Theorizing Scale in Critical Place-Name Studies

Joshua Hagen[1]

Department of Geography, Marshall University
One John Marshall Drive, Huntington, West Virginia, 25755, United States
hagenj@marshall.edu

Building on broader developments in critical social theory, geographers have made significant strides in explicating the assumptions, motivations, and values involved in place naming. This has led to an emphasis on understanding the processes involved in the inscription, subversion, and revision of place names. Despite the increasingly sophisticated approaches found in place-name studies, the field of toponymy occupies a relatively minor position in academic geography. There are varied and complex reasons for this marginality, but perhaps the most salient critique is that place-name research has been slow to engage broader developments in geographic and social theory.

The idea of scale, for example, has been the subject of wide-ranging discussions across many subfields of geography (Herod and Wright, 2002; Sheppard and McMaster, 2004). Numerous geographers have explored the use of scale in the spatial framing, assertion, and contestation of power, yet place-name research, even that involving explicitly scalar processes, often ignores how constructions of "scale" are deployed. In line with broader trends in geographic research, Brenner (2001: 592) argues that "notions of geographical scale as a fixed, bounded, self-enclosed and pregiven container are currently being superseded . . . by a highly productive emphasis on process, evolution, dynamism and sociopolitical contestation." Research on the process of scaling has covered a range

of issues including state territoriality and sovereignty (Legg, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2000), environmental governance and political ecology (Bulkeley, 2005; Rangan and Kull, 2009), and political and social identity (Marston, 2000; Western 2008).

Although there is general agreement that scale can be conceived as a practice or process rather than an ontological given, numerous theorizations of scale have emerged. While scale is often tacitly understood as referring to physical size or position within a hierarchy, Howitt (1998) argues that any given scale should also be understood in terms of its relation, interaction, and interconnection with other scales. As such, he contends that governments, corporations, and social groups often "simultaneously construct different identities at different scales using precisely the same elements" (Howitt, 1998: 56). This emphasis on interaction and variability is also prominent in Brenner's (2001: 600) discussion of the "process of scaling." Brenner suggests that research on the politics of scale has tended to reify scales as conceptual containers within which sociospatial phenomena occur. In response, he argues that the phrase "politics of scale" should be understood in a plural form. In contrast to approaches where "the notion of a politics of scale denotes the production, reconfiguration or contestation of some aspect of sociospatial organization *within* a relatively bounded geographical arena," Brenner advocates a "plural notion of a politics of scale [that] refers to the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies *among* geographical scales" (2001: 599-600).

This emphasis on relationality and plurality highlights the continual (re)production of scales as well as the degree to which scalar concepts are entangled within and across vertical hierarchies and horizontal networks. In this sense, the politics of scaling is less concerned with identifying the scales at which certain phenomena occur or which scale is most appropriate for their analysis. Rather, it explores the "*scalar dimensions of practices*, rather than *practices occurring at different scales*" (Mansfield, 2005: 468). As Moore (2008: 218) points out, research on the politics of scaling should investigate the processes through which governments, businesses, social groups, or individuals deploy scalar concepts in an effort to "crystallize certain sociospatial arrangements in consciousness and practice in order to further social, political or cultural aims." Such "processual analyses of scale politics" would avoid the tendency to reify scales while emphasizing how "scalar narratives, classifications and cognitive schemas constrain or enable certain ways of seeing, thinking and acting" (2008: 214 and 219).

Although often implicit in toponymic studies, theorizations of scale are seldom engaged in a sustained manner. Yet given the emphasis on process in both fields, there appears to be much promise for engaging place-name research and recent theorizations of scale. Indeed, place naming can be interpreted as a practice whereby people, organizations, and social movements attempt to construct and act within certain scalar configurations to legitimize or challenge certain orderings of sociopolitical space. In this intervention piece, I briefly discuss four examples

suggesting how place-name research could connect to and benefit from greater engagement with scale theory.

In their study of commemorative street names in the Arab-Palestinian community, Azaryahu and Kook (2002) explore how different types of names were harnessed to project competing narratives of local, pan-Arab, or pan-Islamic identities. Although firmly grounded in contemporary place-name research, the study did not connect these differing scalar configurations of identification with the literature on the politics of scale. In addition to investigating how local elites harnessed local place-naming practices to advance competing visions of Arab-Palestinian identity, the study could have drawn from scale theory to highlight how these differing practices of street naming reflected debates concerning the geographical extent and foundation of national identity. The article's case studies could have provided intriguing examples of the utilization of local place-naming practices in the scale politics of national identification.

My own research on places names has also lacked sustained engagement with scale theory. I did not pursue the scalar politics involved in the processes linking Senator Robert C. Byrd's ability to earmark supplemental federal spending for West Virginia with the proliferation of place names in his honor across the state. By incorporating contemporary scale theory, this article could have afforded an opportunity to investigate the scalar politics surrounding this profusion of "Robert C. Byrd" place names. For example, in response to criticisms that these projects constituted wasteful spending, Byrd was often quoted as saying, "What helps West Virginia helps the nation" (Hagen, 2007: 354). Here, Byrd and his supporters focus attention on the benefits these places provide at the local/state scale which are then presumed to trickle up to the national level. In contrast, critics tend to emphasize how taxes collected on the national scale are channeled to benefit specific localities through projects named after Byrd. The choice of scale also influences how these places are interpreted. Viewed from the local/state scale, these places are evidence of an effective legislator representing his constituents. Viewed from the national scale, the same places are framed as parochial interests superseding the greater good. In both cases, participants in this place naming debate select specific scalar configurations favorable to their particular political ideology. This highlights how the choice of scale in framing public debates is an inherently political act.

When place-name scholars discuss scale, it is generally conceived as a simple container or hierarchical level enclosing the place-naming process. As one study of place names in South Africa notes: "The level at which decisions regarding naming takes place differs according to the scale of the place in question" (Guyot and Seethal, 2007: 55). Here conceptualizations of scale are limited to the size of the place being named and the corresponding level of government. Although the article lays bare the competing political agendas embedded in place-name debates, it fails to investigate how groups used scale categories to influence the outcome of these debates. Despite a general post-apartheid movement favoring African place names (as opposed to British or Afrikaner toponyms), opponents argued that some

changes would hinder efforts to promote the country internationally as a destination for tourists or businesses. Indeed, linking local place names to global scale concerns proved an effective strategy since the article explains that English names perceived as "international and tourism symbols of South Africa" would likely remain (Guyot and Seethal, 2007: 60). Beyond recognizing scale as a set of simple hierarchical levels, this article could have elucidated the use of scalar concepts by competing ethnic groups in the construction and contestation of place names and place identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

There are tentative indications that place-name research will engage discussions of scale more directly (e.g., Rose-Redwood, 2008). Alderman (2003), for instance, has drawn upon Howitt's notions of scale to elucidate debates over street names commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. Although physical size and prominence were important factors in selecting streets, Alderman (2003: 166) convincingly demonstrates how the relative location, or "the extent to which a named street creates associations or linkages between different people and places," was also a salient issue. Yet, Alderman could broaden this theorization of scale by investigating if, and to what extent, differing scalar configurations are deployed in these debates. For example, proponents might argue that King's national stature or the importance of the civil rights movement provide ample justification for a commemorative street name. Opponents might respond that the locality had no specific affiliation with King nor does it occupy a prominent place in civil rights history. Here competing groups harness different scalar categories to advance their particular political agendas though street naming.

The examples discussed above highlight ways in which place-name scholarship provides a means to explore the practice of scalar politics across a broad range of thematic concerns. The study of scale could also benefit from greater attention to place naming, because these practices are integral to broader processes by which space, place, and scale are socially constructed and contested. Borrowing from the idea of a "scale politics of spatiality" (Jonas, 1994: 257), scholars might think of a *scalar politics of toponymy*. Yet, given the number of place-name cases and contexts, researchers are "very likely to conceptualize scale in different terms depending on the research context and inherent power relations" (Paasi, 2004: 543). Recognizing the contingency and variability of these processes helps focus attention on exploring how, why, when, and to what effect social and political actors utilize scale to frame place-naming processes.

References

Alderman, D. 2003. Street names and the scaling of memory: The politics of commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. within the African American community. *Area*, 35(2), 163-173.

Azaryahu, M. and R. Kook. 2002. Mapping the nation: Street names and Arab-Palestinian identity: Three case studies. *Nations and Nationalism*, 8(2), 195-213.

Brenner, N. 2001. The limits to scale? Methodological reflections on scalar structuration. *Progress in Human Geography*, 25(4), 591-614.

Bulkeley, H. 2005. Reconfiguring environmental governance: Towards a politics of scales and networks. *Political Geography*, 24(8), 875-902.

Guyot, S. and C. Seethal. 2007. Identity of place, places of identities: Change of place names in post-apartheid South Africa, *South African Geographical Journal*, 89(1), 55-63.

Hagen, J. 2007. 'Pork' spending, place names, and political stature in West Virginia. *Southeastern Geographer*, 47(2), 341–364.

Herod, A. and M. Wright (eds.). 2002. *Geographies of power: Placing scale*. Malden: Blackwell.

Howitt, R. 1998. Scale as relation: Musical metaphors of geographical scale. *Area*, 30(1), 49-58.

Jonas, A. 1994. The scale politics of spatiality. *Environment and Planning D*, 12(3), 257-264.

Legg, S. 2009. Of scales, networks and assemblages: The League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34(2), 324-253.

Mansfield, B. 2005. Beyond rescaling: Reintegrating the 'national' as a dimension of scalar relations. *Progress in Human Geography*, 29(4), 458-473.

Marston, S. 2000. The social construction of scale. *Progress in Human Geography*, 24(2), 219-242.

Moore, A. 2008. Rethinking scale as a geographical category: From analysis to practice. *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(2), 203-225.

Paasi, A. 2004. Place and region: Looking through the prism of scale. *Progress in Human Geography*, 28(4), 536-546.

Rangan, H. and C. Kull. 2009. What makes ecology 'political'? Rethinking scale in political ecology. *Progress in Human Geography*, 33(1), 28-45.

Rose-Redwood, R. 2008. 'Sixth Avenue is now a memory': Regimes of spatial inscription and the performative limits of the official city-text. *Political Geography*, 27(8), 875-894.

Sheppard, E. and R. McMaster (eds.). 2004. *Scale and geographic inquiry: Nature, society, and method*. Malden: Blackwell.

Swyngedouw, E. 2000. Authoritarian governance, power and the politics of rescaling. *Environment and Planning D*, 18(1), 63-76.

Western, J. 2008. Russian dolls or scale skippers? Two generations in Strasbourg. *Geographical Review*, 98(4), 532-550.