DOWNSIZING WAL-MART: A REPLY TO PRYTHERCH

Keith Woodward[1]
Department of Geography
University of Exeter
Exeter, United Kingdom

John Paul Jones III and *Sallie A. Marston*
Department of Geography and Regional Development
The University of Arizona

We are grateful to the editors of *Urban Geography* for inviting us to respond to the recent article by David Prytherch (2007), "Urban Geography *With* Scale: Rethinking Scale Via Wal-Mart's Geography of Big Things." In his essay, Prytherch criticized our article, "Human Geography Without Scale" (Marston et al., 2005), in which we argued that scale is an irredeemably chaotic concept, one more suggestive of a pervasive hierarchical epistemology—wherein geographers sort and analogize sociospatial processes through "levels"—than an ontological effort to think through the material-spatiality of processes, events, and orders. Together with us, Prytherch is ready to reject poorly conceived hierarchies that transcendentalize sociospatial processes by tossing them onto orders higher than the state of affairs would suggest. Yet he is not, in his words, ready to throw out the concept with the "dirty epistemological bathwater" (p. 461). Instead, Prytherch attempts to recoup scale by arguing that it is a proportional or relative concept; that it should be understood as a volumetric, networked, space of flows; and that urban (more so than political or economic) geography can provide unique insights into what scale is and how it is structured and works. He goes on to illustrate his case for the scalar geography of "big things" by describing some of the flows and coordinations necessary to fill a 200,000-plus square foot Wal-Mart Supercenter in West Phoenix, Arizona. In this reply, we want to accomplish three things: (1) briefly summarize our position with respect to scale (see also our reply to critics in Jones et al., 2007); (2) examine what we believe are flaws in Prytherch's effort to rethink and thereby recover scale for urban geography[2]; and (3) suggest where to start in a different approach to reading a phenomenon such as Wal-Mart.

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[1]Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Keith Woodward, Department of Geography, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX1 2QT, United Kingdom; e-mail: keith .woodward@ exeter.ac.uk

[2]For the record, we take issue with Prytherch's argument that scale is a latecomer to urban geography. Neil Smith, whose work on the concept is the most prolific and analytically developed, has been writing about cities and scale since the mid-1980s (Smith, 1984). He continued to do so throughout the 1990s (e.g., *inter alia*, Smith, 1992, 1996) as well as more recently (Smith, 2002). Kevin Cox (1998), Andrew Jonas (1994), Deborah Martin (2004), Linda McDowell (1997), Byron Miller (2000), and Erik Swyngedouw (1997), as well as a host of other scholars, have also approached scale as a key concept for comprehending urban processes.

We began our original paper by acknowledging the significant conceptual progress that theorists have made toward complexifying the concept of scale over the past 20 years. We then went on to argue that scale is a problematic concept because (1) it is so conflated with scope, extensiveness, and, well, bigness, that it is nearly impossible to keep these terms separate (and, we noted, we were not the first to point this out); (2) scale's endpoints—the local and the global (see also Marston et al., 2007)—are so easily conflated with other binaries that even careful thinkers find it hard to avoid ready-made pairings such as agency/structure, subjectivity/objectivity, resistance/domination, concrete/abstract, and the like, leaving us with dematerialized formulations such as global capitalism, national social formations, etc.; (3) scale theory, whether alone or in conjunction with network theorizing (Amin, 2002; Leitner, 2004; Brenner, 2005), leads researchers to sort processes *in advance* of serious consideration as to how they operate; and (4) scalar theorizing seduces researchers into an Archimedean conceit (Haraway, 1988), as if they were somehow hoisted above everyday life while following processes up and down scalar hierarchies.

It is important to emphasize that our critique did not negate the idea that scale, as an epistemology, does cultural *work*. With Katherine Jones (1998) we acknowledged that scale, like any discourse or thought regime, can have material effects. For example, we noted how corporate managers cite the international scale of competition to insulate their firms from criticism over the loss of local manufacturing jobs (this is how Wal-Mart's now-deceased "Buy American" program faded away). Yet such "scale talk" is just that, and quite different from the need for theorists to consider its ontological status—to ask, in effect, what is this thing in our heads and how does it actually work on the ground? And in asking those questions our paper turned to thinking about objects, events, and processes in immanent terms (Deleuze, 1994; Delanda, 2002) that remain loyal to their concrete production and unfolding in event-spaces we called sites (see also Schatzki, 2002). This formulation, we offered, was preferable to the gymnastics of scale "jumping," "shifting," "stretching," and "bending"—whether "upwards," "downwards," or "sideways"—all examples of processual contortions to be found in the scale literature.

Prytherch (2007) shares some of these reservations. Most importantly, he critiques as overly constraining the hierarchical imaginary that, in his reading of the literature, is due to scale's theoretical development within political–economic geography and its "structuralist understanding of … process and political struggles—particularly as they unfold via the nested, *de jure* arenas of local, regional, nation-state, supranational government" (p. 462). Yet he departs from us by attempting to hold on to the concept of scale, which he suggests be reworked as "volumetric, networked, spaces of flows." By volumetric he refers to the idea that "high-rise apartments and the retail big box are obvious examples emphasizing a simple point: urban spatial processes operate and take shape in three dimensions"; by networks he suggests that "urban spaces do not take shape in isolation, but emerge through *networked* processes that connect such spaces with others"; and by spaces of flows he signals a turn to "a more relational and process-based view of scales" (p. 465). In summary, "scale is at once about the relative size (volume) and extensiveness (breadth) and spatial structure of geographical flows. It concerns not just big or small, local or global, but how spaces are structured and interconnected as volumetric conduits for networked flows" (p. 465).

In what follows, we argue that instead of solving the key problems with the scale liter-ature that we noted in our original paper, Prytherch's turn to volumetric scale *repeats* rather than *rectifies* many of them. We recognized there—as we do again here—several critical difficulties regarding the roles played by scale in geography's collusion with the production of capitalist global imaginaries. These analytic missteps can be found throughout the discipline, and they surface at various points throughout Prytherch's attempt to retain the scale concept for urban geography. They are: (1) latent assumptions about the self-evidence of scale that intervene on its behalf during arguments for its very existence (i.e., claims *for* scale operate frequently on the *a priori* assumption that it already exists); (2) the citation and deployment of corporate globalist discourse as empir-ical evidence of the existence and importance of scale for studying things like, well, corporate global capitalism; and (3) the turn to abstractions familiar to scalar discourse as a generalizing shorthand for describing relations and processes that are invariably more complex and differential than such analytics can or will allow. We address each of these in turn.

Surely one of the strongest signs that a discourse or concept has become hegemonic is when it becomes so central to thinking (that is, common-sensical) that it cannot be explained without referencing itself in the process of its own definition. In such instances, the concept has taken hold of thought, imprisoning the world within its grid. Should we encounter things new and contradictory, the concept acts like a mantra against their recognizability. Just so with scale: comprehending newness requires that we are able to discuss its arrival on its own terms, rather than forcing it into *a priori* formulations such as scale, especially when the assumptive category cannot be shaken by the difference that newness brings forth. And though Prytherch is in no way the first to meet this challenge with some difficulty, we think his own wrestling with the concept is illustrative of how strong a hold the scalar imaginary has on geographic thinking today. He explains, for example, that "The very '*scale*' of contemporary urban spaces and economies in which they are embedded ought to get us thinking about *scale* … relationally in terms of a vol-umetric, networked, space of flows" (2007, p. 458, our italics). The problem we note here, one that resurfaces repeatedly throughout his article, is that scale is already taken as self-evident in the supposed process of its theorization.[3] This practice is compounded when—after a short consideration of the site ontology, our nonscalar "alternative," and the immanent complexity of event-relations that it foregrounds—he offers no critical challenges, but merely reasserts the blunt existence of scale: "This approach is exciting and promising, but I would reiterate a basic question: Would we care to approach the inevitably uneven—indeed spatially disproportionate—diagrammatic structure of any such event-relations without recourse to a concept like scale?" (p. 464). Rather than addressing the considerable case that we put forward for a concept that precludes the prior framings of scale, Prytherch asks why we would not simply jam it—square peg, round

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[3]This analytic blurring is compounded in the sentences that follow, wherein scale, space, and thing-ness are all made subject to definitional haziness: "The relative *scale of spatial forms and processes* might therefore be rethought as constituted relationally through interconnectedness, and as spaces that structure (and are struc-tured by) the flows they channel. Overall, we need to think about *scale less as a space (a thing) and more as socially constructed spatial structure or spatiality of networked geographical things or processes (a system)*" (p. 458, our italics).

hole—into the old construct, assuming that scale is the only tool capable of dealing with spatial disproportions in the size of buildings, ships, and ports. The site ontology is not so much discounted here as ignored and forgotten in the midst of the heavy presence of disciplinary common sense: the fundamental pervasiveness of scale.

Our second concern is Prytherch's failure to attend to scale's reflexology in terms of global capitalist discourse: where all points of the political–economic can be traced to the concept. Might this failure have something to do with the narratives we are sold regularly in advertisements, on the news, and by political leaders? We are not suggesting that Prytherch has been duped by these systems, nor that, in trying to retain the concept of scale, he is not working against the very real social, political, and economic unevenness that Wal-Mart produces in the world. His empirics, however, are not really about these, but are instead fixated on the quantitative volume of cheap goods that Wal-Mart houses and ships round the globe. For anti-capitalists and anti-globalists, the story he tells is harrowing: Wal-Mart's massive system "flows" like an immense, well-oiled machine, an exemplar of extensive reach and voluminous power (2007, pp. 470–471, 475–476). The result is a painfully familiar story, one that we have been inundated with for decades in repeated tales of the reach of global capitalism. But how different here is the perspective of the teller from that of the corporation when Prytherch's argument is found to draw its empirics almost exclusively from the websites and annual fiscal reports of Wal-Mart and the shipping line, Maersk (pp. 468–471, 473–477)? What other narrative might we expect—beside that of capitalism's conquest over global space—when the sources constituting primary research on global capital have been written by corporate employees specifically trained to compose documents courting corporate investors and customers? Is it any wonder, then, that discourses of global reach and efficiency pervade Prytherch's retelling? This is neither to deny nor downplay the very real forms of pervasive exploitation in which Wal-Mart has played a significant part, but it is *also* to highlight the ways that we are always in danger of becoming wrapped up in corporate selling points, lending supportive argument to their supposed materialities, augmenting and amplifying their discourses rather than aggressively critiquing their distributed, varying materialisms. Be they discursive or material, why should we want to be force-fed any more of Wal-Mart's cheaply packaged goods, let alone join the company of its distributors? In this regard, we find that, rather than embracing a moment to foster such an intervention in the scalar-centric sizeism of corporatist adventurers, Prytherch is too quick to buy what they are selling.

Third, we note that, throughout Prytherch's empirics, we are subject to abstractions that stand in for the materialities that would come to constitute his volumes, networks, and flows. This move is problematic because it prevents Prytherch from constructing theory grounded in the slippery, clunky, different stuff of the world, despite the fact that he agrees with us regarding the need to reject notions that bodies and objects can somehow be detached from their moorings, radiating horizontally while flying over the "materialities of the in-between" (Marston et al., 2007, p. 50). Moreover, his choice of volumetric scale as a way of countering flowsterism is a continuation of the confusion between scale, on the one hand, and scope, size, and extensiveness, on the other (see also Howitt, 2002; Leitner, 2004; McMaster and Sheppard, 2004). As we argued—and here we think Prytherch would agree—geographies of extension at least avoid the detached elevations of most scale theory. But importantly, extensivity should also imply greater

attention to the *grounds on which practices take place and social relations are consti-tuted*. His volumetric scale is partly about spatial extent, but it is also more centrally about bigness: big boxes, big ships, and big ports—an unfortunate conflation between the size of objects and their "scale."

As for his focus on flows, we see in Prytherch the conceptual equivalent to the classic phrase from old cowboy movies: "They went that-a-way." Yet "they," these objects on the move, are unknown and unnameable, given a "you-know-what-I-mean" gesture toward an aggregate of "stuff" that we must assume means or signifies similarly for everyone, but which could really only ever be an approximation. When it comes down to it, it is as easy to claim that these things are clean and consistent aggregates (exchange values, as Wal-Mart would have us believe) as it is to argue that they are differentiated complexities and specificities. But until we engage the site and see how they might be constituted out of strange relations, events, and conditions, the networks and flows might *just as well* come right off the corporate websites. Although exercises such as Prytherch's (2007) averaging of profits to the square footage of Wal-Mart's big box are interesting (p. 468), their reflexive abstractionism must first read that space is average-able *by the square foot*, treating each space within the space as though it were interchangeable. Assumptions about uniform flows and homogeneity should, instead, be checked against the complicated, situated production and consumption practices that are in constant vari-ation and change. To pass these over as exchangeable is to pass over the thousands of exploitations and implications that emerge throughout spaces.

All of this leads us to ask how we would theorize Wal-Mart through the site ontology. Briefly, why not reverse Prytherch's fascination with bigness and downsize the corpora-tion by excavating the objects and intimate practices, small and minoritarian as they are, that really get to the human doings behind the commodity chain he describes? It would be necessary, for instance, to confront the fact that Prytherch's generic, Chinese-manufactured audio headphones are, in fact, a fetishized object set free from its moorings in situated social practice. A site-based approach might start with the Philips Full Size Noise Cancelling headphones (model number HN110) available through both Wal-Mart.com and retail outlets and manufactured by Philips Electronics Division—a subsidiary of Koninklijke Philips Electronics, headquartered in the Netherlands but with corporate offices in several locations throughout China and elsewhere—at the Fu Tian Free Trade Zone, 12 Shihua Road, in Shenzhen, China. It would then explore the multiple and complex material practices that enable the production and consumption of those specific headphones—including their research and development and financing—as well as the practices that facilitate their transfer from the Fu Tian factory to the Huanggang Port facility in Shenzhen to the Port of Los Angeles, to the West Phoenix distribution center, on to the Wal-Mart shelves (both click and brick), and eventually into the homes, offices, schools, and other sites throughout the region served by the West Phoenix center.

Or, instead of focusing on the Regina Maersk container ship and its abstract traverse from Port Huanggang to the Port of Los Angeles, we would suggest looking to the *cargo container* itself, the revolutionary invention of Malcolm McLean (1913–2001), a rural North Carolinian who amassed what would become the second largest trucking empire in the United States. Along the way McLean came up with an idea to build containers that could avoid intermodal break-of-bulk charges as they went from one place to another. On April 26, 1956, McLean's experiment began by loading 58 boxes onto a retrofitted tanker

in Newark, New Jersey, and shipping them to Houston, where they were unloaded and then sent to their final destinations. The rest, as the cliché goes, is history—a history without which there would *be* no Wal-Mart, nor, in the assessment of *The Economist*, something called globalization (March 18, 2006). The transformations produced from this relatively small object (40 feet in length) are hard to overstate: cities made and some forgotten; some natures dredged while others paved; and entire cultures and livelihoods transformed (e.g., from urban to suburban). In fact, it is hard to think of a single object or event in the everyday lives of people in the Global North—and much of the Global South—that has not resulted from or been fundamentally altered by the container. All this from a stackable box-like metal object whose history is the result of thousands of other detailed stories of investors, engineers, factory workers, and warehouse personnel—to name the most obvious actors—as well as plans, spreadsheets, machinery, and docks—to name a few of the objects—as well as the hundreds of oppositions and bargainings, the need to set new standards, change existing laws, appropriate new spaces; all concretely negotiated and unfolding within sites (Levinson, 2006). In short, purportedly big things like Wal-Mart are not ultimately measurable in the massive square footage of distribution centers, but in the complex of bodies engaged in endlessly different and variable practices that make it the social and spatial assemblage that it is.

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