

Bodies, borders and scales

Abstract: In this presentation, I draw on insights from feminist geographies to show the ways in which power is inscribed on bodies through processes of bordering. I first discuss the delineation and enforcement of borders between 'public' and 'private', and the complex ways in which those borders are challenged in feminist geographies. I then discuss the concept of scale, which has been the subject of detailed scrutiny in the discipline of geography. I show how attention to scalar practices and scalar politics offers new insights into the ways in which borders are embodied and bodies are bordered.

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Geographers – whether interested in people or the physical environment – think about the world in spatial ways. Other disciplines have been paying attention: the so-called ‘spatial turn’ has been identified in – among others - history, politics, economics, media studies, education, health research, literary studies and law. However, though the spatial turn provides alternative metaphors for the social sciences and humanities, it often remains at this metaphorical level. The fundamental concepts of geography, which come with their own histories and contested meanings, are often taken at face value by proponents of the spatial turn in other disciplinary contexts.

This paper focuses on a small number of these fundamental concepts. While I pay particular attention to scale and borders, both of which have received renewed attention in recent years, these have to be understood in terms of broader debates in geography around space, place and identity. Space and place are particularly important, and their relative importance and meanings have shifted and changed with broader concerns in the discipline. I don’t intend to rehearse these debates today, other than to point to two central ways in which these terms are now understood and operationalized within geography. The first comes from Henri Lefebvre, a philosopher whose work has been very influential in human geography. Lefebvre wrote about social space, which he saw as being both concrete (objects and things) and abstract. He was particularly interested how abstract space – the space of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism – came to dominate (Lefebvre 1991). More recently, geographer Doreen Massey has described place as dynamic, as comprised of networks and connections, and as marked by conflicts rather than being homogenous and cohesive (Massey 1991; 2005). Though writing at different times and in different contexts, both Lefebvre and Massey came to similar conclusions about the messiness of space and place – Massey described space as ‘thrown-together’ (Massey 2005), Lefebvre as ‘encounter, assembly, simultaneity’ (1991: 101) - and the need to challenge essentialist understandings of the relationship between space/place and identity.

In what is now a substantial body of work that is both empirical and theoretical, feminist geographers show how spaces and places are produced by, and in turn are

productive of, social identities. Henri Lefebvre expressed this succinctly when he said that “social space is a social product” (Lefebvre 1991). There is, as feminist and critical geographers have pointed out, a clear hierarchy in the production of space. These spatial hierarchies are best understood through the concept of scale, a much-debated concept within contemporary geography. The traditional understanding of scale in geography is as an ontological reality. Geographers often first encounter scale in maps, where the concept is used to translate the world into its representation. Scale, in this context, represents the extent of the manipulation required to provide you with a particular image. It is a mathematical formula, expressed with authority as a ratio. This understanding of scale coexists, in geography, with other, less certain definitions. Scale is also used to signify areas, which range in size from the micro to the macro, from the local to the global. These scales are often represented as nested, with local incorporated into regional, which in turn is incorporated into national and global. This way of thinking about scale operates through an explicit hierarchy. While the naming of the different scales varies, the sense that some scales are more important than others persists. This hierarchical ordering of scales has implications for how knowledge is understood, with greater priority and importance afforded for stories that purport to be encompassing. Walter Mignolo described this as ‘global designs’: he argued that the key difference between particular groups and places was the extent to which they wanted to extend their influence and control (Mignolo 2000; 2007) Hierarchical thinking, such as a scalar understanding of the world, operates with global design. And, through the creation of hierarchies, the world is parceled up into *more* and *less* important and significant scales and places.

What would it mean, then, to think differently about scale? One, more radical, suggestion is that we abandon the concept of hierarchical scale and insist, instead, on what its authors call a ‘flat ontology’. Marston et al, in making this suggestion, claim that scale is ‘deficient...it is bound to reproduce a small-large imaginary and with that, pre-configured accounts of social life’ (2005: 422). Their alternative – what they call a ‘site ontology’ – considers the ways in which given, particular sites assemble, and how these particular sites enable and limit movements and practices (2005: 425-6). Their argument is provocative: it suggests that hierarchical views of the world are

so embedded and problematic that they cannot be rehabilitated. Yet, as later commentators have pointed out, it is difficult to operationalize a flat ontology. With this in mind, Adam Moore offers an alternative. Rather than thinking of scale as a category of analysis, he suggests that we see scale as a category of practice (Moore 2008).

Understanding scale in terms of practice rather than analysis has implications for how we think about politics. It points out that scales, and their meanings, are constructed rather than natural. States offer an excellent example of this practice. They construct citizens as linked to bounded territory, and reinforce these social and spatial constructions through everyday practices. The state as a scale is thus constructed as natural, and its naturalness is reinforced through material and symbolic practices (Moore 2008: 214-5). The appeal to the need to defend the state – for example, from the dangers posed by mobile pregnant women to Ireland – may result in a profound redefinition of the state and the grounds of belonging and inclusion. This example – of so-called ‘citizenship tourists’ – shows the relationship between what Moore called ‘scale politics’ and ‘spatial politics’: it tries to ‘crystallize certain sociospatial arrangements in consciousness and practice in order to further social, political or cultural aims’ (Moore 2008: 218). Thus, the changes to Ireland’s citizenship laws, justified as a return to ‘commonsense citizenship’, used the scale of the state to implement more restricted forms of political belonging for particular individuals.

Scale politics and spatial politics are also clearly evident in another key geographical concept, that of borders. When we think about borders, the dominant image is that of the international border between two sovereign states. Those borders are often material: marked by physical features that range from checkpoints to walls, fences, and trenches, and guarded by forces of the state such as members of the police, army, customs and immigration. We see examples of this in the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland during the Troubles, or in the expanding Border Fence between the US and Mexico. This understanding of the border as a “static, permanent” line (Johnson et al. 2011: 65) dominates: it marks

both the extent and the limits of state sovereignty and, in doing so, reinforces the perceived importance of the state.

Fixing the border – both materially and symbolically – is the stuff of traditional geopolitics, which is mostly concerned with the various relationships between states, often expressed through an interest in topics such as security, immigration, militarism, warfare, and international relations (ref). As feminist scholars have pointed out, though, even traditional geopolitics has had to expand its understanding of the border between states. The border has been spatially stretched, both within and beyond sovereign state territory. The Secure Communities programme in the United States provides an example of the expansion of the internal border. Under this programme, local police submitted fingerprint data of people arrested for minor crimes to federal immigration authorities; and were required to detain these people for deportation if they were identified as undocumented. In this way, the policing of the US border does not just take place at a permanent, identifiable site, but also happens in a mobile way in local communities. The expansion of the border beyond sovereign state territory happens through offshore processing. We have long had an example of this in Ireland, where the US Customs and Border Protection Unit operates pre-clearance facilities in Dublin and Shannon – two of a number it operates around the world, including Canada, Bahamas, Bermuda, Aruba and Abu Dhabi. However, offshore processing is increasingly directed at more vulnerable migrants: for example, Australia's so-called Pacific Solution, which operated from 2001-2007 and was recently reinvigorated, involved redrawing the borders of Australia to exclude thousands of islands, intercepting asylum seekers at sea, and processing their claims in other countries, such as Papua New Guinea (Manus Island) and Nauru. There are also periodic calls for the introduction of offshore processing of asylum seekers by the EU, most recently in March 2015. In addition to the spatial stretching of the border, it has also become embodied. Louise Amoore describes this as the 'biometric border': the use of digital technologies in the politics of border management, *and* the encoding of security (and risk) onto individual bodies. As she writes, "the body, in effect, becomes the carrier of the border" (2006: 347-8).

Contemporary critical geography, in this way, deconstructs both scale and borders, showing how they are socially and spatially produced in the service of abstract space. However, the extent to which this deconstruction serves to dismantle hierarchical constructions of space and of knowledge is inconsistent. This is where feminist geography comes in. In their effort to link feminism to geopolitics, Marston and Dixon are explicit about what feminism means in this context. They assert that the role of feminism is to “unsettle the implied fixity of social categories” while practicing an “ethics of care” that offers a commitment to understanding the materialities of the everyday lives of others (2011: 446). For feminist geographers, this act of unsettling relates not just to social categories, but also to spatial categories. ‘Home’ was the first such spatial category to come under scrutiny: the idealization of home in humanistic thought masked its potential as a site of (social, economic, political and cultural) oppression, and its role in confining women to private spaces through a process of spatial entrapment (Rose 1993). Indeed, the sense of spatial entrapment was associated with normative views of appropriate places for both men and women: for men, the public domains of the workforce, the political arena and the street; for women, the private spaces of domestic labour, childrearing, and (unpaid) care. Women who ventured outside these private spaces encountered a range of (often negative) reactions. Ireland offers a striking example of this, from the discursive construction of home as women’s place in the Constitution to the removal of women from workplaces and public places and their incarceration in places of ‘discipline and reformation’ (Crowley and Kitchin 2008: 364). In these diverse ways, the place of women was bordered, and border transgressions were punished. The policing of gendered spatial borders continues today, in a range of different contexts. A clear example is Singapore’s insistence on periodic pregnancy tests for migrant domestic workers: a pregnant migrant must either have an abortion or leave the country (UN Women 2013). Other examples of bordering are less explicit. In the context of women in the workplace, for example, they are given spatial form through metaphors such as the glass ceiling or the maternal wall (Smith et al 2012). Taken together, though, they serve to write borders on bodies: to assert an essentialist understanding of the relationship between identities and space that has relevance not just in relation to gender, but also race, ethnicity, sexuality and other identity categories. In doing so, they

reinforce what Lefebvre described as dominant abstract space, more concerned with prohibitions than solicitations. As he wrote, 'it is impossible to say how often one pauses uncomfortably for a moment on some threshold – the entrance of a church, office or 'public' building, or on the point of access to a "foreign" place – while passively, and usually "unconsciously", accepting a prohibition of some kind' (Lefebvre 1991).

The embodied border thus draws on a long tradition of scholarship within feminist geography. However, the idea of scale as embodied has yet to be adequately developed. Instead, despite claims to the contrary, discussions of scale focus on showing its power, with examples drawn from states and global corporations. Yet, as Lefebvre pointed out, 'it would be mistaken ... to picture a hierarchical scale stretching between two poles... For everything (the "whole") weighs down on the ... "micro" level [and] everything also *depends* on this level: exploitation and domination, protection and – inseparably – repression' (1991: 366). Marston and Dixon clarify this further when they argue for the significance of seeing the "force relations that operate through and upon [...] bodies, such that particular subjectivities are enhanced, constrained and put to work, and particular corporealities are violated, exploited and often abandoned' (2011: 445). Scale as embodied, then, considers the different force relations that operate on bodies, whether these are material and/or symbolic in their actions and effects. The deportation of asylum seekers and of Irish citizen children shows scale as embodied, with the removal of a 'foreign body' constructed as necessary for the health of the nation. But inaction is as important as action in understanding how scale is embodied. In this light, the general failure to deport US or Australian visa overstayers from Ireland shows the ways in which other bodies are constructed as acceptable and in place. Immigration policy and practice certainly shows how borders are embodied. They also highlight the ways in which scale – an overarching concept that incorporates borders – is embodied, and the need to pay attention to this process rather than accepting scales as natural and given.

In his recent work on the legal spatial turn, Philippopolous-Mihalopolous argued that the conceptualization of space within legal theory was limited and restricted. He

highlighted and critiqued the dominance of the jurisdiction: the space within which law operates that is assumed to be fixed and bounded (2010). Yet, in his long account of the legal spatial turn, the broader question of hierarchy remains obscured. I want to suggest that an embodied approach to borders and to scale offers us a way of challenging hierarchical thinking, whether this is through understanding the spatial hierarchies of legal practice (for example, the prominence of the court); the scalar hierarchies of courts (from district to supreme); and the scalar violence that translates the materialities of everyday lives (or concrete spatialities) into abstract space (the legal judgments that are an integral part of how states are constructed).

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