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# The Urban Question as a Scale Question: Reflections on Henri Lefebvre, Urban Theory and the Politics of Scale\*

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Throughout his two major works of the 1970s, *The production of space* (1974) and *De l'État* (1976–78), Henri Lefebvre describes capitalist globalization as an intensely contradictory integration, fragmentation, polarization and redifferentiation of superimposed social spaces. Lefebvre (1991: 351) elaborates this thesis through a series of questions to which much of his work of the 1970s was devoted:

How and why is it that the advent of a world market, implying a degree of unity at the level of the planet, gives rise to a fractioning of space — to proliferating nation states, to regional differentiation and self-determination, as well as to multinational states and transnational corporations which, although they stem from this strange tendency towards fission, also exploit it in order to reinforce their own autonomy? Towards what space and time will such interwoven contradictions lead us?

According to Lefebvre (1979: 289–90), this tension between global integration and territorial redifferentiation leads to a 'generalized explosion of spaces' in which the relations among all geographical scales are continuously rearranged and reterritorialized.

Lefebvre developed this conceptualization of globalization as a contested reconfiguration of superimposed geographical scales in the mid-1970s, a period in which the territorial foundations of the Fordist-Keynesian configuration of capitalism were only just beginning to be dismantled. As the twentieth century draws to a close, we appear to be witnessing an even greater intensification of the contradictory processes of globalization, fragmentation and reterritorialization to which Lefebvre drew attention over two decades ago. As entrenched, nationally organized configurations of scale are loosened and rearticulated with new subnational and supranational scalar hierarchies, Lefebvre's conceptualization of globalization as a conflictual 'explosion of spaces' appears more salient than ever (Brenner, 1997).

Throughout the world economy, urban regions are among the key geographical sites in and through which this multiscale reconfiguration of capitalist spatiality is currently unfolding (Ronneberger and Schmid, 1995; Scott, 1998). In what follows I shall build upon Lefebvre's theoretical framework to explore various implications of contemporary re-scaling processes for conceptualizing the dynamics of capitalist urbanization in the late twentieth century. This essay elaborates two basic assertions: (1) that the problematic of geographical scale and its social production has become increasingly central to critical

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urban theory in the contemporary period of global restructuring; and (2) that Lefebvre's sociospatial theory contains a number of insights which are of crucial relevance to this problematic. I wish to claim neither that Lefebvre is the only urban theorist to have grappled explicitly with the issue of geographical scale, nor that his writings of the 1970s could somehow have anticipated the specific forms in which processes of re-scaling are currently unfolding. Instead, I shall deploy some of Lefebvre's writings of the 1970s as a conceptual springboard into a broader discussion of the 'transformed form' of the urban question in an era in which entrenched geographical scales and scalar hierarchies are being profoundly rearticulated, reshuffled and redefined throughout the world economy (Swyngedouw, 1992; 1997; Jessop, 1998a).<sup>1</sup>

The notion of a distinctive 'urban question' was first popularized through Manuel Castells' (1972) influential work in the early 1970s and has subsequently been debated at length among critical urban researchers (Dear and Scott, 1981; Saunders, 1986; Katznelson, 1993). However, for my purposes here, the concept of the urban question refers neither to a specific definition of the city nor to a particular approach to urban studies. Rather, I understand the urban question under capitalism as a double-edged sociopolitical problematic: it encompasses both the historical process of capitalist urbanization and the multiple, politically contested interpretations of that process within modern capitalist society. On the one hand, the urban question refers to the role of cities as sociospatial arenas in which the contradictions of capitalist development are continually produced and fought out. On the other hand, the urban question refers to the historically specific epistemic frameworks through which capitalist cities are interpreted, whether in sociological analysis, in public discourse, in sociopolitical struggles or in everyday experience.

My starting point is the methodological premise, implicit in Lefebvre's writings on urban theory, that the urban question assumes radically different historical and geographical forms within each configuration of capitalist development. On this basis, it can be argued that the meaning of the urban question is currently being systematically redefined in conjunction with processes of global capitalist restructuring. As Scott and Moulaert (1997: 267) likewise note:

Each generation, it seems, defines the urban question after its own fashion, as an articulation of social challenges, political predicaments and theoretical issues reflecting the current conjuncture of urban society ... [T]he dynamics shaping contemporary cities (and, as a corollary, the nature of urban problems) have shifted significantly since the 1970s, calling for new conceptual tools and new forms of political mobilization.

I shall propose that the urban question is today increasingly assuming the form of what Lefebvre (1976: 276) once aptly termed 'the scale question' (*la question d'échelle*). This situation, I argue, presents new methodological and political challenges for critical urban theory.

1 This essay can therefore be read as an attempt to begin to explore the interface between two important strands of sociospatial research of the last decade — the explosion of interest among Anglo-American geographers and urbanists in Lefebvre's writings on cities and the production of space (see *Espaces et Sociétés* 76, 1994; Gregory, 1994; Kofman and Lebas, 1995; Kipfer, 1996; Soja, 1996); and the proliferation of discussions of geographical scale and its social production (see Smith, 1993; 1995; Cox, 1996; Agnew, 1997; Delaney and Leitner, 1997; Herod, 1997; Swyngedouw, 1997; Brenner, 1998; Howitt, 1998). Although Lefebvre's sociospatial theory is occasionally mentioned in contemporary discussions of geographical scale, his contributions to this enterprise have not, in my opinion, been adequately appreciated. On the other hand, it should be emphasized at the outset that the production of scale in the contemporary era has been analyzed effectively on the basis of other conceptual starting points, including regulation theory (Swyngedouw, 1997), the theory of uneven development (Smith, 1984; 1997) and neo-Gramscian state theory (Jessop, 1998a; 1998b). As will become apparent below, I believe that Lefebvre's theoretical framework can be fruitfully combined with each of the aforementioned methodologies.

## Geographical scale and the urban question

Since the early 1970s, debates on the urban question have centered closely on the conceptualization of space in research on cities (Gottdiener, 1985). However, it can be argued that the problematic of geographical scale has permeated all aspects of these debates, even if it has not generally been acknowledged as a distinct theoretical issue. In their efforts to conceptualize urban *spatiality*, urban theorists have necessarily introduced diverse (implicit or explicit) assumptions concerning the distinctiveness of the urban *scale* of social organization (as opposed to, for instance, the regional, the national and/or the global scales). To unpack this assertion and its implications for contemporary urban theory, I shall reconstruct briefly some of the distinctive scalar assumptions upon which previous rounds of debate on the urban question have been grounded.<sup>2</sup>

### *The 1970s: the functional specificity of the urban*

In his classic work, *The urban question* (1972), Castells attacked the Chicago school of urban sociology for its failure to grasp the historical specificity of the urban form under capitalism. Against this universalistic 'urban ideology', Castells set out to delimit the role of the 'urban system' as a determinate structure within the capitalist mode of production. In so doing, he implicitly distinguished two basic dimensions of the urban, which for present purposes can be termed its scalar and its functional aspects. The scalar aspect of the urban concerned the materiality of social processes organized on the urban scale as opposed to supraburban scales. In Castells' terminology, scales are described as the differentiated 'spatial units' of which the capitalist system is composed.<sup>3</sup> The functional aspect of the urban, Castells' most explicit focus in *The urban question*, concerned not merely the geographical setting or territorial scope of social processes, but their functional role or 'social content' (Castells, 1977: 89, 235). According to Castells' (1977: 235–7, 445) famous argument, the specificity of the urban 'spatial unit' could not be delimited theoretically with reference to its ideological, its political-juridical or its production functions, but only in terms of its role as a site for the reproduction of labor-power. The essence of Castells' position, then, was the attempt to define geographical scale in terms of its social function. Castells repeatedly acknowledged the existence of multiple social processes within capitalist cities, but argued that only collective consumption was *functionally specific* to the urban scale. Castells' attempt to spatialize Althusserian structuralism was thus premised upon an understanding of geographical scales as spatial expressions of social functions.<sup>4</sup>

- 2 At the risk of oversimplifying an extremely complex refraction of debates, the following reconstruction brackets the important, albeit ambiguous, role of Lefebvre's own work in the discussions of the urban question during the 1970s and 1980s (on which, see Saunders, 1986; Kofman and Lebas, 1996). Lefebvre's *La révolution urbaine* (1970) was a central, if highly controversial, intellectual and political reference point for both Castells and Harvey in their major works of the 1970s. Nevertheless, Lefebvre's writings of the 1970s have often been viewed as idiosyncratic analyses of Fordist urbanism and technocratic statism in postwar France (see Castells, 1977: 86–95; Katznelson, 1992: 93–103). It was not until the mid-1980s that writers such as Gottdiener (1985) and Soja (1989) drew greater attention to Lefebvre's importance as a theorist of space and its social production. The most recent intensification of interest in Lefebvre's work among Anglo-American urbanists during the 1990s has also been fueled by the publication of two excellent English translations — Nicholson-Smith's (1991) translation of *La production de l'espace* (1974); and Kofman and Lebas' (1996) translation of *Le droit à la ville* (1968). I return to Lefebvre's understanding of geographical scale in the second half of this essay.
- 3 In the course of *The urban question*, Castells refers to a diverse range of these 'spatial units', including neighborhoods, urban cores, metropolitan regions, national urban systems, metropole-colony relations and the international division of labor. Castells discusses his conception of these 'spatial units' most explicitly in the 'Afterward' to *The urban question* (1977: 445–50).
- 4 This interpretation is reinforced by Castells' (1977: 236) formally identical analysis of the *regional* scale in terms of its role as a site of capitalist *production*. Castells' early work can thus be viewed as an anticipation of the functionalist theorization of scales that was subsequently articulated more explicitly by Taylor (1981; 1982) in his initial contributions to scale theory.

Castells began to modify this position almost immediately after the publication of *The urban question* (see Castells, 1976), but the latter work continued to exercise a strong influence upon conceptualizations of geographical scale within urban studies. Saunders' (1981) critique of Castells' early work usefully illustrates the extent of this influence. The core of Saunders' critique of Castells was a rejection of the notion that any of the social processes located within cities are necessarily specific to that geographical scale. This observation led Saunders to view the spatial organization of cities as a merely contingent effect of social processes and thus as a flawed conceptual basis for confronting the urban question. However, in reaching this conclusion, Saunders implicitly embraced Castells' own criterion of functional specificity as the theoretical key to the urban question. It was this underlying assumption which enabled Saunders to invoke the *supraurban* character of the social processes located within cities as grounds for dismissing the possibility of a coherent spatial definition of the urban. Saunders' (1986: 288) alternative proposal to define urban sociology as the study of consumption processes preserved the label 'urban' only as a 'matter of convention'. Saunders thereby rendered the urban dimension of urban sociology entirely accidental, a random choice of geographical scale.<sup>5</sup>

Both positions in the Castells/Saunders debate were premised upon two core assumptions regarding the role of geographical scale in the urban question. First, both authors viewed the urban scale as the self-evident *empirical* centerpiece of the urban question. Because of their overarching concern with the functional content of the urban, Castells and Saunders reduced its scalar aspect, the existence of distinctively urbanized 'spatial units', to a pre-given empirical fact rather than conceptualizing it as a theoretical problem in its own right. Consequently, neither author could explicitly analyze the ways in which the urban scale is itself socially produced or, most crucially from the vantage point of the late 1990s, the possibility of its historical transformation. Second, the arguments of both Castells and Saunders were grounded upon what might be termed a 'zero-sum' conception of geographical scale — the notion that scales operate as mutually exclusive rather than as co-constitutive territorial frameworks for social relations. On this basis, both Castells and Saunders implied that *supraurban* geographical scales were merely external parameters for the urban question. By contrast, as we shall see below, the interlinkages and interdependencies between urban and supraurban scales are today becoming intrinsic to the very content of the urban question.

### *The 1980s: from scale-specificity to the production of space*

Various alternatives to Castells' early work were elaborated during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as many urban scholars attempted to redefine the specificity of the urban. The key task from this perspective was to delineate social processes that were tied intrinsically, but not exclusively, to the urban scale. Thus cities were now analyzed as multidimensional geographical sites in which, for instance, industrial production, local labor markets, infrastructural configurations, interfirm relations, urban land-use systems and consumption processes were clustered together. From Harvey's (1978) capital-theoretic account of urban built environments and Scott's (1980) neo-Ricardian theorization of the urban land nexus to Storper and Walker's (1989) post-Weberian analysis of industrial agglomeration and territorial development, these approaches replaced Castells' criterion of functional specificity with that of *scale-specificity*. The analytical core of the urban question was no longer the functional unity of the urban process but rather the role of the urban scale as a complex geographical materialization of

5 It is worth noting that this argument was in turn grounded upon the implicit, deeply *spatial* assumption that the nation-state (in Saunders' terms, 'society as a whole') rather than the city is today the most relevant geographical scale for sociological analysis. In this sense, Saunders' arguments for a 'non-spatial' urban sociology rested on the foundations of an intrinsically geographical political sociology which ontologized nationally scaled social processes.

capitalist social relations. In effect, Castells' early position was inverted: against his conception of scales as the spatial expressions of social functions, the social relations of capitalism were now analyzed in terms of their distinctive patterns of agglomeration and territorialization on the urban scale.

These multifaceted analyses of urban spatiality soon flowed into broader explorations of the production of space and spatial configuration under capitalism. Harvey's (1985) historical-geographical materialist conceptualization of the spatial fix exemplified this tendency. In his writings of the 1980s, Harvey continued to view the urban scale as a key geographical foundation for the accumulation process and elaborated a periodization of capitalist development focused upon successive historical forms of urbanization (Harvey, 1989: 17–49). At the same time, Harvey began more explicitly to conceptualize the role of supraurban spaces and processes — e.g. regional divisions of labor, national political-institutional constellations, supranational regimes of accumulation and world market conditions — as central geographical preconditions for each historical spatial fix under capitalism. Closely analogous methodological strategies were also elaborated by writers such as Massey (1985), Smith (1984) and Soja (1989), each of whom embedded a discussion of the urban question within an account of capitalist spatiality on multiple supraurban scales, whether with reference to changing spatial divisions of labor, patterns of uneven geographical development or forms of crisis-induced restructuring.

Three aspects of these debates deserve emphasis here. First, insofar as these analyses of urban spatiality flowed directly into a wide range of supraurban questions — e.g. the regional question, the problematic of uneven development, the core-periphery debate and so forth — the coherence of the urban question was unsettled (Soja, 1989: 94–117).<sup>6</sup> Whereas explorations of the urban question had contributed crucially to this broader spatialization of Marxian political economy, the latter trend now appeared to be supplanting the urban question itself, relegating urban space to a mere subtopic within the more general issue of capitalism's inconstant historical geography.<sup>7</sup> Second, these analyses introduced more multidimensional conceptions of geographical scale than had previously been deployed. Scales were no longer equated with unitary social functions but were viewed increasingly as material crystallizations of multiple overlapping political-economic processes. Third, despite this methodological advance, the historicity of geographical scales was recognized only in a relatively limited sense. Capital was said to jump continually between the urban, regional, national and global scales in pursuit of new sources of surplus-value, but the possibility that scalar hierarchies and interscalar relations might themselves be radically transformed was not systematically explored.<sup>8</sup> It was not until the early 1990s, with the proliferation of research on the urban impact of economic globalization, that more historically dynamic conceptualizations of geographical scale and scalar configurations were elaborated within urban studies.

6 This outcome had already been foreseen by Castells (1976) a decade earlier. However, much of Castells' subsequent work during the 1980s likewise articulated an understanding of the urban in terms of scale-specific sociospatial processes and struggles (see Castells, 1983; 1989). For a more recent reassessment of the 'first wave' of French urban sociology see also Castells (1994).

7 In an incisive critical review of the first edition of Saunders' book, Cox (1984) explicitly embraced this position. Cox rejected both Castells' early defense of a distinctive 'urban question' as well as Saunders' defense of a 'non-spatial' urban sociology, arguing instead for a synthetic approach to what he termed the 'spatial question' (see Cox, 1984: 81–82; italics in original).

8 This characterization applies as well to the pioneering work of Taylor (1981; 1982) and Smith (1984) during the 1980s. On the one hand, these contributions were among the first attempts to theorize explicitly the socially produced character of geographical scales under capitalism. On the other hand, a differentiated lexicon for analyzing *transformations* of scalar hierarchies and interscalar relations — to which Swyngedouw (1992) would subsequently refer as 're-scaling' processes — had yet to be elaborated.

*The 1990s: urban theory and the globalization debate*

The urban question has continued to provoke intense debate in the 1990s, but its meaning has been significantly redefined in the face of recent geoeconomic and geopolitical transformations (Amin and Graham, 1997; Graham, 1997). In contrast to previous conceptions of the urban as a relatively self-evident scalar entity, contemporary urban researchers have been confronted with major transformations in the institutional and geographical organization not only of the urban scale, but also of the supraurban scalar hierarchies and interscalar networks in which cities are embedded. Under these circumstances, urban researchers have begun to conceptualize the urban question with direct reference to various supraurban re-scaling processes.<sup>9</sup>

This methodological reorientation can be illustrated briefly with reference to three strands of contemporary urban research. First, world city theorists and industrial geographers have emphasized the enhanced strategic importance of place-specific social relations, localization and territorial concentration as basic geographical preconditions for global economic transactions (Sassen, 1991; Knox and Taylor, 1995; Storper, 1998). From this perspective, the urban scale operates as a localized node within globally organized flows whereas the global scale is in turn constituted through networks of superimposed localities and cities. Second, many authors have analyzed dramatic shifts in both the vertical and horizontal relations among cities, as manifested, for instance, in the consolidation of new global urban hierarchies, in accelerated informational and financial flows between cities, in the construction of new planetary interurban telecommunications infrastructures, in intensified interurban competition as well as in countervailing forms of interurban cooperation and coordination (Graham, 1995; 1997; Krätke, 1995; Friedmann, 1997). From this perspective, the urban is not only a nested level within supraurban territorial hierarchies but also the product of dense interscalar networks linking dispersed geographical locations. Third, recent regulationist-inspired analyses have linked processes of urban restructuring to various ongoing transformations of state territorial organization which are deprivileging the national regulatory level and giving new importance both to supranational and to subnational forms of governance (Mayer, 1994; Schmid, 1996; Jessop, 1997; Jones, 1998; Keil, 1998; MacLeod, 1999; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999). From this perspective, the urban scale is not only a localized arena for global capital accumulation, but a strategic regulatory coordinate in which a multiscale reterritorialization of state institutions is currently unfolding.

As indicated by the proliferation of terms such as 'local-global interplay' (Dunford and Kafkalas, 1992), 'local-global nexus' (Peck and Tickell, 1994), 'glocalization' (Swyngedouw, 1992; 1997) and 'glurbanization' (Jessop, 1998a), many urban researchers have begun to conceptualize the current round of globalization as a complex rearticulation of socioeconomic space upon multiple geographical scales. In short, the problematic of geographical scale — its territorial organization, its social production, its political contestation and its historical reconfiguration — has been inserted into the very heart of the urban question in the current era. If the urban question had previously assumed the form of debates on the functional specificity or scale-specificity of the urban within relatively stable supraurban territorial configurations, in the 1990s the urban question is increasingly being posed in the form of a *scale question*.

Clearly, as the preceding discussion indicates, urban social science has long presupposed any number of scalar assumptions, whether with reference to the territorial organization of cities, urban politics, urban social movements, urban systems, urban hierarchies and the like. In the current era, however, analyses of the scalar dimensions of urban processes appear to have become far more central, both methodologically and empirically, than was previously the case. As evidenced in the diverse fields of urban

9 In early anticipation of this methodological reorientation was Friedmann and Wolff's (1982) classic essay on world city formation.

research mentioned above, many important strands of contemporary urban studies are focused quite centrally upon questions of scalar organization and upon processes of re-scaling. In this context, the scalar dimensions of capitalist urbanization are being analyzed and theorized with an unprecedented methodological self-reflexivity. The concept of a scale question is intended not to prejudge the substantive content of these debates on the re-scaling of capitalist urbanization, but simply as a means to characterize, in general and open-ended terms, the broad terrain of issues — theoretical, empirical and political — around which such debates have been focused.<sup>10</sup>

In my view, two closely related theoretical realignments underpin these recent scalar reformulations of the urban question. First, despite significant disagreements regarding the nature of contemporary urban transformations, a wide range of urban researchers have argued that historically entrenched relations among urban and supraurban scales are currently being radically reorganized. In this sense, the reframing of the urban question in the 1990s has been closely intertwined with explorations of the rapidly changing supraurban hierarchies and interscalar networks in which cities are embedded. Second, urban researchers have begun to reconceptualize the nature of geographical scale itself as an arena, hierarchy and product of capitalist social relations. In this sense, recent contributions to urban theory resonate closely with the new approaches to the social production of geographical scale that have likewise been elaborated during the course of the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Smith (1995: 60–1) has concisely articulated the conceptual foundations for this social constructionist approach to the analysis of geographical scale:

Geographical scale is traditionally treated as a neutral metric of physical space: specific scales of social activity are assumed to be largely given as in the distinction between urban, regional, national and global events and processes. There is now, however, a considerable literature arguing that the geographical scales of human activity are not neutral ‘givens’, not fixed universals of social experience, nor are they an arbitrary methodological or conceptual choice ... Geographical scale is socially produced as simultaneously a platform and container of certain kinds of social activity. Far from neutral and fixed, therefore, geographical scales are the product of economic, political and social activities and relationships; as such they are as changeable as those relationships themselves... Scale is the geographical organizer and expression of collective social action.

From this point of view, each geographical scale operates simultaneously as a presupposition, a medium and an outcome of social relations. Thus conceived, the urban scale is not a pre-given or fixed platform for social relations, but a socially constituted, politically contested and historically variable dimension of those relations.

## **Scaling urban theory: contours of the scale question**

The theoretical developments sketched above have substantially loosened the grip of static, atemporal models of geographical scale upon urban and regional research. Nevertheless, the task of theorizing the role of cities within contemporary re-scaling processes presents considerable methodological difficulties. Not least among these is that we currently lack an appropriate conceptual grammar for representing the processual, dynamic and politically contested character of geographical scale. A reification of scale appears to be built into everyday scalar terms (e.g. local, urban, regional, national, global etc.) insofar as they represent distinctive socioterritorial processes (e.g. localization, urbanization, regionalization, nationalization, globalization etc.) as static entities frozen

10 Of course, just as scalar assumptions were never absent from earlier approaches to urban studies, the contemporary urban question is in no way exhausted by its scalar aspect. My purpose here is not to reduce the urban question to any of its multifarious dimensions, but rather to characterize one particularly important way in which the urban question is currently being redefined.

11 See the sources cited in footnote 1.

within geographical space. Relatedly, existing scalar vocabularies are poorly equipped to grasp the complex, perpetually changing historical interconnections and interdependencies among geographical scales. Insofar as terms such as local, urban, regional and so forth are used to demarcate purportedly separate territorial 'islands' of social relations, they mask the profound mutual imbrication of all scales and the dense interscalar networks through which the latter are continually produced and reconfigured. These difficulties are exacerbated still further by the circumstance that much of the social-scientific division of labor is organized according to distinctive scalar foci — e.g. urban studies, regional studies, comparative politics, international relations etc. — which obstruct efforts to explore the dynamics of interscalar relations and transformations.

Under these circumstances, a key methodological challenge is to elaborate a dialectical approach to *scaling processes* under capitalism that is capable of capturing the ways in which, as Swyngedouw (1997: 141) suggests, 'scales and their nested articulations become produced as temporary standoffs in a perpetual transformative sociospatial power struggle'. An equally crucial analytical task in this context is to develop conceptual vocabularies that are capable of representing the rich spatiality of these scaling processes with reference both to the mutual imbrication of differential geographical scales and to the multiple sociospatial morphologies in which interscalar relations are organized.

In the literature on the social production of geographical scale, these methodological challenges are now being directly confronted (see, e.g., Smith, 1993; Agnew, 1997; Herod, 1997; Low, 1997; Swyngedouw, 1997; Collinge, 1999). Against the background of these contributions, my goal here is to suggest various ways in which Henri Lefebvre's multiscalar approach to sociospatial theory, as developed in some of his major works of the 1970s, might be redeployed to decipher the transformed form of the urban question in the contemporary era.

From the vantage point of the late 1990s, Lefebvre's writings of the 1970s appear quite remarkable in their capacity to discern and theorize some of the core spatio-temporal contradictions of the contemporary round of globalization, such as that between deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Brenner, 1998). However, it would be deeply problematic to attempt to transpose Lefebvre's analyses of this initial wave of crisis-induced capitalist restructuring onto the current conjuncture without considerable mediation. In the present context I cannot attempt to provide a detailed contextualization or critical exegesis of Lefebvre's writings. Instead, I propose to examine three specific aspects of Lefebvre's work which I consider particularly relevant to the task of reconceptualizing the urban question as a scale question in the late 1990s — his notion of an 'implosion-explosion' of urbanization; his conceptualization of state spatiality; and his analysis of the politics of scale. Each of these aspects of Lefebvre's sociospatial theory, I suggest, can be fruitfully redeployed to illuminate the distinctively scalar contours of the urban question in the current era of neoliberal globalization.<sup>12</sup>

12 Before proceeding further, one point of clarification is in order regarding Lefebvre's terminology. Lefebvre discusses the scale question on the basis of two key terms — *niveau* (level) and *échelle* (scale). Whereas the former term refers to different levels or dimensions of social reality within capitalist modernity, the latter term captures the notion of scale in its customary, territorial sense. On the one hand, Lefebvre refers to three key 'levels' or *niveaux* of social reality: the global (*global*) level; the 'mixed' or the urban level; and the 'private' or everyday level. On the other hand, Lefebvre refers as well to multiple 'scales' or *échelles*: the body, the local, the urban, the regional, the national, the supranational, the worldwide (*mondial*) and the planetary. In *La révolution urbaine* (1970), Lefebvre focuses above all upon the former aspect, scale as level. In *The production of space* (1974) and *De l'État* (1976–78), Lefebvre devotes more extensive attention to the latter aspect, scale as territory. A systematic interpretation of Lefebvre's theory of scale — which I cannot begin to undertake here — would need to analyze each of these aspects in relation to one another. The urban and the global are particularly central concepts, in this context, for they operate simultaneously as 'levels' (*niveaux*) and as 'scales' (*échelles*) within Lefebvre's theoretical framework. The following discussion draws above all upon *The production of space* and *De l'État*, and thus focuses somewhat one-sidedly upon the territorial aspect of scale.



*Re-scaling cities: the implosion-explosion of urbanization*

On various occasions Lefebvre (1968; 1970; 1986a) describes the spatiality of capitalist industrialization as a multiscale dynamic of 'implosion-explosion'. On the one hand, the capitalist urbanization process dismantles and reconstitutes historic urban centers to create new, specifically capitalist forms of urban centrality, industrial agglomeration and peripheralization. On the other hand, as capitalist urbanization spreads across the globe, it generates new forms of uneven development, territorial differentiation and core-periphery polarization that are articulated differently upon each geographical scale. The resultant 'urban fabric' is a 'net of uneven mesh' in and through which the industrialization process is stretched from individual agglomerations across national boundaries and continents to the global scale of the international division of labor (Lefebvre, 1996: 71). It is this highly uneven process of 'massive industrialization on a world scale ... with its consequence of an equally massive urbanization' which underpins Lefebvre's notion of the 'generalization of urban society' (Lefebvre, 1970; 1978: 265). In this sense, the urban question under industrial capitalism has always been, simultaneously, a scale question: each round of capitalist urbanization necessarily entails historically specific scalings of this implosion-explosion process and its associated forms of urban centrality and uneven geographical development.

Lefebvre extends this analysis in *The production of space* by describing the densely interwoven scalar contours of this 'uneven mesh' of capitalist urbanization. According to Lefebvre's 'principle of superimposition and interpenetration of social spaces', geographical scales cannot be understood in isolation from one another, as mutually exclusive or additive containers; rather they constitute deeply intertwined moments and levels of a single worldwide sociospatial totality. As capitalist urbanization expands globally, all geographical scales are permeated by an immense variety of 'links, connections, communications, networks and circuits' which at once intensify their interdependencies and hierarchize them in historically new, highly conflictual ways (Lefebvre, 1978: 305). As Lefebvre (1991: 86, 88, italics in original) argues,

No space disappears in the course of growth and development: *the worldwide does not abolish the local ... the local ... is never absorbed by the regional or even worldwide level. The national and regional levels take in innumerable 'places'; national space embraces the regions; and world space does not merely subsume national spaces but even ... precipitates the formation of new national spaces in a remarkable process of fission. All these spaces, meanwhile, are traversed by myriad currents.*

Lefebvre's analyses of the implosion-explosion of urbanization focus above all upon: (1) the role of urban space during the transition from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism; (2) the increasing subordination of urban space to exchange value, commodification and state spatial planning under 'neocapitalism' or high Fordism; and (3) the possibility for a revolutionary political transformation grounded upon 'differential space' and 'the right to the city'. From the vantage point of the late 1990s, Lefebvre's notion of implosion-explosion can also be fruitfully redeployed to analyze the re-scaling of neocapitalist forms of urbanization and the consolidation of post-Fordist or 'glocal' forms of urban and regional development since the late 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

The postwar, Fordist-Keynesian round of urban implosion-explosion was enframed within relatively stabilized scalar configurations crystallized around the national economy, the national state and national city-systems. Despite the multiple forms of uneven development which permeated the Fordist-Keynesian scalar configuration, its

13 The term 'post-Fordist' is used here in the literal sense of the Parisian regulationist notion of '*l'après-fordisme*', not to signify an essentialist interpretation of contemporary sociospatial transformations. The concept of 'glocal' urbanization refers to the diverse ways in which contemporary processes of global integration are recasting the social, economic and political contexts of local urban development (see Swyngedouw, 1992; Scott and Moulaert, 1997).

unprecedented stability hinged upon the privileged role of the national scale-level as an organizational and geographical interface between subnational and supranational social processes. However, contemporary glocal urbanization patterns have unsettled these entrenched, nationally organized scalar fixes without crystallizing around a new privileged geographical scale for the regulation and reproduction of capital (Brenner, 1999). Under these circumstances, the autocentric national economic spaces of the postwar era are being rearticulated with and superimposed upon various newly emergent scales of accumulation and regulation, including, most crucially, supranational economic triads (the European Union, North America and East Asia) and an emergent global mosaic of regional industrial complexes (Scott, 1998). On the one hand, new urban hierarchies are emerging on a world scale which crosscut and partially bypass the territorial borders of national urban systems and regulatory frameworks (Sassen, 1991; Knox and Taylor, 1995). On the other hand, on urban and regional scales, entrenched core-periphery relations are being reconfigured as the concentric spatial ecologies of Fordist urban systems are transformed into the polycentric clusters, nodes and patchworks of post-Fordist metropolitan agglomerations (Keil, 1994; Soja, 1996). In city-regions throughout the world economy, the spatiality of the urban process is thus being radically redefined as new scales and patterns of capitalist industrial development crystallize into what Sudjic (1993) has vividly described as '100-mile cities'.

From this point of view, the proliferation of scalar discourses within contemporary urban theory can be interpreted as an attempt to grasp the re-scaled forms of urban implosion-explosion that have been emerging throughout the world economy since the 1970s. Lefebvre's principle of superimposition and interpenetration of social spaces suggests an interpretation of these urban transformations as expressions of a multiscale reterritorialization of intertwined geographical scales rather than as an intrusion of global flows into local places. In my view, the critical analysis of this ongoing re-scaling of urbanization is among the central methodological challenges of conceptualizing the contemporary urban question as a scale question.

*Re-scaling states: state power and the production of geographical scale*

These considerations lead into a closely related scalar dimension of the contemporary urban question — the political regulation of glocal urbanization. Lefebvre's writings on urban theory devote extensive attention to the role of the modern territorial state in the production, regulation and transformation of urban space. On the urban scale, according to Lefebvre (1970), state institutions operate primarily to mold urban space into an ensemble of exchange-values. Lefebvre extends this analysis considerably in *De l'État* (1976–78) by exploring three key aspects of state spatial intervention under capitalism, each of which, he argues, is grounded upon scale-specific regulatory strategies:

- 1 States operate to *mobilize space as a productive force* through various forms of infrastructural investment, spatial planning, industrial policy and financial regulation directed towards different geographical locations and scales. According to Lefebvre (1977), the state's role in mobilizing space as a productive force dramatically intensifies during the period of industrial urbanization, leading to the worldwide consolidation of an ultra-productivist state form which he terms the 'state mode of production' (*le mode de production étatique*).
- 2 The state also operates as the most crucial *institutional mediator of uneven geographical development* under capitalism. In addition to promoting and territorializing capitalist industrial growth, Lefebvre argues, the state also attempts to alleviate, mediate and regulate its polarizing sociospatial effects on a variety of scales.
- 3 States deploy diverse strategies to *hierarchize social relations* upon different geographical scales, at once to maintain social cohesion and to impose a functional

differentiation of space (Lefebvre, 1978: 302–3). It is ultimately through the state's continual reconfiguration of social space, Lefebvre (1991: 378) suggests, that scalar fixes for capital accumulation — 'a certain cohesiveness if not a logical coherence' of territorial organization — can be secured, maintained and reproduced.

Lefebvre's state theory focuses predominantly upon the consolidation of a state-centric mode of development under neocapitalism, grounded upon the increasing nationalization of social relations in the context of a rapidly integrating world market. Under these circumstances, the above-mentioned aspects of state spatial intervention were provisionally harmonized and coordinated through the construction of nationally organized scalar fixes for global capitalist expansion — a 'precarious equilibrium' based upon national-developmentalism and 'statism' (Lefebvre, 1976: 56; 1978: 263). Insofar as the national scale serves as the central geographical locus for the promotion of capitalist growth, for the alleviation of sociospatial polarization and for the preservation of social cohesion, Lefebvre suggests, the state mode of production maintains its institutional coherence even in the face of capital's endemic spatio-temporal contradictions. Because of its sensitivity to the profoundly spatial aspects of state power, Lefebvre's conceptualization of the state mode of production can also be usefully redeployed to decipher the ways in which these entrenched nationally organized scalar fixes have been radically destabilized since the 1970s.

Contemporary processes of state spatial restructuring are a subject of intense debate (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Jessop, 1997; Keil, 1998; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999), but in the present context they appear to signal an increasing scalar and institutional *disarticulation* of the three dimensions of state spatial intervention sketched above. In general terms, the current round of neoliberal state restructuring can be interpreted as a contradictory ensemble of political strategies to reactivate the productive force of capitalist territorial organization in the wake of the crisis of global Fordism during the 1970s (Lipietz, 1994). In this sense, neoliberalism entails a more directly productivist incarnation of the state mode of production than existed under the Fordist-Keynesian regime of neocapitalism. Insofar as the scalar organization of state power is essential to its capacity to mobilize social space as a productive force within particular territorial arenas, processes of state re-scaling have figured crucially within this neoliberal-productivist project.

On the one hand, triadic, supranational, plurinational and international regulatory regimes and institutions such as the EU, NAFTA, the World Bank and the IMF have acquired important new roles in the regulation of global competition, international trade and foreign direct investment which were previously monopolized, in large part, by national-developmental central governments. On the other hand, throughout the world economy, a wide range of subnational, regional, metropolitan, municipal and local state agencies have adopted entrepreneurial governance strategies during the last two decades to promote structural competitiveness, to attract external capital investment and to secure endogenous forms of accumulation within their territorial jurisdictions (Hall and Hubbard, 1998). In this context, central states have also attempted to redefine themselves by deploying new forms of 'spatial selectivity' (Jones, 1997) to regulate economic restructuring and industrial growth within their major growth poles, industrial districts and urban regions. In the western European context, this ongoing 'glocalization' of national state power has entailed, among other re-scalings: (1) the reorganization of spatial planning systems to privilege the regional rather than the national scale of regulatory intervention and governance; and (2) the construction of new institutional forms, or 'regional armatures' (Lipietz, 1994), within major urban agglomerations in order to enhance place-specific competitive advantages. The 'institutional thickness' (Amin and Thrift, 1994) of regional regulatory space is thus being significantly enhanced in the current era as a wide range of social actors and organizations struggle to reactivate the productive forces within major urban regions. Under these conditions, a new regulatory

regime based upon 'glocal' developmentalism — the promotion of global economic competitiveness within strategic subnational territorial sites such as urban regions and major industrial districts — appears to be supplanting national-developmental regulatory models which emphasized the balanced redistribution of growth on a national scale.

This neoliberal privileging of the productivist moment of state spatial intervention has also entailed a major redefinition of the state's role in mediating sociospatial polarization and in securing social cohesion. As space is mobilized as a productive force primarily in triadic, supranational economic spaces and in core urban regions and industrial growth poles, uneven development and sociospatial polarization are being dramatically intensified on nearly *all* geographical scales (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Smith, 1997). Whereas the national scale currently remains the most crucial, if destabilized, institutional locus for the regulation of uneven development and for the promotion of social cohesion (Jessop, 1997), these latter aspects of state spatial intervention have been subordinated to the state's productivist moment most systematically on subnational and supranational scales. Two trends within the contemporary European Union (EU) illustrate this structural realignment in the social regulation of uneven development.

First, on the European scale, the question of social cohesion has remained a source of intense controversy in the context of the Agenda 2000 proposals for EU enlargement. However, like the European single market and the European single currency, the Agenda 2000 project has been configured above all according to economic priorities, such as enhancing capital mobility and integrating market relations across national boundaries, rather than in terms of social priorities, such as redistribution, cohesion or human welfare (see *Financial Times*, 1999). Second, on the urban and regional scales, the issue of city-suburban polarization has exploded throughout the EU in the 1990s. As a new round of industrial growth has rippled through European urban peripheries and edge cities, new forms of sociospatial inequality and exclusion have proliferated both within and between major urban regions. However, the currently unfolding re-scaling of urban governance within European city-regions has been dominated overwhelmingly by entrepreneurial, competition-oriented projects to enhance territorially specific competitive advantages. Although strategies to alleviate polarization, exclusion and inequality have in no way been entirely suppressed, they are generally being subordinated to, or integrated within, the dominant discourses and practices of urban entrepreneurialism (Brenner and Heeg, 1999). As these brief illustrations indicate, the new regulatory projects which are currently being mobilized on a range of geographical scales within the EU underpin a neoliberal-productivist redefinition of state spatiality: particularly on subnational and supranational scales, state institutions are increasingly seen to operate as instruments for reactivating the productive force of social space rather than as mechanisms for institutionalizing social compromises, for overcoming spatial disparities or for promoting social cohesion. In contrast to the Fordist-Keynesian configuration of state power, uneven development within this neoliberal-productivist framework is no longer viewed as a *limit* to capital accumulation but rather as its very *foundation*.<sup>14</sup>

Under these circumstances, the state mode of production is being disarticulated into a multiscalar institutional hierarchy characterized by rapidly changing, deeply contradictory scalar divisions of regulation (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1996). Jessop (1998b) aptly describes this situation as a 'relativization of scales': state institutions no longer attempt to secure an encompassing institutional fix on any single geographical scale but struggle instead to maintain a 'variable mix of institutional forms and governance mechanisms involved in stabilizing specific economic spaces in however provisional, partial, and temporary a manner in the face of continuing volatility, market failures, and economic

14 The social and political contradictions unleashed by this neoliberal-productivist project were articulated in a particularly extreme form during the late 1980s in the South East of England (Peck and Tickell, 1995; Allen *et al.*, 1998).

(and other) conflicts' (Jessop, 1998a: 23). In stark contrast to the scalar fixes associated with previous forms of state regulation, contemporary neoliberal regulatory projects appear to be premised upon a highly volatile *scalar flux* in which interscalar hierarchies and relations are continually reshuffled in response to a wide range of strategic priorities, conflicts and contradictions. Within the resultant geographies of 'global-local disorder' (Peck and Tickell, 1994), supranational, national and subnational state institutions are forced to adjust continually to the economic fluctuations and social contradictions which are induced through their own productivist, market-oriented restructuring strategies.

The 'generalized explosion of spaces' to which Lefebvre (1979: 290) drew attention two decades ago appears to be dramatically intensifying under neoliberalism as state institutions organized at multiple geographical scales struggle to secure distinctive scalar niches for themselves within the rapidly changing geographical forcefields of global capitalism. As key sites and targets of these re-scaling processes, urban regions are among the crucial geographical arenas in which the politics of neoliberal-productivism are currently being articulated and contested. Insofar as the re-scaling of the state is today both a medium and an outcome of the re-scaling of urbanization, the urban question is being intertwined ever more directly with the question of state regulation, not only on the urban scale but on multiple supraurban scales as well (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999). Consequently, in the late 1990s, processes of state re-scaling have become an absolutely central dimension of the urban question.

#### *Re-scaling power: the politics of scale*

In the concluding chapter of *The production of space*, Lefebvre articulates his famous thesis that space is becoming a central object of political struggle in the contemporary world — it is no longer merely the 'medium' or 'theatre' of sociopolitical conflicts but one of their constitutive dimensions. 'Space', Lefebvre (1991: 410) suggests, 'is becoming the principle stake of goal-directed actions and struggles'. In this situation, Lefebvre argues, all social actors, movements and institutions are subjected to a 'trial by space' — 'an ordeal which is the modern world's answer to the judgment of God or the classical conception of fate' (ibid.: 416). According to this notion, the struggle to gain command and control over social space has become a central element of everyday life, industrial production, political regulation and geopolitical conflict on all geographical scales. As Lefebvre (ibid.: 417) ominously remarks, 'Space's investment — the production of space — has nothing incidental about it: it is a matter of life and death'.

This 'strategic hypothesis' regarding the growing importance of 'theoretical and practical questions relating to space' (ibid.: 62) has provoked considerable debate among Lefebvre's interpreters. For present purposes I propose to read Lefebvre's thesis not as an ontological affirmation of spatiality over historicity but rather as a historical-political diagnosis of ongoing transformations within contemporary capitalism that have rendered the spatial and scalar dimensions of everyday power relations more readily apparent and therefore more directly open to sociopolitical contestation. Thus, whereas Lefebvre opens *The production of space* with a discussion of the 'illusion of transparency' and the 'realistic illusion' through which social space is reified into a pregiven empirical object, he concludes that work by calling for a spatialized counterpolitics to transcend the abstract space of capital and the modern state (Lefebvre, 1991: 27–30, 416ff).<sup>15</sup> This intensified politicization of space is not *opposed* to historicity in Lefebvre's framework but actually *grounded* upon it: a renewed politics of space is enabled precisely by the destabilizing of the entrenched historical form of capitalist space/time which was premised upon, as Lefebvre (1991: 21) notes of Hegelian state theory, the 'fetishization of space in the service of the state'. As Lefebvre (1991: 23) argues, the national state form

15 See Kipfer (1996) and Kofman and Lebas (1996) for more detailed discussions of Lefebvre's politics.

'promotes and imposes itself as the stable centre — definitively — of (national) societies and spaces'. One of Lefebvre's central goals in *The production of space* and *De l'État* is to show how this apparently atemporal form of state-centric, nationally crystallized capitalist spatiality is being superseded as sociopolitical struggles to reconfigure and re-scale spatial practices proliferate upon multiple geographical scales.

Lefebvre's writings of the 1970s are permeated by analyses of such struggles. In his early writings on cities (1968; 1970), he focuses primarily on the project of reappropriating urban space for collective social uses rather than for private profit and exchange value. Lefebvre's subsequent writings expand this concern with urban space and the 'right to the city' into a multiscale politics of scale focused not only upon supraburban spaces such as regions, national states and the world economy, but also upon struggles to transform scalar hierarchies and interscalar relations themselves. The problematic of geographical scale became an increasingly central dimension of Lefebvre's spatialized politics in his studies of capitalist globalization, for, as he clearly recognized, scales operate simultaneously as territorial containers and as geographical hierarchies of everyday power relations under capitalism. Lefebvre's politics of scale stem from his sustained analysis of the ways in which the multiple spatio-temporal contradictions of capitalism are crystallized upon each geographical scale, from the global to the local, leading in turn to intensified political struggles which are not merely territorialized within scalar hierarchies but oriented directly towards their reorganization, reconfiguration and even transcendence. Major examples of such struggles in Lefebvre's work include pressures for regional or local self-management through the decentralization of state power (Lefebvre, 1978, 208–9; 1991: 378–9, 382–3); consumers' movements which 'experiment with modes of action on diverse scales' from the immediate, the neighborhood and the urban to the regional, the national and the global (Lefebvre, 1978: 272–3); and 'the globalization and diversification of the class struggle' (Lefebvre, 1978, 315–6). In the current era of capitalist globalization, Lefebvre (1978, 413–41; 1986b: x) suggests, the political stakes of such struggles have dramatically increased because the power to reorganize geographical scales — in their role both as containers and as hierarchies — has become an essential basis for the power to command and control social space as a whole.

In the context of contemporary urban theory, Lefebvre's approach to the politics of scale suggests a multiscale reconceptualization of urban forms of sociopolitical conflict. As transnational corporations, state institutions (on supranational, national, regional and local scales) and locally based social movements struggle to influence the socioterritorial organization and trajectory of the urbanization process, the urban scale has become a major socioinstitutional forcefield in which the geography of global capitalism is being forged, a 'set of spaces where diverse ranges of relational webs coalesce, interconnect and fragment' (Amin and Graham, 1997: 418). This situation, as Lefebvre presciently recognized, is among the major paradoxes of the contemporary round of globalization. On the one hand, the globalization process is causing the urban scale to be intertwined ever more directly with multiple supraburban political-economic processes. At the same time, urban regions appear to have become the geographical foundations of the entire edifice of global capitalism through their central role as motors of industrial growth and as territorial concentrations of social and political power (Scott, 1998). As a result of this extraordinarily dense 'superimposition and interpenetration of social spaces' within contemporary cities, the urban scale appears to have become the central institutional, political and geographical interface upon, within and through which the contradictory politics of capitalist restructuring are currently being fought out, at once 'the setting (*milieu*)' and 'the stake (*l'enjeu*)' of contemporary sociopolitical struggles (Lefebvre, 1991: 86, 386).

Under these circumstances, Lefebvre (1978: 161–2) notes, urban social movements have acquired an 'importance and resonance (*ampleur*) on a world scale': they do not

merely occur within urban space but strive to transform the socioterritorial organization of capitalism itself on multiple geographical scales. The 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968) thereby expands into a broader 'right to space' both within and beyond the urban scale (Lefebvre, 1978: 162, 317; 1979: 294). Even as processes of global capitalist restructuring radically reorganize the supraurban scalar hierarchies in which cities are embedded, cities remain strategic arenas for sociopolitical struggles which, in turn, have major ramifications for the supraurban geographies of capitalism (INURA, 1997). This situation, it seems to me, is a defining feature of the politics of scale in the contemporary era which deserves systematic, critical investigation among urban theorists.

## **Concluding comment**

If the urban question is today increasingly assuming the form of a scale question, this is not because the urban has been superseded as a level of analysis and social struggle, but because multiscale methodologies are now absolutely essential for grasping the fundamental role of cities as preconditions, arenas and outcomes of the current round of global capitalist restructuring. I have attempted to outline some of the contours of the contemporary scale question through the lens of Lefebvre's sociospatial theory, which began to confront the urban question as a problematic of geographical scale over two decades ago and which, in my opinion, contains a number of methodological insights whose relevance to urban theory has become more evident than ever in the late 1990s. Yet much work remains to be done to come to grips both theoretically and politically with contemporary processes of re-scaling in all their complexity and multidimensionality. Lefebvre's sociospatial theory provides one among a number of newly emergent methodologies which might be deployed to this end within urban studies. The rapidly expanding literature on the social production of geographical scale, which I have only mentioned fleetingly here, likewise contains powerful insights and methodological innovations which might be mobilized to confront many of the questions outlined in this essay. A key purpose of the preceding discussion has been to highlight the centrality of the scale question to urban theory in the late 1990s, and thereby, to attempt to initiate a methodological debate regarding the scalar assumptions within contemporary urban theory as well as a substantive debate regarding the dynamics of contemporary re-scaling processes.

The scalar flux induced through contemporary neoliberal restructuring strategies has severely unsettled entrenched scalar hierarchies without, however, creating a new privileged scale for the regulation of capital accumulation. Under these circumstances, as I have suggested, geographical scales have become both arenas and objects of sociopolitical contestation as a wide range of sociopolitical forces interact to reconfigure the territorial organization of capitalism. As Smith (1995: 62) notes, geographical scales constitute a 'primary avenue to power', whether through their role in differentiating social relations within asymmetrical territorial hierarchies or in containing them within determinate territorial boundaries. Whereas the capacity to 'jump scales' provides some actors and institutions with a means to widen their control over social space, processes of de- and re-scaling are currently transforming the very geographical frameworks within which such maneuvers occur, leading in turn to new scalar configurations that both differentiate and contain social relations in new, highly contentious 'power-geometries' (Massey, 1993). Clearly, the production of scale has always been a 'a highly charged and political process' (Smith, 1995: 61), but its intensity and its stakes have today dramatically increased in a global context of proliferating struggles to reestablish some form of territorial coherence or scalar fix for capitalist industrial growth.

In a recent reassessment of the urban question in an age of economic globalization and neoliberal politics, Scott and Moulaert (1997: 276) suggest that contemporary urbanization processes contain a 'genetic code that is the latent carrier of both relatively

benign and relatively forbidding futures'. In my view, the question of 'possible urban worlds' (Harvey, 1996: Chapter 14) can only be decided politically, through everyday struggles to reconfigure social and political space not only within urban regions, but also on national, supranational and ultimately global scales. An approach to critical urban theory which is attuned to the politics of scale might have powerful implications not only for reconceptualizing the urban question in an era of neoliberal globalization, but also, perhaps, for the mobilization of a spatialized counterpolitics oriented towards more egalitarian, democratic and socially just forms of urban society.

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