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What is This?
Working space: why incorporating the geographical is central to theorizing work and employment practices

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ABSTRACT
Theorists of work and employment (W&E) practices should more seriously engage with literatures concerning how space is constitutive of social praxis. Rather than simply serving as a stage upon which social life is played out or being merely a reflection of social relations, the construction of the economic landscape in particular ways is fundamental to how social systems function. Struggles over space are a central dynamic in W&E practices as different actors engage with the economic landscape to ensure their ‘geographical vision’ is emplaced in that landscape. Furthermore, conflicts over W&E practices frequently revolve around the spatial (re)scaling of such practices (as when collective bargaining is ‘decentralized’). Consequently, an important key to better theorizing W&E practices is understanding how the various spatial scales at which these operate are socially constructed and discursively represented.

KEY WORDS
geographical scale / geography of capitalism / place / socio-spatial dialectic / space / spatial fix / spatiality
Introduction

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (Edward Said, 1994: 7)

Issues of spatiality (by which we mean how social life is organized geographically) appear to be squarely ‘on’ the intellectual agenda within contemporary social theory. Of course, some might point to the long tradition of comparative research in a slew of disciplines and question whether they were ever really ‘off’ it: after all, it is the similarities and differences between locations which give meaning to comparative research. However, what is different about this contemporary ‘(re)assertion of space in critical social theory’ (Soja, 1989) is that it is marked by a very much deeper interrogation of the role of space in structuring social life and how this geographical structuring can enable or constrain economic and political praxis. Such interrogations do not seek merely to understand how economic and political processes play out across space – a rather naïve ‘geography is important because everywhere is different’ approach wherein the economic landscape is conceived simply as a reflection of the social relations of life or as a passive ‘stage’ upon which such relations play out. Rather, recent conceptual developments have pointed to a more profound appreciation of geography as constitutive of social praxis, as something with which social actors must actively engage. Such developments, in Massey’s (1984a: 4) words, suggest that spatial patterns are ‘not just an outcome [of social relations but are] part of the explanation’ of those relations.

From distinctions between ‘space’ and ‘place’ (Taylor, 1999) to ideas such as the ‘spatial division of labour’ (Massey, 1984b), and from analyses of how labour markets are geographically structured (Peck, 1996) to the idea that social actors’ spatial embeddedness and ‘locality dependence’ (Cox and Mair, 1988) shape their economic and political praxis in important ways, a vibrant conceptualization has sought to build space into the study of work, employment and resistance. Much of this effort has been conducted by geographers working within the field of ‘labour geography’ (Herod, 2001). However, although there are exceptions (see the second section after this Introduction), such advances in conceptualizing the role of space in structuring how capitalism works appear generally to have bypassed the study of work and employment (Herod et al., 2003), for three interrelated reasons. First, research on work and employment (W&E) tends to conceptualize economic actors as ‘contained’ within particular spatial units such as workplaces or towns, which are viewed as discrete social and geographical entities (ontologically, in other words, the spaces which actors inhabit are viewed as existing prior to such actors’ social practices and hence are seen as unconnected to them). Second, there has been a tendency to view geography as little more than a complicating contextual factor. Third, much work has conceived of W&E practices as unfolding upon an empty spatial stage called
‘place’ without evaluating how that stage is itself constructed and plays a constitutive role in shaping W&E practices.

We suggest such a lack of engagement is regrettable, for an appreciation of how economic actors engage with geographical difference and how the spatial relations of work life can be actively structured to facilitate particular economic and political goals can help us more clearly understand W&E practices. For instance, seeking to develop national contracts requires that unions ponder several explicitly geographical questions. In trying to create a geographically uniform wage surface, should they seek to bring all places up to the level of the highest paid, should they establish a minimum below which no part of the economic landscape should be permitted to fall, or should they seek some kind of ‘spatial average’ of conditions across the nation? Equally, how will ‘national contracts’ incorporate ‘local specificities’? Likewise, as transformations in the nature of work organization (e.g. outsourcing) alter work’s spatial structure, will new, post-Fordist models of labour organizing appropriate for these new spatial arrangements be required (Herod, 2007; Wial, 1994)?

The purpose of this article, then, is to further the encounter between W&E studies and labour geography by presenting a broad overview of the theoretical debates within the geographic literature and to show how engaging with this literature helps us theorize W&E practices better. The rest of the article divides into four sections. In the first we consider the example of ‘globalization’ to highlight why it is important to consider matters of place and space not merely as conceptual afterthoughts but as central to understanding how W&E practices are constituted and work out. In the second we outline an approach to theorizing the geography of capitalism. The third addresses the ‘rescaling’ of W&E practices, arguing that a more sophisticated understanding of what geographers have called the ‘politics of scale’ helps to understand such rescaling. Finally, we offer a summary section which outlines why adopting a more spatially sophisticated approach to theorizing W&E better practices will allow us to conceptualize and understand such practices. Through this article, then, we seek to render geographical theory and concepts more accessible and meaningful to the W&E research community while deepening and developing that interface. As such, ours is largely a conceptual article, laying out the argument for why this is important. Interested readers may consult a more empirically focused companion article (Rainnie et al., forthcoming) for several case studies illustrating how social actors’ engagement with the spatiality of the economic landscape influences their behaviour.

**Why worry about space and place? The case of globalization**

When seeking to understand W&E practices, why should we worry about space (the generalized product of social forces) and place (the particular locales within a landscape which are imbued with meaning) (McGrath-Champ, 2006; Taylor, 1999)? Perhaps we can begin to answer this question by considering one basic
example: the debate over globalization. Specifically, many of the triumphalist neoliberal claims concerning globalization (e.g. Ohmae, 1990, 2005) – and not a few of the fears expressed by left-wing fatalists – rest upon particular claims about geography. First, they assume that capital, as a totality, is inherently more geographically mobile than is labour, as a totality, and that, consequently, the best thing workers can do is make ‘their’ communities more attractive to mobile capital vis-a-vis others with whom they are in competition for investment (e.g. Bryan and Farrell, 1996; Kanter, 1995). In this formulation, capital is viewed as capable of transcending space while labour is necessarily confined to place, a confinement which will encourage workers to be quiescent if they hope to secure their economic futures through drawing mobile capital to their community. Second, such a formulation assumes that globalization is heralding ‘the death of distance’ (Cairncross, 2001) and leading us towards a ‘borderless world’ in which ‘nothing is overseas any longer’ (Ohmae, 1990: viii) and the ‘world is flat’ (Friedman, 2006). In such a world, the argument goes, the ‘traction of distance’ (the ‘dragging’ effect that crossing space has on social actors’ degrees of interaction) and geographical location are no longer important – if corporations can ship commodities from one part of the world to any other in little more than 24 or 48 hours, then where they choose to locate production facilities makes little difference (Herod, 2000).

This simple example highlights the geographical conundrums associated with theorizing a process such as globalization where, in the same account, geography both explains everything (capital’s spatial mobility allows it to play workers against each other, whereas labour’s immobility encourages quiescence) and yet is also seen as completely irrelevant (firms can choose to locate their production pretty much anywhere and still serve a global market). However, it also points the way to how a more geographically sensitive approach can reveal important lacunae in such theorizing. Thus, understanding how certain segments of capital (e.g. public utilities, large industrial plants, mortgage companies dependent upon realizing loans made in particular places) have significant sunk costs which prevent their ready relocation to greener pastures shows us that place, and being spatially entrapped in particular places, clearly matters not just for workers but also for such forms of capital. Indeed, many capitalists are just as fixed in place as are workers (and some are more so, given that workers may migrate), a geographical reality which encourages them to engage in boosterist politics to ensure the economic vitality of the communities within which they are located and, thus, their own survival (Molotch, 1976).

Furthermore, as globalization breaks down spatial barriers of distance as Ohmae suggests, small differences in the quality and cost of labour on offer across the planet take on signal importance. Thus, while globalization allows mobile capital to roam planetarily for the best investment opportunities, where such capital chooses in point of fact to locate often hinges upon almost imperceptible differences in conditions between places. The result is that rather than location becoming increasingly irrelevant in a shrinking globe, the specificities of location actually become more important.
Globalization is clearly a geographical process which is transforming the social and spatial relationships between actors located in different parts of the globe. An understanding of space and how it is produced, manipulated and addressed, then, can provide important insights into how W&E relations are reworked as various segments of capital and labour pursue their interests in particular places.

**Locating space and place**

In presenting our critique of much W&E work, we certainly do not claim to be the first to explore matters geographical, for there have been a number of attempts recently to develop a more complete picture of capitalist political economy which incorporate some concept of geography. Thus, Thompson (2003) argues that contradictions within firms (what he calls the ‘intra-domain’) are leading to new ‘inter-domain’ (inter-firm) relationships and the emergence of a more ‘disconnected capitalism’, as firms increasingly solve their internal labour problems through subcontracting and decentralization. However, he largely fails to explore the geographical implications of this development. Thus, although he argues for the necessity of pursuing the connections between various ‘territories’, he uses this term rather metaphorically to mean the realms of the labour process, employment relations, firm governance structures, capital and product markets. Certainly, we do not have a problem with spatial metaphor, but we would argue that there is also a spatial materiality to such restructuring – whatever else they may be, subcontracting and decentralization are fundamentally about creating new geographical relationships between economic actors. Likewise, while Thompson argues the importance of taking on board insights to be gleaned from the ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature (Coates, 2000; Hall and Soskice, 2001), again he does not explore the geographical implications of this form of analysis – how, for instance, do the particularities of place impact subcontracting and decentralization?

More recently, Felstead et al. (2005) have explored changes in the nature of work location. Specifically, they argue that spaces and times of work are no longer clearly delineated from the rest of life, with work being undertaken in a variety of locations which are not necessarily set aside for work-related tasks (e.g. airports). Indeed, for white collar employees technological changes have made it possible to work on-line at virtually any time and anywhere, such that work is increasingly being done in three socio-spatial contexts: collective offices, at home and on the move. As a way to conceptualize this development, Felstead et al. argue for drawing distinctions between ‘work stations’ (the immediate location where work takes place), ‘work places’ (the buildings designated for work) and ‘work scapes’ (the total network of places and work stations, comprising specific sites and the telecommunications that link them). Certainly, this represents an interesting way of addressing new spatialities of work, but it still reflects a view of place as little more than a stage upon which
work and workers are located and relocated. Other studies likewise frequently
utilize spatialized language, such as when talking of how various ‘levels’ of the
state interact (i.e. how the state is spatially scaled at the local, regional and
national level) and the movements of people, goods, capital and information
between places (which implies spatial relationships between different parts of
the Earth’s surface). However, whereas such studies often situate social actors
spatially, their theorizations are generally not spatially informed. In such pieces
geography is nodded at, but not wholly embraced (Ellem, 2006).

For sure, there have been W&E studies that implicitly – if not explicitly –
take on board the approach we are promoting (see for example Taylor and
Bain’s 2005 piece on how Indian call-centre workers are becoming embedded
in new socio-spatial articulations because of having to answer calls from
European or North American customers; though see Rainnie et al., forthcom-
ing, for a critique). Arguably, though, it is Ellem (2006) who has gone furthest
in explicitly outlining the implications of a more geographically informed anal-
ysis of W&E practices. Drawing from research on unionization in the Pilbara
region of Western Australia, he argues there are five elements of W&E prac-
tices wherein geographically informed theory is essential. The first involves
understanding how capital and labour may have quite different orientations
towards space, differences which can lead to conflict (capital may see particu-
lar places as locations for profit generation whereas workers may see them as
locations for social reproduction). Second, analysts must be aware of the rela-
tionship between physical and social geographies (i.e. to what degree does a
place’s physical geography [e.g. natural resource availability] shape its social
geography?). Third, any understanding of labour markets must recognize that
they are regulated in locally specific ways. Fourth, workers must be seen as
‘spatial agents’ who actively produce economic landscapes. Finally, how social
life is articulated is fundamentally shaped by the geographic scales at which
it is organized.

As a way of providing some greater theoretical clarity on the importance of
a spatial perspective for W&E studies, then, here we will explore debates over
two matters spatial that are central to how W&E practices are structured: what
geographers call the ‘production of space’ and the ‘politics of geographical
scale’. Specifically, we will explore ideas of the ‘socio-spatial dialectic’, the ‘spa-
tial fix’, the ‘politics of place’, and (in the following section) the ‘politics of geo-
graphical scale’. These concepts take us away from the view that space is merely
a reflection of social relations and towards one in which space is understood to
be constitutive thereof, and in which different representations of space and scale
can have significant political and theoretical implications.

Making the geography of capitalism

The argument that it is important to theorize the spatial relations of social life
are important to theorize is deeply intertwined with the notion of the ‘produc-
tion of space’, in other words, how economic and social landscapes are actively
struggled over or ‘produced’. Central to this idea is the concept of the ‘socio-spatial dialectic’ (Soja, 1989), which views spatial relations and social relations as mutually constituting each other. So, spatiality is both a material product of social relations but also shapes them. This approach to understanding the operation of capitalism has been most fleshed out by a number of Marxist geographers such as Harvey (1982), for whom the key to understanding how capitalism operates is to recognize that, for accumulation to proceed, the economic landscape must be structured in particular ways – as a landscape of profitability rather than unprofitability, for instance. This necessitates capitalists ensuring – individually or collectively – that they have workers on hand who can access a particular workplace, that raw materials can reach factories, that finished commodities can reach consumers and that information and capital can flow to where they are needed. All of these considerations require a certain spatial arrangement of investments in plant, infrastructure and the built environment more generally – what Harvey calls the ‘spatial fix’. Because accumulation needs vary historically and spatially, capitalism’s geography takes on particular appearances at different historical moments, for ‘the territorial and regional coherence that … is at least partially discernible within capitalism is actively produced rather than passively received as a concession to “nature” or “history”’ (Harvey, 1982: 416–17). At the same time, though, the way in which the landscape is structured materially shapes how social relations unfold – hence the spatial relocation of jobs from one place to another will impact workplace politics greatly.

A significant insight provided by Harvey, particularly given the triumphalist ‘end of geography’ rhetoric, is the proposition that even the most footloose capital can never be entirely free of spatial constraints or considerations because capitalists must always negotiate two contradictory spatial tendencies – the need for sufficient geographical mobility to be able to seek out investment opportunities in new locations, and the need for sufficient geographical fixity so that accumulation may occur. This is because, as Marx pointed out, capital can only ever be in one of two states during the circulation process – motion or fixity – and it can never remain permanently in either state if self-expansion is to occur. Drawing from Marx, Harvey argues that because capital and commodities exist in space as well as in time, fixity in time also implies fixity in space, while motion through time usually implies motion through space. Put another way, even the most flighty of capital must come to ground at some point, since for all of their innovative capacities capitalists have not yet found, at least to our knowledge, an ethereal way of accumulating capital. Thus, the trillions of dollars which circle the planet daily can never entirely escape the draw of space, for they must flow from place to place through particular sets of infrastructures (roads, railways, fibre-optic networks, satellite connections and the like), all of which have specific spatialities to them, and must, at some point, come to rest in the stock markets and other corners of the global financial system to be managed by brokers and analysts who themselves are fixed in place and who rely upon local business networks within which they are spatially and socially imbricated.
There is, however, a paradox in all this. Specifically, as time passes and as new modes of production organization or commodity distribution come into being, capitalists may find themselves increasingly constrained by the very economic landscapes which facilitated accumulation previously – as when new forms of transportation technology (e.g. the internal combustion engine) require new spatial infrastructures (roads) as they replace older forms (railways) and the spatial infrastructures (train tracks) around which the built environment had previously been structured. To escape the constraints of the spatial fixity that was appropriate at one historical moment but may no longer be so, capital must construct new forms of the built environment – it must build ‘a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time’ (Harvey, 1978: 124). The paradox, therefore, is two-fold: not only are the spatial configurations which are appropriate at one historical moment not necessarily appropriate at another, but in its effort to escape the constraints of old spatial fixes, capital must produce new spatial fixes. Not only, then, is there a dialectic between space and social relations, but there is also one between the past and the present – the landscapes of the past shape how those of the present are made, even as the creation of such new landscapes gradually erases those of the past.

Although Harvey (1978: 124) has focused primarily on how ‘capital represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image’, this approach has been critiqued for forgetting that workers also seek to shape the landscape in ways they see as beneficial (Herod, 2001). For example, while industrialists may wish to relocate to suburban locations, central city workers may prefer factories remain in urban areas. All of this shows that capital and labour can have quite different visions for how they would like the economic landscape to evolve. Equally, it suggests that different segments within the categories of ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ may have quite different visions for the future development of the economic landscape. Thus suburban capitalists may not want urban firms to relocate for fear that labour scarcities will drive up wages, while one group of workers’ (central city) loss may be another’s (suburban) gain. The point is that different groups of social actors may prefer to see quite different economic landscapes put in place, such that much of the political and economic conflict between them revolves around questions of whose preferred spatial fix will be implemented and how this will, in turn, be challenged by those with competing visions.

The politics of place

‘Place’ has typically been conceived of in rather unproblematic terms, simply as the spot in which W&E activity occurs. However, as Agnew (1987) has argued, the term ‘place’ can be seen to incorporate three related aspects of locality: place as ‘location’ (a distinct point on the Earth’s surface); place as ‘locale’ (a physical arena for everyday life); and place as a ‘locus of identity’ (a focus for
personal and collective loyalty, affect and commitment). Each has different implications for understanding W&E practices. Thus, a locality’s absolute location on the Earth’s surface determines the judicial framework within which its inhabitants must operate – communities in South Wales and those in New South Wales must structure their W&E practices according to quite different legal systems, for instance. At the same time, its location relative to other communities will have dramatic implications for political and economic praxis in ways that are understandable only if one appreciates how the locality fits within a broader socio-spatial organizational schema. For example, is a particular locality a branch plant community or a centre of R&D, and how close in organizational space is it to the centres of corporate power? Equally, place serves as a physical milieu within which everyday life is played out, one whose boundaries are constantly made and remade by that everyday life. For instance, as residents increasingly rely upon commodities produced overseas a place’s economic ‘footprint’ will be extended spatially far beyond its jurisdictionally defined territorial limits. Finally, place can serve as a focal point of emotional attachment, such that what geographers call ‘topophilia’ (love of place) can have significant bearing upon how workers or capitalists feel about their places.

It is important to engage conceptually with this multifaceted nature of place because it highlights that places’ distinctiveness is derived both from their own internal characteristics and histories, but also from their dialectical relationships with other places which may be proximate or spatially quite distant. Thus, as Massey (1999: 22) has put it,

‘places’ may be imagined as particular articulations of ... social relations, including local relations ‘within’ the place and those many connections which stretch way beyond it. And all of these embedded in complex, layered, histories. This is place as open, porous, hybrid – this is place as meeting place...This is a notion of place where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical internal roots nor from a history of relative isolation – now to be disrupted by globalization – but precisely from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found together there.

What is significant in all this is that while places seem to express a certain uniqueness, this uniqueness is theorizable, traceable to broader social processes such as the circulation of capital, a place’s location within a broader spatial division of labour, the articulation of class (and other) conflicts within particular places and so forth. This recognition is important because it forces us to acknowledge that places are not simply idiosyncratic ‘boxes’ or ‘arenas’ for social life but are continually reconstituted by the broader social relations within which they are embroiled and, in turn, constantly shape how such social relations play out as a result of such places’ historical ‘geographical path-dependence’ – that is to say, how what has happened in that place in the past shapes its future characteristics and possibilities.

Such efforts to theorize place in a more sophisticated manner are crucial for understanding W&E practices, we contend, for the places which are constituted
by and through the factories, offices, fields or homes in which workers toil and which are themselves set within the broader system of cities, regions and national territories are far more than simply a space in which to work for a wage (or not, in the case of unpaid domestic labour). Rather, they are a continuously fashioned mélange of meanings, values, and relationships that are effected by shared and ongoing social practices [which] construct, sustain, and transform the context in which economic, social, and political life is produced and reproduced on a daily basis and into which new members are socialized. (Hudson, 2001: 267)

The result, Castree et al. (2004) suggest, is that because people, institutions and things come together in unique (though not untheorizable) ways in different locations, social relationships, regulations and institutions have a high degree of local ‘stickiness’ and actors are necessarily geographically embedded to greater or lesser degrees in the long-standing structures and relationships of place, an embeddedness which shapes their social praxis. Hence, as Storper and Walker (1989: 157, emphasis added) put it, it takes time and spatial propinquity for the central institutions of daily life – family, church, clubs, schools, sports teams, union locals, etc. – to take shape … The result is a fabric of distinctive, lasting local communities and cultures woven into the landscape of labor [and capital].

The day-to-day immobility of both labour and capital, itself the result variously of their embeddedness in local employment relations, kinship ties, market relationships, the spatial drag of sunk investment and the like, then, ‘gives an irreducible role to place-bound homes and communities’ in how they interact and behave, especially because, once established, ‘these [institutions] outlive individual participants to benefit, and be sustained by, generations of workers’. Given the dialectical nature of the relationship between social and spatial relations (Soja, 1989), this ‘distinctive fabric’ both shapes the activities of labour and capital on an on-going basis and continues to be shaped by them.

To summarize, this understanding of place is important because such particularities mean that labour markets operate in different ways in different places, such that relationships of supply and demand which work in one place may not work in another (Peck, 1996). Moreover, the fact that both workers and capitalists are anchored geographically not only in the labour market but also in the household, the community and the state – all of which have particular spatial forms and geographical relationships to each other – means that the labour supply is both socially and spatially regulated (see Hanson and Johnston, 1985 for an example of how women’s domestic responsibilities spatially constrain their employment options). This fact distinctively shapes W&E practices.

The politics of geographical scale

Recently, economic life has been seen to have experienced a dramatic rescaling, whether this is through processes of ‘globalization’, ‘localization’, ‘glocalization’,
‘decentralization’ and / or ‘recentralization’. The issue of the scalar restructuring and reordering of W&E practices is implicitly a geographical one. In the past, many authors have tended towards a view of scales such as ‘the local’, ‘the regional’, ‘the national’ and ‘the global’ as somehow natural geographical ‘containers’ of particular social practices (as in claims that ‘process A occurs at the national level whereas process B occurs at the global level’). However, a lively literature (summarized in Herod, 2001: 37–46) has developed within geography which seeks to problematize the question of spatial scale, with scale being viewed not as a natural or ‘most logical’ circumscriber of particular processes but, rather, as produced through conflicts and compromises between capital and labour and their various segments either to equalize conditions across the economic landscape (e.g. by having national-level collective bargaining agreements) or to differentiate them (e.g. by localizing bargaining). Scale, then, is the geographical mechanism whereby spaces exhibiting similarity of conditions are delineated from those experiencing different conditions. As such, it is a social product.

Such theoretical considerations of how scales are produced, though, led Cox (1998) to question how relationships between different scales are conceptualized. Specifically, he argued that because theorists had viewed scale largely in discrete areal terms, spatial scales were understood as essentially boundaries demarking particular sets of closed spaces of different sizes (‘the local’, ‘the regional’, etc.). This was particularly the case when it came to the notion of social actors ‘jumping scales’, which has been viewed simply as a process of moving up or down the spatial hierarchy from one areal unit, such as ‘the local’, to another, such as ‘the national’. Cox, then, argued for a more relational and networked view of scale, one in which spatially embedded actors construct associations with others located elsewhere. Such an approach has also been explored by Latour (1996: 370), who has argued that the world’s complexity cannot be captured by ‘notions of levels, layers, territories, [and] spheres’, and should not be thought of as being made up of discrete levels (i.e. scales) of bounded spaces which fit together neatly but, instead, as being networked.

Two issues emerge from this questioning of how scales are conceptualized. First, how scalar relationships are actively produced can have significant implications for W&E practices. Hence, the capacity to move beyond the local spaces within which social actors are embedded by building linkages to actors located elsewhere – as when local union branches come together to develop ‘national’ level institutions – can significantly shape collective bargaining strategies. Likewise, the ability to confine one’s opponents to operating at particular spatial scales by preventing them from building such scalar links represents a significant exercise of power – keeping collective bargaining ‘local’ allows ‘nationally’ organized firms to engage in whipsawing, for instance.

Second, how scales are represented discursively has great importance for how we understand the world (and, hence, W&E practices). For instance, the relationship between scales seen as areal units is frequently represented in terms whereby each scale is considered to be, variously, a rung on a ladder (whereby one moves ‘up’ the scalar hierarchy from ‘the local’ to ‘the global’), or one of a
series of concentric circles (in which one moves ‘out’ from ‘smaller’ scales such as ‘the local’ to ‘larger’ scales such as ‘the global’, with the latter ‘encircling’ the former), or perhaps one of a series of Russian Matryoshka nesting dolls (in which ‘smaller’ scales sit snugly ‘inside’ ‘larger’ ones) (see Herod, 2003: 238–41 for pictorial representations). What is important here is that although these three representations share some similarities – all conceive of scales as spatially discrete things, such that ‘the local’ and ‘the global’ are separate rungs / circles / dolls – they also have significant differences. Hence, in the ladder metaphor ‘the global’ appears above the other scales, whereas in the circle metaphor it encompasses them. Likewise, the Matryoshka metaphor presents the ‘outer’ scale of ‘the global’ as larger than all the others and is the most forceful metaphor suggesting the notion of a nested hierarchy in which scales from the very local to the truly global can only fit together in a strict progression.

Rather than portraying scales as capable of somehow being stacked one above the other (the ladder metaphor), placed within one another (the circle metaphor), or fitted together like Matryoshka dolls, Latour (1996: 370) maintains we should conceptualize the world as ‘fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, [and] capillary’. Clearly, such a characterization provides yet another way of thinking about the scaled relationships between places, suggesting metaphors in which scales are akin to sets of earthworm burrows or tree roots or spiders’ webs and in which geographical scales are seen not as spatially discrete and separate levels or spheres of social life but, rather, as ways of describing ‘networks that are by nature neither local nor global, but are [instead] more or less long and more or less connected’ (Latour, 1993: 122). In such a view, then, it is still possible to recognize that different scales exist – following the metaphor, earthworm burrows can be viewed as penetrating different strata of the soil, with some going deeper than others – but it is much more difficult to determine exactly where one scale ends and another begins.

Such matters of how we think about scale ontologically and discursively transform dramatically how we think about the relationships between different scales and what it might mean to talk about such practices as ‘scale jumping’, ‘rescaling’, ‘scaling-up’/’scaling-down’, ‘centralizing’/’decentralizing’, ‘going global’/’going local’, ‘thinking globally’ but ‘acting locally’, and the like. In turn, this impacts how we theorize W&E practices. Thus, to give one simple example, being able to talk of how there have been recent trends to decentralize industrial relations in many nations requires a view of the world which incorporates a scalar hierarchy of separate scales, with contract bargaining being relocated from the national to the local scale (McGrath-Champ, 2005). If, on the other hand, we were to adopt a Latourian view, then some other descriptor of recent changes in industrial relations practices would be required, one which might encourage us to think quite differently about the relationships within which workers and employers find themselves. Equally, talking of social actors ‘going global’ or ‘jumping’ from national to global actions requires us to think, precisely, what such terminology may mean. Hence, representing the practice of, say, creating a national-level collective bargaining agreement to
take the place of myriad local ones as one of ‘jumping’ from one scale to another implies that such scales already pre-exist the action of jumping, a view which tends to naturalize the existence of certain scales rather than view them as having been actively created through political praxis. Likewise, talk of ‘going global’ raises questions as to what this actually denotes and whether there is a difference between, say, being ‘global’ and simply being ‘multi-locational’ internationally (Gibson-Graham, 2002). How such spatial scales are represented, then, clearly has significant implications for W&E practices. Thus, for workers trying to organize against transnational corporations perceiving them to be ‘global’ is quite a different prospect psychologically than perceiving them to be (merely) ‘multi-locational’. This difference may lead workers to adopt utterly different tactics and strategies.

**So what?**

We would argue that there are four principal reasons for engaging with the theoretical explorations of how capitalism is structured spatially and how actors’ spatial and scalar embedding shapes W&E practices.

First, because ‘none of us is outside or beyond geography’ (Said, 1994: 7) – nor ever can be – all actors, from the most immobile to the most itinerant, must learn how to come to terms with capitalism’s spatiality. Recognizing this is not just an abstract exercise in developing a spatially aware Weltanschauung (‘world view’) but is something that can make real differences both to the outcome of economic and political praxis and to our abilities to theorize accurately. For both capital and labour, negotiating the tensions between the needs for fixity and mobility is a process which drives much of their praxis. Equally, crossing space – even in an age of rapid global mobility – costs money and time, a fact which shapes social praxis (such as the decision as to whether to outsource particular activities overseas). This means that models of how industrial relations systems operate and why social actors do what they do will be widely off the mark if they fail to consider the influence of phenomena such as the friction of distance and how the spatial structuring of the economic landscape shapes how money, ideas, commodities and people diffuse across it (see Wills, 1998, for an example of how such spatial structures shaped the diffusion of practices of unionism in Britain). Likewise, the reworking of spatial relationships between places through processes such as globalization both opens up and shuts down possibilities for social praxis. For example, allowing capital to source components over a wider geographical area simultaneously brings greater numbers of workers into contact with each other, with all the consequences for capital that flow from this. How social actors construct their own ‘spatial fixes’, then, has important implications for how W&E practices unfold.

Second, the fact that social actors are always constrained to some degree by the spatiality of the economic landscapes within which they find themselves
means we must appreciate how the landscape’s spatial form can have lasting effects on W&E practices, even after the social relations of production and consumption which were extant when it was constructed have changed. This spatial constraint powerfully influences the possibilities for actors’ political and economic praxis. Put another way, understanding why particular practices have such longevity in particular places may require comprehending how social actors are either unable or unwilling to break out of particular spatial relationships and the constraints of specific built environments.

Third, drawing upon the ideas of the ‘spatial fix’, it is obvious that different sets of actors will often have quite different spatial visions with regard to how the geography of capitalism should be made. While capitalists wish to see a landscape of profitability put in place, for workers the ability to structure landscapes so as to facilitate their social and biological reproduction on a daily and generational basis may be more important. Likewise, divisions within classes may cause different groups of capitalists, workers and state actors to seek to implement competing spatial fixes, with all of the resultant conflicts this can engender. These varying spatial imaginations, then, can result in significant political conflicts over where investment and jobs are located.

Fourth, issues of the social production of geographic scales and the metaphors used to describe the world’s scaled nature have great significance for W&E praxis and for theorizing such praxis. For example, considering scales as discrete spatial arenas encourages actors and theorists to think of the relationship between, say, the local and the global as a relationship between two quite distinct realms. This means that moving from the one to the other will often be perceived as an act of ‘scale jumping’ or ‘up-scaling’ or ‘down-scaling’, with all of the attendant implications that may have for considering what kinds of resources must be marshalled and what kinds of links must be made if the dispute is to be successful. Likewise, such a view of scale regards entities like the nation-state as, essentially, containers of political praxis, a view which will structure how actors think about going ‘beyond’ the national level – perhaps requiring working with an explicitly ‘international’ organization. On the other hand, if scales are viewed in networked terms, then there is a much greater sense that ‘local’ actions are simultaneously ‘global’ (and ‘regional’ and ‘national’), a sense which will undoubtedly shape actors’ perceptions of what is politically and organizationally possible and thus what is the most appropriate praxis in which to engage. Similarly, viewing scales not as discrete spatial containers but as parts of a highly integrated nexus means that actors may understand the world in less hierarchical terms. Consequently, rather than structuring their political praxis so as to move up and down such hierarchies, they may perceive their actions in networked terms, with all the organizational implications this brings.

What we have tried to do here, then, is to argue that matters of spatiality have a significant bearing upon understanding W&E practices and thus the operation of capitalism. This means that in trying to understand W&E practice we must be sensitive to the fact that the geography of capitalism is
not simply a reflection of capitalism’s social relations but is also constitutive thereof. Actors’ spatial embeddedness and the necessity for them to come to terms with the spatial relationships within which they find themselves will shape materially their economic and political praxis. Equally, though, we must also be sensitive to what we might call the ‘spatial imagination’ and the weight of spatial metaphors inherent in particular representations of the world. Thus, with regard to understanding geographies of labour organizing, we can readily see how apparently innocent representations of spatial scales as, say, hierarchically structured areal units can have significant implications for workers’ practices. For example, a representation of spatial scales in a nested hierarchical manner à la Matryoshka dolls might cause workers in one country to believe they have to mirror such scalar hierarchies if they are to make contact with those in another. Hence, they may adopt a strategy which involves their local branch union contacting its regional office, which then contacts its national office, which then contacts an international labour organization like the International Metalworkers’ Federation, which then contacts the national union office in another country, which then contacts a regional or branch office finally to put workers in the two countries into contact with each other. In contrast, internalization of a scalarly ‘flatter’ view of the world will probably result in them being more likely to think about direct plant-to-plant contacts. Such a change in thinking may encourage a shift in organizing strategies away from the more hierarchical structures dominated by what Waterman (1993) has called the professional ‘agents’ of union organizations to a more horizontal organizational structure dominated more by activist ‘networkers’, people who may or may not be official representatives of a union but who are handy with a computer.

In this article, then, we have outlined some central geographical concepts as a contribution to developing a stronger understanding of W&E. Our focus has been to erode disciplinary silos so as to provide accessibility to theoretical debates and constructs surrounding the making of the capitalist economic landscape and key notions of space, place and scale. Enlivening research on W&E practices by building in these perspectives is, we argue, a worthwhile and rewarding project upon which to expend scholarly energy.

References


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