given category' (Marston, 2000: 220) are widely accepted within human geography. However, questions of *when* we are ontologizing scale and what our conceptions mean for politics are far from settled (Castree et al., 2008). In the subsequent section, for instance, I will outline how some claim scales predate social activity, such that it is necessary to take stock of already-existing scales when considering politics. Others, however, claim this to be a form of 'ontological reification' that instead stifles political possibilities. The extremes of this latter group are exemplified by Marston et al.'s (2005) proposed wholesale eradication of scale from the discipline. Our treatment of scale in relation to ontology and politics clearly matters yet, as Chapura has argued, a 'need remains for a detailed and coherent theoretical framework for thinking about scale ontologically' (2009: 463).

Such a task is pertinent given the current 'ontological turn' in political thought, where theorists have inquired into the ontological assumptions that shape political thinking (Marchart, 2018). Whilst I argue that there can be no panacea for the divides of the scale debate, I suggest that reading the 'politics of scale' through the political and aesthetic thinking of Jacques Rancière can move us beyond the present theoretical impasse on scale's relative position to ontology. Rancière is of increasing interest to human geographers (cf. Cook, 2018; Derickson, 2017; Dikeç, 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Dixon, 2009; Ruez, 2013; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Tolia-Kelly, 2017). Whilst for many Rancière's thought is useful in considering the 'post-political' nature of the contemporary governance (for example Swyngedouw, 2009), what draws me to him here is his approach to political change more broadly (Davidson and Iveson, 2014). In particular, it is his 'aesthetic' solution to the problem of ontological reductionism (a concern many scale theorists share) that I argue warrants attention.

Aesthetics means myriad things to geographers (Hawkins and Straughan, 2014, but for Rancière (2006: 13) it relates to 'forms of perceiving the world and modes of relating to it' (Dikeç, 2012a: 274). Rancière (2009c: 56) suggests we are bound together by a 'sensory fabric' that shapes how we make sense of the world. He terms this *le partage du sensible* (the distribution of the sensible). Politics, in turn, disrupts these normalized ways of making sense and transforms them (Rancière, 1999). This aesthetic approach to politics, as we shall see, allows us to consider how social activity is shaped by inherited, shared, 'common-sense' whilst avoiding ontological theorizing and narrowing political possibilities. In adopting Rancière's approach I argue that scales serve as one such 'common-sense' frame which shapes places and roles played in society. Whilst, in such a reading, scales do precede social activity, there is nothing 'natural' or ontologically-given about them. As such, they can always be disrupted by politics.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the second section, human geography's scale debate is overviewed, highlighting how thinkers understand scale in relation to ontology. In the third section I introduce Rancière's political thought and his approach to avoiding ontologizing political thinking. I utilize this understanding to reconsider the ontological disagreements of the scale debate, offering his aesthetic solution as one possible way forward. In the fourth section, drawing upon examples, I consider the implications of Rancière's aesthetic approach for the politics of scale. I suggest the approach is able to bring together idealist approaches which understand scale as 'mental contrivances for [. . .] ordering processes and practices' (Herod, 2011: 13) and materialist understandings which consider scale as produced through political struggle. Moreover, in keeping scales and the opportunity for their contestation in parallax view, a Rancièrian approach can more fully account for scale as a 'product and a

progenitor' of social activity (MacKinnon, 2010: 22). Finally, I conclude by suggesting that whilst we do not encounter scales '"up there" in a vertical imaginary but on the ground, in practice', this is not to say that these shared, vertical imaginaries do not matter (Marston et al., 2005: 420). Rather, what is vital for scale theorists to consider is how common-sense on scales as vertical imaginaries is met with dissensus 'on the ground' (Rancière, 2016a: 159).

II Geography and scale: An ontological dispute

1 Towards a 'politics' of scale

Prior to the 1980s, 'scale' was largely taken for granted as a way of establishing hierarchy and order over space (Herod, 2011). These early theorizations drew on Kant's (2007 [1781]) understanding of time and space as a priori forms that shape how we make sense of the world. Under Kant's idealist approach, time and space were hard-wired in the mind (Dikeç, 2012a; Dixon et al., 2012). Scale, then, was seen as part of this mental spatiotemporal ordering system. However, following the materialist interventions of Peter Taylor (1982) and Neil Smith (2010 [1984]), the concept was hotly debated. As this debate is well documented (cf. Herod, 2011; Jonas, 2015; MacKinnon, 2010; Marston et al., 2005), I trace only the key contours here.

Taylor (1982), drawing upon Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory, theorized the scales of the urban, the nation and the global, tracing their emergence under capitalism. Taylor's work is broadly seen as critical human geography's foundational piece on scale (Marston et al., 2005; Smith, 2008). However, it is Smith who is credited with 'profoundly revolutioni[sing . . .] scholarly understandings of space through his conceptualization of scale' (Jones et al., 2017: 138–9).

In *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, Smith (2010 [1984]) identified the urban, national and global as scales where uneven development can be observed. Smith derives these scales from capital's contradicting tendency to spatially 'differentiate' and 'equalize' (see Smith, 2010 [1984]: chs. 4 & 5). Despite the impossibility of achieving permanent spatial fixity against these contradictory tendencies (Harvey, 1981, 1982), for Smith, scales offer a degree. Smith (2010 [1984]: 180) considers uneven development under capitalism not as a mosaic of spaces but as organized by this multi-scale system. These scales are 'nested rather than hierarchical' (Smith, 1992a: 66) and produced rather than given, with Smith considering their origins, ends and 'inner coherence' as a window upon the uneven development of capital (Smith, 2010 [1984]: 181). This processual approach prompted Marxist political economy to investigate how scales are shaped, considering their production and how their 'relative importance may vary over space and time' (Sheppard and McMaster, 2008: 15).

Smith continued to work on the relation between scale and capital (e.g. Smith, 1992b), but recognized that these early theorizations, derived to explain uneven development under capitalism, were somewhat 'wooden' (Smith, 2011: 262). As such, Smith (2010 [1984]: 229) introduced the 'politics of scale' in the Afterword to the second edition of *Uneven Development*. The term was subsequently taken up by numerous scholars to capture how actors attempt the social construction of scale (Brenner, 2001; Jones et al., 2017, Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008). The politics of scale attempts to capture the interplay of prevailing power mechanisms and political struggle, where scales serve not only as a mechanism of 'constraint and exclusion' but also 'a weapon of expansion and inclusion' (1992: 61, 78). In Smith's work on resistance to gentrification in New York City, for instance, he details how the homeless community of Tompkins Square Park was threatened with a curfew to 'take back' the park

(Smith, 2010 [1984]: 230–1). Under the banner of 'Tompkins Square Everywhere', solidarity squats emerged across the entire Lower East Side. For Smith (2010 [1984]), this evidenced how actors attempted to 'jump scale' to 'elevate themselves to the next scale up the hierarchy' (2010: 232). For those adopting the politics of scale, such struggles are precisely the political component of the politics of scale (Newstead et al., 2005: 486). The politics of scale was subsequently adopted by an array of other geographers to interpret a plethora of struggles (cf. Agnew, 1997; Herod, 1997; Jonas, 1994; Leitner, 1997; Swyngedouw, 1996, 1997).

The politics of scale literature has focused on 'the nature of scale' – what scale is, what it is not, and how the processes of rescaling take place (Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008: 538). Scholars have sought to understand the social, political, cultural and economic processes through which scales are redefined (Brenner, 1998; MacKinnon, 2010; Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997). These processes have included the aforementioned scale jumping; scale bending, where 'entrenched assumptions about what kinds of social activities fit properly at which scales are [. . .] challenged and upset' (Smith, 2008: 193); and glocalization, 'the contested restructuring of the institutional level from the national scale' both upwards and downwards (Swyngedouw, 2004: 37).

Marston notes that much of the 1990s politics of scale literature focused on the role of 'capital, labor or the state – or some combination' (2000: 221). One example given here is Brenner's (1997) work on post-war planning policies in the Federal Republic of Germany between 1960 and 1990, where he considers how scales were altered under changing configurations of both the state and capital. Marston argues that whilst the role of the state and capital are vital to consider, the politics of scale had become overly:

> [p]reoccupied with questions of capitalist production [. . . and fails] to comprehend the real complexity behind the social construction of scale and therefore tells only part of a much more complex story. (Marston, 2000: 233)

In particular, Marston (2000) draws attention to the role of patriarchal gender relations in the politics of scale. Marston stakes a claim for a more multifaceted understanding of the social construction of scale that is sensitive not only to capitalist production but also processes of social reproduction and consumption.

Scholars have also debated the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' dimensions of scale. Brenner, for instance, developed the concept of 'scale structuration', to emphasize the links between scales and the (re)hierarchization across the 'vertically differentiated spatial units' (1998: 603). Some have viewed this vertical dimension as too rigid, turning to networked, horizontal and relational understandings of social processes (see for instance Cox, 1998b; Dicken, 2004), whilst others have brought horizontal and vertical approaches together (Amin, 2002; Brenner, 1998; Leitner, 2004; Taylor, 2004). Brenner has since argued that scales do not just exist in vertical or horizontal dimensions, but in both, advocating a relational understanding 'in terms of upwards, downwards and sidewards links to other geographical scales situated within tangled hierarchies and dispersed interscalar networks' (Brenner, 2001: 605). However, as Herod and Wright (2008) have argued, perhaps the most central debate has concerned the ontological status of scale, to which I now turn.

2 Scale: Ontological, epistemological, nonsensical?

> If scale is continually contested [. . . and] a representational practice deployed by participants in struggles [. . .] then what is its ontological status? (Jones, 1998: 27)

In 1998 Katherine Jones asserted that scale was a 'representational trope' which, in framing

what is knowable, holds the power to 'shape the meaning of space' (Jones, 1998: 27). Scale as a mode of representation, therefore, was to be understood as a technology of power which configures what is knowable or true (Cox, 1998a: 43). For Jones (1998), this necessitated a reconsideration of whether scale was epistemological – a way of thinking about the world – or whether it is ontological – a fundamental 'given' of the world. Reflecting that scales 'as a mode of understanding' did not exist prior to becoming a trope for making sense of space, Jones (1998: 28) argued that scales were epistemological. For Jones (1998), when we assume scales to be ontological we naturalize them and, in doing so, diminish our analytical capacity to understand how scales are used to frame and represent space. This intervention was to be highly influential. As Marston (2000: 220) later noted, interest in scale was gravitating toward constructionist frameworks and 'the rejection of scale as an ontologically given category'. But in proffering this understanding, Jones (1998) also laid the ground for a later series of debates around not only *how* we can avoid reifying scale in ontology, but also *who* is doing so.

Inspired by this turn to conceiving scales 'not as ontologically given, but as epistemology', scholars began conceptualizing scale as a discursive or representational device (Ansell, 2008; Delaney and Leitner, 1997; Jones, 1998; Kurtz, 2003: 893; Mansfield, 2005; Moore, 2008). These perspectives tended to treat scalar frames as 'unfolding' and '[a]lways emergent' narratives that delimit 'sociospatial boundaries and relations' (Moore, 2008: 206, 221), often taking the form of horizontal, actor-network based understandings (Bulkeley, 2005; Collinge, 2006; Leitner et al., 2002; Marston et al., 2005). Scalar narratives have been seen as 'a way of framing political-spatiality that in turn has material effects' (Jones, 1998: 27; Moore, 2008). Kurtz (2003), for instance, has observed how scale frames operate as a strategic device for representing a controversy and, conversely, how counter-scale frames might seek to undermine these. These practice-focused approaches began to reject perspectives that saw scales as preceding social activity as giving a problematic 'ontological priority to scales themselves' (Herod, 2001: 46; Herod and Wright, 2002). Others have been more sympathetic toward 'inherited scales', with performativity approaches considering how scale is utilized as a tactic of governmentality, as 'a naturalized way of seeing the world', observing both 'the enacted discourses that over time work to produce 'scale effects' and 'the "gaps and fissures" that destabilise these scalar epistemologies' (Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008: 543).

Whilst scale's role as an epistemological construct had gained traction, this too was to be disputed in Marston, Jones and Woodward's (2005) 'Human Geography without Scale'. The authors observed vast divergences in definitions of scale, declaring it a more than 'chaotic' concept (Marston et al., 2005). Central to this claim was the supposed dichotomy between the dominant perspective of scale as a 'nested hierarchy of differentially sized and bounded spaces' (Marston et al., 2005: 416–17) and those who, inspired by Latour and Deleuze amongst others (Jones et al., 2007), stand in opposition to this 'vertical' understanding, comprehending scale through a horizontal networked model (Jones et al., 2007).

The authors argue that neither is sufficient, asserting that 'horizontal' conceptions of scale rely on an ontological 'origin-to-edge imaginary', much as 'vertical' understandings rely on the 'local-to-global continuum' (Marston et al., 2005: 422). For Marston et al. (2005: 422), this merely replaces 'one ontological-epistemological nexus (verticality) with another (horizontality)'. As such, they claim critical geography should be able to deconstruct these representational tropes without ontologizing scale. Most research, they argue, a priori assumes commonly-held 'levels of scale' (such as the body, the national, the

global), reflecting 'the contingency of socially constructed political boundaries' rather than socio-spatial processes (Marston et al., 2005: 422). In doing so, they argue that 'the global' is seen as a more causal force, neutralizing the agency of the local. Marston et al. (2005) also reject an emergent third option, to hybridize understandings of scale across both vertical and horizontal dimensions (Brenner, 1998), stating that the 'inherent', 'foundational weaknesses' of vertical approaches cannot be resolved by 'integrating them with network formulations' (Marston et al., 2005: 422, 417). Marston et al. conclude that a spatial ontology that includes scale 'delimit[s] entry points into politics – and the openness of the political – by pre-assigning to it a cordoned register for resistance' (2005: 427).

Instead, they suggest doing away with ontological 'predetermination' completely, proposing a 'flat', site-based ontology (Marston et al., 2005: 422). This approach flattens both space and scale into diverse sites of relations, practices and processes situated in place, folded into an interconnected 'neighbourhood' of other practices (Jonas, 2006). In doing so, they argue that we can account 'for socio-spatiality as it occurs' without imposing predetermined categories such as scale (Marston et al., 2005: 425). The proposed eradication of scale has had a mixed reception. Some have received it positively (cf. Collinge, 2006; Springer, 2014; Escobar, 2007), with Springer (2014: 408) concurring that

> scale [. . .] represents a theoretical distraction, a drawing away from the grounder particularities of the everyday [. . . where we] soar off into an abstract sky, only to touch down on the immediate materiality of everyday life when and where it becomes convenient to our argument.

Springer (2014: 408) welcomes the advancement of a flat ontology with a 'rhizomic notion of a processual politics that is conceived through actual practice' but stops short of recommending its complete abandonment. Similarly, Escobar (2007) applauds the shift towards 'flat' thinking, but argues that whether this necessitates an abandonment or even overhaul of scale is still a matter of debate.

On the other hand, Leitner and Miller (2007) and Jonas (2006) contest that verticality need not imply top-down hierarchical power relations, instead suggesting power may emerge from the bottom-up, or in both directions simultaneously (Collinge, 1999; Sayre, 2005). Others have defended 'pre-existing' scales in the name of understanding and contesting power. Leitner and Miller (2007), for instance, have argued that recognizing already-existing scalar structures does not diminish the opportunity for politics. Rather, they suggest it is vital to developing strategies of resistance. Whilst in agreement that scale is not an ontological category of space (Jones et al., 2017), Smith argues that the attempt to replace contingent understandings of scale, which he sees as organizing social difference, with horizontal understandings of space abolishes power distinctions in an act of 'wishful thinking' (2015: 964). It is for this reason that the wholesale excision of scale from Geography has been argued to reinforce unequal scalar power relations (Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008).

Despite these divides, attempts at reunification have been made. Moore (2008: 214) has argued that we should abandon scale as an analytical category to avoid ontological theorizing, and instead consider how ideas about scalar orders become solidified 'in consciousness and practice'. MacKinnon (2010), drawing upon a critical realist perspective, has viewed the charge of ontological reification held against many political-economic understandings of the politics of scale as too readily accepted. Instead, MacKinnon (2010) argues that scales exist as a consequence of both capitalist restructuring *and* social practice in an attempt to create common ground. In doing so, he argues that 'the so-called politics of scale are not fundamentally "of"

(about) scale' (2010: 32), but rather scale's deployment towards various ends. MacKinnon advocates 'scalar politics' as a term to capture this, as 'an "open" political-economy approach [. . .] receptive to poststructural insights concerning the importance of scalar practices and narratives' (2010: 32) which recognizes 'scalar structures' as both inherited and contested (2010: 33). For MacKinnon (2010: 30), this necessitates an understanding of how actors attempt to 'ontologically "fix" or "undo" scales as material expressions of emergent power relations'.

Subsequent to Jones' (1998) intervention, it is clear that the question of how scale ought to relate to ontology became central to the scale debate. Compare, for instance, Smith's insistence that, in asserting the existence of scales preceding social activity, he was 'in no way proposing some ontological system of scales' (1992b: 66; Jones et al., 2017), with others charging this as ontological reification (cf. Herod, 2001: 45–6; Herod and Wright, 2002: 10–11; Jones, 1998; Moore, 2008). Commentators have also insisted that one's position on scale's ontological status has ramifications for politics, though scale theorists refer to highly divergent things in their use of the term (Castree et al., 2008). Take, for instance, Marston et al.'s (2005) assertion that a 'flat' ontology is more politically 'open' and Leitner and Miller's (2007) contrary position, that a recognition of pre-existing scales is instead crucial to politics. The subsequent section suggests one way to move beyond these ontological and political divides.

III Reframing scale with Rancière

1 Police, politics and ontological principles

This section demonstrates how reading scale through Jacques Rancière's 'post-foundational' political framework offers one way forward. Indeed, I turn to Rancière precisely because of his treatment of ontology in relation to politics, which I shall briefly outline.

In *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière (1999) argues that the traditional pursuit of philosophy has been to decide what is and is not ontological. In a radical step, Rancière instead proclaims that he is 'not a political philosopher' (2003: np) and so abstains from theorizing an 'ontological principle of politics' (2009a: 119). In posing the question of '[i]s there any such thing as political philosophy?', Rancière (1999: vii) launches a scathing critique of political philosophy as a paradoxical enterprise. For Rancière, in theorizing what a political process *is* we impose rigid ontological boundaries on the world that paradoxically circumscribe politics, supplanting 'the anarchic disorder of politics with [. . . the] hierarchical order of the philosopher' (Chambers, 2011: 305). Under this understanding, political philosophy is seen as

> an attempt to suspend the destabilizing potential of the political, to disavow and/or regulate it in one way or another [. . .] fixing the rules of political competition. (Žižek, 2006: 72)

Rancière's apprehensions about how we consider politics echoes Marston et al.'s (2005: 427) concern that scale theorizing limits 'the openness of the political'. However, Rancière diverges from Marston et al. (2005) in that he does not refute the value of understand pre-existing yet contestable ways of managing and making sense of the world including, I will argue, scale.

It is Rancière's twin appreciation for the lack of any ontological principle for how society ought to be ordered *and* the contingent ways in which it is that has led Marchart (2007) to group him amongst what he terms as 'post-foundational' political theorists. Marchart (2007) argues that we can distinguish post-foundational political thinkers in their common rejection of 'foundationalist' perspectives which claim that there is a 'natural' or ontological principle for how we might best organize society. They can also be distinguished from anti-foundationalists who

reject the existence of all ‘foundations’, considering them a barrier to thinking and enacting emancipatory politics (Wingenback, 2011). Instead, post-foundational thinkers assert that whilst there is no ontological principle for how we ought to order society, it is nonetheless valuable to consider socially constructed ‘foundations’ as necessary, contingent and contestable attempts to order society, space and time (Arditi, 2019; Marchart, 2007; Sparke, 2005; Wingenback, 2011).

A diverse set of these post-foundational political thinkers has gained traction amongst geographers in the past decade, including Schmitt, Ricœur, Wolin, Mouffe, Nancy, Badiou, Žižek and Rancière (Marchart, 2007; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). However, in Rancière’s work this translates into a distinct political lexicon. For Rancière politics is a ‘deviation from [. . . the] normal order of things’ (2001: 18). This order of things, in turn, is what Rancière calls the police order, which is not to be confused with the police *force.* The police refers to the broader ordering of parts and roles in a community as ‘the seemingly natural order of things’ (Dikeç, 2005: 174). Drawing upon a Kantian understanding of aesthetics as that which relates to sense-perception (Kant, 1999 [1790]), Rancière argues that the police order has a corresponding aesthetic configuration which normalizes certain ways of seeing, sensing, feeling, acting, speaking and being in the world. He terms this aesthetic configuration *le partage du sensible* (which translates as both the partition and sharing of the sensible) (Dikeç, 2012a). This distribution of the sensible – as I shall henceforth term it – refers to a shared:

> system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it [. . .] a distribution of spaces, times, and form of activity. (Rancière, 2006: 12)

As will become apparent, it is this aesthetic approach which has led me to Rancière’s work over other post-foundational political thinkers.

Distinct from Kant’s idealist understanding of space and time which influenced early conceptions of scale in the discipline, the distribution of the sensible refers to *framings of* time and space that arise in particular historical and geographical contexts (Dikeç, 2013). The police, therefore, can be understood as an incumbent governance order that is symbolic with material manifestations (Dikeç, 2012b; Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017). As Dikeç (2013: 82) observes, two premises structure Rancière’s political thinking: ‘radical contingency and radical equality’. Politics is always a possibility precisely because there is no ‘natural’, ideal or ontologically-given way to order society, even though the police order might *appear* all inclusive or natural (see Rancière, 2000: 124). Acts of politics occur, therefore, when the police order is disrupted by those that declare it ‘wrong’ and a *re*distribution of the sensible takes place (Dikeç, 2005; Rancière, 1999). As Rancière (1999: 30) argues, politics ‘undoes the perceptible divisions of the police’. For this to occur ‘a polemical common space’ must be set up, where the established way of ordering things (the police) is challenged by a different logic in the name of equality (Dikeç, 2005: 178). This manifests as a dissensus, ‘the presence of two worlds in one’, between the police distribution of the sensible and the logic of politics (Rancière, 2001: np). Equality, here, is not an end to be strived for but is instead a presupposition: politics is a verification of equality (Dikeç, 2012a; Rancière, 1999). It is a confrontation between those acting ‘in the name of equality’ and a contingent police order which ‘presupposes their inequality’ (May, 2010: 73). Space then, for Rancière, serves as both the ‘medium of fixity and change’ (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017: 14).

2 Moving beyond the ontological dichotomy

Writing in acknowledgement of the work of the late Neil Smith, Jones et al. (2017) recall a 2005 Association of American Geographers (AAG) panel where participants, including Smith, debated Marston et al.'s (2005) 'Human Geography without Scale'. Smith responded to the claim that 'scale is not an ontological category of space' (Jones et al., 2017: 147) by declaring, 'I agree with you, but you still have to understand that scale exists!' (2017: 148) – a statement that Jones et al. remark is 'somewhat contradictor[y]' (Jones et al., 2017: 148). Jones et al.'s (2017) comment here is worth recounting as it exemplifies the ontological dichotomy at play in the argument Marston et al. (2005) advanced. The choice presented is between a 'foundational' concept of scale as an 'ontological given category' (Marston et al., 2005: 419; Jones et al., 2017: 148) or their proposed 'anti-foundationalist' eradication of scale.

Instead, under a Rancierian approach, the rejection of scale as an ontological category and the acceptance of 'already-existing' scales need not be seen as mutually exclusive positions. To the contrary, Rancière's *post*-foundationalist approach enables us to consider the role of scale not as an 'ontological category of space' (Jones et al., 2017: 147), but as part of a socially-constructed police order – a normalized way of relating to the world that is inherited and contested (Dikeç, 2017). In his conception of the police, Rancière seeks not to essentialize any given social orders, but merely to recognize them alongside their 'lack of foundation' in ontology and 'the sheer contingency of any social order' (Rancière, 1999: 16). Rancière's approach is post-foundational precisely because he recognizes that commonly-held existing ideas which work to order society (such as scale) can be quite rigid, and that as they lack an ontological principle, they can always be contested. Smith, writing of post-foundationalism, has remarked:

> However much we may want to emphasise fluidity, if for no other reason than to open up political possibilities [. . .] social relations [. . .] are not infinitely fluid in any given time and place [and] can be historically and geographically quite rigid. They are fixed not in the sense of being unchangeable, universal, or philosophical necessities, but [. . .] certain kinds of social relations and interests succeed in making themselves hegemonic. One can therefore recognise quite 'foundational' social relationships, for any given society, time, or place, while implying no ontological claims whatsoever. To deny the historically and geographically contingent foundation of these social relations is to deny politics. (2008a: 173)

Rancière offers an unexplored angle for approaching 'already-existing' scale that moves beyond the ontological dichotomy presented in 'Human Geography without Scale' (Marston et al., 2005). Asserting that scale is part of a police order indeed shares much with epistemological approaches in that it points to the role of scale as a socially-constructed representational or discursive device deployed to assert or contest scale (Delaney and Leitner, 1997). However, MacKinnon (2010: 22) has argued that the focus on practice, and the discursive articulation of scales, provides a 'one-sided view' of the contingent 'product and [. . .] progenitor' relationship that I argue Rancière's frame is able to better capture. MacKinnon (2010) has similarly argued that the charge of ontological reification against those who assert that scales predate social activity is overdrawn. As I will elaborate in the subsequent section, Rancière's approach offers a way to think about how we may indeed inherit ideas about scales that work to order space without running this risk of ontological reductionism.

However, Rancière's approach is by no means a panacea. As Leitner and Miller (2007) have pointed out, there are limitations to ontological debate. Moore's (2008) comments provide a useful example to this end in suggesting that, despite his appreciation for the

social construction and contingency of scale, Smith cannot be absolved from ontological theorizing. Moore (2008) suggests Smith misunderstands ontology, citing Elden (2005), who claims that ontology is about ‘how it all hangs together’ (Searle, 1995: xi). But this is, of course, entirely dependent on what one understands ontology to be. As we have seen, for Rancière, it is the utter lack of an ontological principle that necessitates the contingent and contestable socio-spatial orders that he calls the police. So, whilst adopting a Rancièrian approach cannot be considered a silver bullet, it offers an unexplored angle that enables one to consider contingent scalar imaginaries *and* their lack of an ontological principle.

IV An aesthetic approach to scale

Whilst Rancière (1999) shares Marston et al.’s (2005) concern for the political ramifications of ontological reductionism, his solution is distinct. Instead, ‘aesthetics takes on a leading role’ whilst ontological theorizing is abstained from (Ieven, 2009: 60). Crucially, under this aesthetic approach, we do not apprehend the world in a ‘flat’ manner. We instead inherit a ‘common-sense’ way of ‘perceiving and making sense of the world’, which Rancière terms the police ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Dikeç, 2012a: 277). But what difference does it make to insist that scale is part of this distribution of the sensible rather than an ontological entity? As Moore has suggested:

> many terms [. . .] are deeply constitutive of the common-sense ‘folk sociologies’ [. . .] by which we make sense of the world. As such they tend to be reified in social thought as essential and natural entities, and these reified understandings are often uncritically adopted by social scientists as categories of analysis. (Moore, 2008: 207)

Moore (2008: 208) asserts that ‘however contingent and fluid’ we might argue scales to be, ‘once socially constructed they are treated as every bit as real and fixed as ontological givens’. But the master-stroke within Rancière’s framework is that he keeps *common-sense* ways of making sense of the world (the police) and the potential for *different* ways to make sense of the world (politics) in parallax view. Rancière terms this approach a ‘method of equality’ where, in considering the capacity of each and all to bring about politics, he seeks out ‘egalitarian articulations of an alternative world within the world as it is’ (Davidson and Iveson, 2014: 7). In other words, he is interested in dis-*sensus*, a ‘division inserted in “common sense”: a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given’ (Rancière, 2010: 77). Politics, therefore, brings about a *re*distribution of the sensible (Tolia-Kelly, 2017), such that it ‘is aesthetic in principle’ (Rancière, 1999: 58). As Derickson (2018) argues, Rancière’s method of equality compels us to reject understandings of spaces as *intrinsically* political and compels us to instead consider the political processes through which spatial imaginaries (such as scale) become denaturalized or indeed how this is resisted. Considering scales through Rancière’s aesthetic approach means that we can attend to how scales are socially constructed, how shared and pre-existing ideas about scales shape social practice, and ultimately their fallibility in the face of politics. But what does this look like in practice?

1 Scales and supplements

Rancière’s explicit comments about scale are few and far between. However, in a 2016 interview in *BibliObs* he is asked if ‘a people’ necessarily has to be national in scale (Rancière, 2016b). He first responds that a ‘people, in the political sense, always constitutes itself as something apart from the state form of the people’ (Rancière, 2016b: np). One must note that, for Rancière (1999: 22–3), the ‘people’ are those that are effectively the surplus to the

population recognizable within the police. They are the possible subject of politics, those that declare a wrong against the police and bring about a redistribution of the sensible. Instead, Rancière asserts that the national scale is 'a collective symbolisation and, like any symbolisation, it is the stakes of a permanent struggle' by the people (Rancière, 2016b: np). This is not to say that the national scale 'exists' in a metaphysical sense, but that, as the space of the police and of politics are 'enmeshed', common-sense ideas of the national scale often become *the stakes* of political struggle (Dikeç, 2012b: 673). His allusion to the state is also of note here, as one actor (though not the only actor) that works to perpetuate common-sense surrounding the national scale.

Nonetheless, as 'the spaces of politics are necessarily enmeshed with the space of the police [. . .] there are a multiplicity of possible spaces at different scales' that can be politicized (Bassett, 2014: 888). Rancière's comments about the 'world police' in the final pages of *Dis-agreement* substantiate this further, where he writes:

> The reign of globalization is not the reign of the universal [. . .] There is a world police [. . .] But there is no world politics. The 'world' can get bigger but the universal of politics does not get any bigger. (1999: 139)

For Rancière the global scale is yet another 'collective symbolisation' that is not universal or ontological precisely because it can be infinitely transformed in acts of politics (see also Rancière, 2016a: 157–9). However, what is unclear here is if scales such as the national or the global do form a 'collective symbolisation', should one consider them *as* a police distribution of the sensible or as merely as an ordering device *within* a distribution of the sensible? My inclination is the latter.

It is useful to revisit Brenner's (2001) distinction between singular and plural applications of the politics of scale to understand why. In the singular usage, 'the politics of scale denotes the production, reconfiguration or contestation of some aspect of sociospatial organisation *within* a relatively bounded geographical arena' (2001: 599). Singular conceptions, therefore, observe how a particular scale is sociohistorically constructed. In contrast, the plural usage of the term denotes the 'production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies *among* geographical scales' (2001: 600). In Agnew's (1997) discussion of political parties in Italy, for instance, he demonstrates how policing outlooks are intrinsically tied to their constructions of scale, such that 'the boundaries they draw [. . .] contingent as they may be, define the geographical scales that channel and limit their poli[cing] horizons' (1997: 118). One might simply equate this understanding with the distribution of the sensible and how it 'demarcate[s . . .] the spaces of the visible and the invisible, and articulates these allocations of parties and parts' (Rancière, 1999: 40). Such an understanding also implies a multiplicity of coexisting police distributions of the sensible. This is the understanding that Davidson and Iveson (2015: 552) advance in their reading of 'the city' through a Rancièrian frame, remarking that it is 'a naturalized police order or "distribution of the sensible"'. However, this multiplicity is problematic if we dig deeper into Rancière's thinking.

Brenner has warned that this singular usage of scale should be employed only 'in question to its *embeddedness* or *positionality* within a broader scalar hierarchy' (2001: 600, *emphasis original*). Implicit in this singular usage of scale is, therefore, an appreciation for the 'outside' of any given scale. But yet, the police 'is a partition of the sensible whose principle is the absence of a void and of a supplement' (Rancière, 2001: 8). In other words, because there is nothing that the police leaves unaccounted for, there can be no 'outside' or remainder as everything is seemingly in its place (Rancière, 2010: 36). It is for this reason that I suggest that scales can

only be conceived of *as part of* this broader aesthetic ordering. Moreover, this also implies that there cannot be a multiplicity of police distributions of the sensible. Consequently, I shall argue that scales are *part* of this assignment of place by the police. Sevilla-Buitrago (2015: 99) has similarly remarked that the distribution of the sensible might entail 'regimes of scale and place that [shape ...] our social being and forms of socialization'.

2 Scales and superimpositions

Let us return both to Rancière's comments and to an example to understand the implications of this approach. He not only observes that scales, such as 'the national' or 'the global', are often the stakes of politics, but that 'a people also constitutes itself locally, in relation to a given domination' (Rancière, 2016b: np). In *The Method of Equality*, for instance, Rancière writes that NGOs may 'fight the powers of the world government' but that they do so 'on the ground' (2016a: 159). Rancière's point is that even though scales might be at stake, politics is always rooted in local 'fractures' from which 'egalitarian logic' works to disrupt the police (1999: 137). Rancière gives the example of the Spanish *Indignados* who pitted themselves against the national-scale logic of austerity (Rancière, 2016b), a case well-rehearsed amongst Rancièrian thinkers in Geography (Bassett, 2014; García-Lamarca, 2017; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2015). The *Indignados* ('the outraged') are a self-titled group of anti-austerity activists who, following the arrest of 24 demonstrators during a protest against neo-liberal economic reforms on 15 May 2011, set up camp in Puerta del Sol square in Madrid, Spain (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015). As Sevilla-Buitrago (2015: 11) suggests, in setting up camp the movement reappropriated public space to create a 'space of appearance', a space 'from which a new democratising political sequence may unfold' (Swyngedouw, 2014: 174). This 'space of appearance' broke with the given order of 'where the voices of the people could be expressed, what they could say and how they could narrate and represent public space' (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015: 11).

In demanding their right to equality, Puerta del Sol square became a 'a polemical common space' (Dikeç, 2005: 178), a produced space from which politics may – or may not – arise (Davidson and Iveson, 2014: 137–152; Dikeç, 2005, 2016). This attempt to construct a 'local' space of appearance for the *Indignados* also took place within the space of the police (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2016). A polemical space, therefore, is one where there are 'two worlds in one and the same world', a space where 'two logics' for making sense of the world meet (Rancière, 1999: 32). On the one hand, there was a national-scale logic in Spain which identified that the cost of the crisis ought to be borne by the public (Bassett, 2014). On the other, the demonstrators provided 'localised inscriptions' of a different logic, whereby the commodification of public space and the pandering to the financial markets is eradicated (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2014: 171). In this sense, Puerta del Sol square became a polemical space precisely because it became an aesthetic superimposition between this national-scale logic and the local scene, staged by the *Indignados,* which declares it as wrong (Rancière, 2016b). Scale, here, provides the spatialized language to consider how this polemical space emerged on the ground. Moreover, the risk of 'already-existing' scales imposing a 'cordoned register for resistance' (Marston et al., 2005: 427) is mitigated by actively considering such moments of dissensus, where common-sense surrounding scales are disrupted through an alternative logic.

As we have noted, individual scales cannot be taken in isolation. Swyngedouw (2014: 171) remarks that Puerta del Sol square was an 'embryonic' politicization, inspiring similar movements across Spain. Reminiscent of the

scale-jumping chants of 'Tompkins Square Everywhere' (Smith, 2010 [1984]), the *Indignados* claimed '[w]e're here, but anyway its global, and we're everywhere' (Swyngedouw, 2014: 182). Rancière similarly considers scale-jumping tactics during the civil unrest that spread through Paris in May 1968. Following the expulsion of the movement's leader, the German-Jewish Daniel Cohn-Bendit, from Paris in May 1968, Rancière notes how demonstrators 'declared, against all police evidence, "We are all German Jews"' (1999: 59). Be it in claiming that 'we are all German Jews', that the *Indignados* are 'global' or 'Tompkins Square Everywhere', it is also clear that not only are ideas about individual scales often the stakes of political claims, but that claims are made against a wider 'gestalt of scale' (Smith, 1987: 63) which is declared as 'wrong' (Rancière, 1999: 6). Moreover, in doing so, the qualities of one scale (e.g. the polemical status of Puerta del Sol square) can be utilized to inspire claims to or around another (e.g. the *Indignados* being global).

Finally, it is important to respond to the concern amongst commentators that Rancière's thought, and post-foundational political thinking more generally, leads to a diminished frame to consider the political (Beveridge and Koch, 2017). What does an approach which reserves the term politics for demands of equality mean for scale theorists? As Dikeç (2017) has responded to Beveridge and Koch's (2017: 32) claim that Rancière's 'restricted' conceptualization 'reduces the realm of political action', one can instead argue the contrary – that this is an expansionary frame. In insisting that anyone can 'become a political subject and anything a political issue', Rancière's frame is remarkedly open, expanding our horizons for thinking about how spatial orders are reconfigured (Dikeç, 2017: 52). Equally, this does not stop us considering how common-sense surrounding scales is transformed through already-existing governance mechanisms such as party politics. For this I lean upon Marchart's (2011) term 'minimal politics', as a reordering of power within the possibilities of what the police permits. Take, for instance, the minimal politics of Brexit or the Scottish independence movement as a neat example of this. It is indeed important to hold on to a lexicon that can describe how changes within a police order occur, which nonetheless work to redefine our common-sense surrounding scales.

V Conclusion: Scales, aesthetics and a method of equality

I have argued that Rancière's framework provides one way forward for human geography's scale debate. I have argued that the divides amongst commentators often stem from their position on how scale relates to ontology. Take, for instance, those that consider scales as an 'already partitioned geography' (Smith, 1993: 101) and those that reject this as ontological reification (MacKinnon, 2010; Moore, 2008). These ontological divides are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the debates that played out subsequent to Marston et al.'s (2005) rejection of scale and proposal of a 'flat' ontology in its place.

Rancière's aesthetic approach, however, offers an alternative solution to this 'problem of ontological reductionism' (Ieven, 2009: 60). I have suggested that scales might be considered as part of Rancière's police 'distribution of the sensible', 'an established set of possible modes of perception' that shape conduct in particular historical and geographic contexts (Tolia-Kelly, 2017: 127). In this vein, our common-sense ideas about scale precede and shape social activity, working to frame time and space in different ways, along with what is seen as in and out of place. However, as our 'common-sense' surrounding scales lacks an ontological principle, politics is always a possibility. Far from limiting 'entry points into politics', scale as a 'vertical imaginary' can form the *stakes* of politics (Marston et al., 2005: 427, 420). It is vital, therefore,

to recognize existing, commonly-held ideas about scale to understand how they are supplanted (Leitner and Miller, 2007).

Whilst Rancièrian thinkers within Geography have (often implicitly) utilized scale in divergent ways, in this piece I have suggested that it is important to consider any given scale not in isolation but in relation to a wider distribution of the sensible. In keeping scales and the opportunity for their contestation in parallax view, a Rancièrian approach can more fully account for scale as a 'product and a progenitor' of social activity than epistemological approaches (MacKinnon, 2010: 22). Moreover, given that scales take the form of contingent, shared understandings that are at once symbolic with material manifestations (Dikeç, 2012b; Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017), this approach is able to bring together idealist approaches which understand scales as 'mental contrivances' and materialist understandings of scales as produced through political struggle (Herod, 2003: 21). Nonetheless, as Leitner and Miller (2007) suggest, there are limitations to ontological debate and this approach cannot be considered as a panacea.

It is also important not to neglect the intent of the arguments at play. Those warning against scale-theorizing as 'ontological reification' have done so out of a concern that our frames of analysis foreclose the opportunity to consider alternative configurations. This is indeed important to consider and Rancière's approach can mediate this risk. As Davidson and Iveson (2015) have argued, the full implications of Rancière's 'method of equality' have not been attended to in human geography. His method focuses attention on those moments when our existing ideas about scales are disrupted through politics (Iveson, 2015). The point here is that we ought not only to consider common-sense on what scales 'exist', but also those moments when scales are contested (Davidson and Iveson, 2015). Indeed, whilst as Marston et al. (2005: 420) rightly point out, we do not encounter scales '"up there" in a vertical imaginary, but on the ground, in practice', this is not to say that these shared, vertical imaginaries do not matter. Under the Rancièrian method, the task for scale theorists is to consider those moments when common-sense on these vertical imaginaries is met with dissensus 'on the ground' (Rancière, 2016a: 159).

Finally, this paper poses broader challenges. How, for instance, might other post-foundational political thinkers or aesthetic thinkers infuse understandings of scale? Moreover, the scale debate's impact extends beyond the concept itself, with Marston et al.'s (2005) 'flat', site-based ontology being part of a broader disciplinary shift towards relational approaches (Anderson et al., 2012; Jones, 2010). But as Gerhardt (2020) has warned, a focus on sites and relations alone may lead to the oversight of those forces that order them. Rancière's aesthetic and dissensual approach might also, therefore, be a fruitful means to consider 'common-sense' concepts that work to order space more generally (such as territory, place, scale or combinations thereupon) whilst avoiding the risks of ontological reductionism and remaining sensitive to emergent politics (Jessop et al., 2008; Leitner et al., 2008; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Amy Barron, Erik Swyngedouw, Alison Browne, Jonathan Darling, James Evans, Scott Prudham and Lazaros Karaliotas. I am also grateful to the editors and anonymous reviews. All errors and interpretations remain my own.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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