Of eagles and flies: orientations toward the site

Keith Woodward*, John Paul Jones III** and Sallie A Marston**

*Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706, USA

Email: kwoodward@wisc.edu

**School of Geography and Development, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85719, USA

Email: jpjones@email.arizona.edu, marston@email.arizona.edu

The macro-micro distinction is one of the most powerful in the human and physical sciences. In this article we challenge the macro by positing an alternative that recognises the intricacies and complexities of material geographies. We employ the Latin proverb – Aquila non captat muscas (Eagles don't catch flies) – to epitomise our position. Instead of looking to general theory – the bird's eye view – we argue for interrogating the ontological and methodological implications of a reciprocal, but antithetical, perspective – that of the flies. We call this alternative the site, an ontology that attempts to account for the different and varying political possibilities – virtually infinite and 'un-catalogue-able' – constantly at work in the world. The site is a formulation that recognises social life as a realm of infinite singularity and variability, where matter is immanently self-organising and pure difference unfolds. We explore the spatiality of the site through the concepts of topology and difference and then develop four methodological orientations for exploring the terrain of situated practices enmeshed in and unfolding through sites.

Key words: *site ontology, politics, subjectivity, methodology, difference*

Introduction

Within the history of complex spaces in topology, Bernhard Riemann's 1851 doctoral thesis detailing the beginnings of what would come to be known as 'Riemannian surfaces' was revolutionary. Developed from a system 'based upon the *covering principle*' that maps the distribution of points upon a complex plane, these surfaces were an attempt to 'describe local branching [of points] *topologically*' (Remmert 1998, 205; italics in original). Riemann's text sparked more than a century of innovation in conceptualising the mutability and fold-ability of spaces, having a driving influence upon mathematicians from Poincaré to Einstein and philosophers from Bergson to Deleuze. Leaving aside the breadth of its historical influence, this work also represented a gesture within mathematics toward what today might be called 'pure theory'.

Although the project was centrally invested in the specificity of differentials and differentiation, it nevertheless remained theoretically and methodologically generalist, paying no attention to the situatedness that conditions any negotiation of materiality's messy particularities.

Remmert explains: 'Riemann's thesis is merely the sketch of a vast program. He gives no examples, *Aquila non captat muscas* (Eagles don't catch flies) . . . Explicit representations by power series or integrals are of no interest. Formulae are powerful but blind' (1998, 206). The appearance of the Latin proverb is telling: a phrase equivalent to the contemporary injunction 'don't sweat the small stuff', it is deployed as an affirmation of both the generalist perspective of Riemann's contribution and the analytic reflex that would have such theory float above the specificities toward which it vaguely-yet-authoritatively gestures. This

generalising function operates with blindness toward the specific, the particular, and the situated, threatening to short-circuit at the first encounter with the unruly, chattering actualities it presumes to order.

In the spirit of the topology to which Riemann added so many refinements, we may endeavour to fold this old Latin proverb, realigning its points and enabling it to signify differently. For while it is undeniable that, under certain explanatory schemas, the infinitesimal movements of actual forces and bodies become imperceptible, this is an analytic rendering of invisibility, a *logical* effect, and never an actual erasure of those complex materialities. Thus, while the perspective of the eagle is invested in analytic specificity, it nevertheless remains incapable of approaching specificity in situated terms:

> it seeks to capture vital difference that outruns all thought and submit it to the judgment of a single perspective, a perspective that stands outside difference and gathers it into manageable categories. (May 2005, 27)

Ultimately unmanageable, the strange alignments of actual difference – such as those inhabited in a swarm of flies – are virtually infinite, constantly finding cracks in theory through which they escape back into the real materiality of the world: obscure and undomesticated. *Aquila non captat muscas*. Eagles don't catch flies.

Consider, for example, how masculinist abstractions favouring production underwrote early scale theory's tendencies to ignore the situated practices taking place in households (Marston 2000; Marston and Smith 2001). Questioning these sorts of abstractions, along with the transcendental insistence of the bird's eye-view, we can endeavour to interrogate the *political* implications that ensue from the multiple, swarming, aggregating movements of flies. For, whereas theory from the perspective of the eagle can disregard the intricacies and complexities that go into organising and mobilising specific political actions, favouring instead generic procedures and projects, it is often the nature of such universalisms to pass over the very specificities that produce the 'monkey wrenches' capable of jamming up systemic oppression and exploitation. Thus, by deploying an aggregative theory of power that treats capital, globalisation or the state as singular entities, countless alternate political possibilities and actualities transpire beneath the radar, which in turn necessarily leave or pass over gaps that become potentially useful for minoritarian politics (Katz 1996).[1] In different contexts, similar observations have been issued by Ansell (2009), Belcher *et al.* (2008), Gibson-Graham (2002), Hiller (2008), Isin (2007), Pain (2009) and Painter (2006).

Our task in this contribution is to extend these varied impulses from the ontological realm to the methodological. To do so, we first describe ontology from the perspective of the flies. Developed from several strands of so-called 'flat ontologies', our onto-analytic object is the site: an immanent (self-organising) event space that is differentiated and differentiating, but whose emergent properties also include congealments and blockages (Jones *et al.* 2007). We then go on to consider several implications that this ontology has for work in geography. These are not prescriptives ('should do'), nor are they methods ('how to'). They are, rather, 'orientations' that, we hope, can help researchers interested in site-based approaches to social investigation.

Topology and difference

It seems as though it was only a matter of time before geographers would make efforts to 'ontologise' difference. After all, what had the 1980s brought if not two decades of celebration of epistemological inquiry and a near total rejection of metaphysics and ontology (Dixon *et al.* 2009; cf. Soja 1989)? Set in motion were over 20 years of linguistically driven deconstruction and humanities-inspired criticism rooted in the cultural turn. If this cleared the stage for a rematerialisation of human geography (Anderson and Wylie 2009; Jackson 2000; Woodward and Lea 2010), the ensuing scene has been driven by the search for ways to once again take ontological questions seriously without at the same time falling back into the privileged and phallocentric essentialism that once guided their investigation.

Confronting this ontological challenge, Derrida (1997), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Latour (1993) and a host of others (see Bonta and Protevi 2004; Buchanan and Lambert 2005; Doel 1999; Massey 2005) have developed numerous topological approaches that recognise space as a differential concept. In opposition to Kant's static, thinker-centred spatialities, for example, Derrida understands 'spacing' as a moving, 'irreducible alterity' (1981, 81). Latour, on the other hand, blurring the line between human and non-human forms of agency, explores the amplification of capacities for hybrid technologies to make distant spaces appear close and close spaces appear distant (an account that, in the final tally, may differ very little from Harvey's (1989) time–space compression). Finally, rejecting totalising views of spatial stasis,

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe 'intensive' spaces (see also DeLanda 2002) capable of falling into far-from-stable states or passing slowly through gradiated differentiations. Theirs is a difference characterised by self-organising singularity and ongoing movement-in-variation – expressions ranging from variations of surface pressure during cell division (DeLanda 2002) to the complex equations of differential calculus (Deleuze 1994). Following Spinoza, Deleuze affirms an immanent ontology that requires no eagle: no transcendental organising principle or category beyond the swarms of material articulation and differentiation.

Our efforts to rethink spatiality have relied upon selective readings of Deleuze (1994), developed in combination with the site ontology of Schatzki (2002). Attentive to the challenges that might arise from adapting the former's version of 'pure difference' to the site, we emphasise an account in which the 'state of affairs' (i.e. the 'situation') marks the (material) limit of ontology.[2] Initially, this treatment was specified as part of a critique of scalar hierarchies in geography (Marston *et al.* 2005; Jones *et al.* 2007). More recent work has examined its implications for rethinking subjectivity (Woodward *et al.* 2008), politics (Woodward 2010) and production, the last of which concerns the site at the intersection of capitalism and aesthetics in Nollywood's video-film industry (Marston *et al.* 2007). Along with various other 'flat ontologies' in contemporary spatial thought – including some variants of assemblage theory (Law 2000 2004; McFarlane 2009; Robbins and Marks 2010) – site ontology emphasises the immanent, material connection between bodies and unfolding, situated practices. Pivoting upon the emphatic assertion that such relations arise from emergent (self-organising) processes – rather than stasis and transcendence (see Orientation 1, below) – each site is a dynamically composed aggregate whose 'map' is drawn according to its own internal 'logics', rather than any generalising laws. It makes no sense, therefore, to think of one's immediate surroundings as 'always, already' or 'necessarily' a site, nor will one abstractly pre-exist the objects and bodies making up its composition. Likewise, it makes no sense to privilege human agency in sites over the material force relations that draw them together. No individual is ever outside of the dense materialities that compose sites, but – equally – neither is one the transcendental author of those sites. Instead, we must approach sites as aggregating, negotiating and *working* materialities (Spinoza 2000) – bodies in motion, affecting

and effecting – that sometimes enfold the labours of purposeful subjects. This does not mean that subject-centred explanations do not remain an important, necessary part of the enterprise of human geography, but it does mean that they do not describe everything that is circulating and emerging in sites (Woodward *et al.* 2008).[3]

While the work of the site surfaces in its composition of material bodies, we should likewise resist limiting this to the abstract relations that ground molecular, geological, aloplastic, planetary and other body typologies. Sites are frequently held together, populated or even delimited by all sorts of obscure material 'bodies' – everything from percepts to sign systems (a body of sayings, a body of work, and so on). And while formal bodies will inevitably play a part in such assemblies, the material cooperation of the site is primarily affective and forceful (the 'constraint' and movement of cooperating bodies expressing reciprocality). That is, the comings-together of elements composing a site are always a matter of labour, of work: bodies do not merely *find* themselves in positions of relative or interlocking distribution, but *participate* in the production of the fields of force through which they aggregate. Given this, the distinction between composition and production can only be analytic: the product of the site *is* its dynamic and changing composition. Thus the 'work' of the site is the material context for the 'stuff' (bodies, doings, saying, and so on) that makes it up. Accordingly, while the site that emerges might be extraordinary, strange or 'different', its labour need not be: it involves instead an infinity of varying localised processes the analytics of which resemble a physics of reproduction. In this regard, the aggregating site appears as the inter-affectivity of force relations whose share of materiality arises through repetitions of forceful association.

Finally, the site permits dealing with situated, onto-logical difference in ways that are fundamentally socio-ethical, resembling Spinoza's onto-ethical characterisation of a material body:

> When a number of bodies of the same or of different magnitudes are constrained by others in such a way that they are in reciprocal contact with each other, or if they are moved with the same or different degrees of speed in such a way that they communicate their motions to each other in some fixed ratio, we shall say that those bodies are reciprocally united to each other. We shall also say that all such bodies simultaneously compose one body, i.e. an individual, which is distinguished from others by this union of bodies. (Spinoza 2000, 128)

This formulation has two immediate implications: (a) by definition the site is immanent to the articulation of a set of specific doings and it is by virtue of this relation that they become its doings (the ethical dimension of the site); and (b) because its purview is in no way limited to human doings but rather includes all participating bodies, the site broadly reinterprets 'the social' to incorporate the totality of interacting materiality, regardless of whether it be human or not (the social dimension of the site). Accordingly, site ontology does not endeavour to reduce all relations to physics, but rather to open the processes and hangings-together of every site to the socio-ethical questions of work. Recalling Spinoza's famous notion, if the 'ethics' of a body is a question of 'what can it do?', the politics of site ontology explores *how* the variations and degrees of labour constitute its composition.

Orientations

We turn now to four methodological problematics that arise from the ontological framework elaborated above. Less formal than propositions, they are presented here as orienting landmarks rather than rigid compass points.[4]

Orientation 1: Riemann's Paradox (Specifying the site)

In our work criticising the concept of scale in human geography (Marston *et al.* 2005; Jones *et al.* 2007), we positioned ourselves against theoretical approaches that distractedly hang sets of categories over dense fields of differentiating materiality. These procedures, we argued, arise from rigidities in vertical thought that have reified hierarchies of spatiality (local, regional, national, global). For imaginaries such as scale and its close relative, globalisation (see Marston *et al.* 2007), such moments tend to find expression in the modelling of a series of formal spatial scaffolds onto which complicated and messy states of affairs then get assigned. In research, this is almost never a clean operation: states of affairs rarely fit neatly into scalar (or local–global) operations without being first subject to a kind of analytic surgery, where procedures of simplification and reduction are performed in accordance with an analytic coherence that remains external to the situation. Once the bandages come off, we often find Riemann's Paradox: what was gained in analytic specificity and parsimony was bought at the cost of amputating much of the difference and complexity that marked the situation's specificity in the first place. As suggested above and in Marston *et al.* (2005), this in

no way implies that scale is not an epistemology – in short, a discourse (Jones 1998) – around which people act and construct spatiality. Most assuredly, it is relevant, even within a human geography that is ontologically suspicious of scale, to interrogate its deployment by differently situated actors and institutions (see Kaiser and Nikiforova 2008; Legg 2009; Moore 2008; see Jones *et al.* 2007).

Networks and flows are a second transcendent spatiality that operates by way of analytic reductions (Marston *et al.* 2005). We do not reject connective systems out of hand – surely, connections between material bodies exist and networks may be an appropriate way to *represent* them. We remain suspicious, however, of treatments that ignore the real blockages, oppressions and exploitations that can terrorise and imprison situations. This is exactly what happens when network imaginaries align with liberalist fantasies of 'free' mobilities, flows and fluidities (Friedman 2005). No less transcendent than the verticalities they purport to replace, they select out an exemplary regime of (often capitalistic) mobility, simultaneously obscuring the many immobilities that enable it. When such discourses of accessibility, hybridisation, nomadism, deterritorialisation and flux become idealist and absolutist, however, the material processes of boundary construction, frictions of routinised practices and sedimented language begin to talk back. North American commodity production after NAFTA, for example, is 'free' and mobile *only* by virtue of the geographies of containment that leave thousands every year to seek new routes – often at their peril – through the deserts to the north (Nevins 2002). Network- and flow-based discourses can be just as likely to import *a priori* blinders for research practice, particularly when the connectivities under investigation fail to 'touch ground'. If the perspective of the eagle produces the generalising logics of spatial hierarchies, then not even the loose consistency of the flies survives the reduction of materiality to absolute, fluid indiscernability.

In contrast to these perspectives, site ontology corresponds – as we have explained above – to a series of movements whose convergences and divergences *carve out* a specific materiality. Such a complex requires that we start with the unfolding state of affairs whose varying and gathering situatednesses give rise to singularities in the form of increasingly self-conditioned sites – that is, as collectivities of bodies or things, orders and events, and doings and sayings that hang together so as to lend material consistency to dynamic relations. Such a starting point precludes strategies that proceed by way of sets of pre-

established standards of measure for evaluating what processes are unfolding on the ground – a reductive strategy that tends to overlook differences from site to site in favour of roping them together under the banner of equivalence. Instead, investigations should proceed by an examination of the composition of the site, approached not as a problem that must fit the conditions of a preordained solution, but instead as a singular (situated, changing) problematic field whose specific hangings together mark both the dynamics and the limits of its own describability (Deleuze 1994). This alternative does not merely exchange induction for deduction – both of which work within an economy of reduction in the specificity of material difference – so as to produce a surplus of generality in scientific explanation (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). Instead, the site ontology invites speculation on the variation and composition of all relevant and intersecting materialities that go into its composition. As such, difference – rather than being something that must be controlled in order to arrive at general and reproducible results – becomes a fundamentally productive and active component of the site itself and of any account corresponding to it.

Orientation 2: The proliferation of differences (Ditching the roll call)

In parallel to the above distancing from transcendent spatialities, this orientation suggests that much the same problem arises for situated research practices when we attempt to precode subjects within matrices of social relations. Catalogues of diversity are almost an inevitability in the wake of some 40 years of important feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial critiques of white, masculinist, statist and capitalist hegemonies and of their attendant erasures of difference – a silencing made all the more powerful by their often implicit character. And yet, we equally fall into the trap of hypostatising social difference under the familiar intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, (non)citizen, (dis)ability and age when we treat subjectivity as derivatives of these categories. Warnings against essentialisations, typically under the banner of social constructivism and performativity (Butler 1990; Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Natter and Jones 1997; Peake 2010; Secor 2007), are of course well known, and are in fact helpful in turning attention away from the roll call of subjectivities as an ever-present critical condition and towards more open processes of subject construction, counter-subjection, refusals and disidentification. But it is nevertheless the case that, in much empirical work, the authorisations of interpretive data

of a qualitative sort – whether through interviews or observations – come in the form of a disclosure: Swindon-born, labour-leaning, straight middle-aged white male speaks . . . thus. It is difficult not to be swayed by the constellation of intersecting social relations such descriptive categorisations bring forth.

There are, moreover, political reasons to be wary of alignments that seem to arise so naturally in the linkage between subjectivity and politics. As we have written elsewhere:

> The political processes initiated by subjectivity are characterized by a prescriptive procedure: subjectivity, as a determinate abstraction, prescribes the politics that are specific to it. That is, with respect to politics, subjectivity is transcendental. The uni-directionality of this relationship is evident, for example, in the concept of citizenship, which names a politics over which it reigns. Here, the invocation of a specific subjectivity (a collection of individualizing and subjectivizing codes that are thrust upon a body) brings with it specific political contexts and practical directives (e.g. voting, serving your country, licensing your pets, reporting unattended baggage). In such invocations, a politicality [political potential] is carved out of what seems an otherwise noisy field of relations as the proper context for its subject's corresponding orientation. . . . As a result, nothing is 'surprising' when 'politics' take place. (Woodward *et al.* 2008)

By contrast, site ontology suggests that it is not only subject-bodies but other materialities that may be at work in the emergence of politicalities. The specificity of the site announces the irreplaceable contribution of grounded materialities and actualities – the state of affairs – to particularly evolving relations of all sorts and worldly production in general. What we envision therefore is a treatment that would keep such complexities alive in their specificity, so as to make them as productive for theoretical reflection as they are for material production. In part, this means stepping away from treatments that would resolve specificities back to a family of generalised social relations and positionalities, but it also seems to present challenges to the ways we have been trained to perceive the world and the theoretico-empirical continua that inspire such understandings. To some degree, the site opens the space for us to re-interrogate our analytics by the suspension of subjectivity. By avoiding the reflex to treat theories of social identity like an instruction booklet for approaching the world, site ontology dismisses the notion of a stable, testable or transplantable picture of the world and the corresponding, flawed imaginaries that would reduce scientists to lame fact checkers who

follow-up or test the abstract speculations of theorists. Rather than being something that gets 'put to work' in empirical research (like social movement theory that analytically sorts and guides), the site ontology 'goes to work', seeking out the situated articulation of grounded specificities.

Orientation 3: Methodological bricolage (Working with what it is hand)

In this orientation we paraphrase the late B-movie actor and erstwhile US President, Ronald Reagan, who, in response to a reporter's query about the generally bad quality of his films during his career as an actor, was reported to have replied: 'they didn't want it good, they wanted it Thursday'. Reagan's excuse reminds us that situated or immanent processes – as opposed to floating or transcendent ones – have a certain frugality, texture and immediacy that, rather than predetermining or perfecting them, work with what is at hand. Thus a site is like a 'swarm' of flies: consistent without being permanent, it denotes without demarcating – a blob (Lynn 1998) whose orientation cannot be described prior to its articulation. In one sense, the swarm's orientation is toward the corpse of the eagle, but at the same time it is continuously varying in relation to any number of other conditions: variations in the wind, the suddenly passing car, the imminent arrival of a pack of wolves.

Working with 'what is at hand' reinforces the notion that the site is a processual bricolage of dynamic, continuous change, the relative consistency of which is not an issue of maintaining an ideal form or structure, but rather relatively cohering within varying conditions. As a result, situated politics cannot wait, nor can it affirm a series of ideal or transcendental programmes. And while hardenings and blockages are part of what goes into the composition of the site, these processes, even when heavily routinised, are always anexact. With regard to production, this means that any series of processes are not exactly repeatable, but only approachable. With regard to research, studying a site is about openness and encounter.

While flat ontology may not of necessity require new methods of collecting 'data' – like other contemporary perspectives it might combine qualitative work based on observation and participation, discussion and listening, mapping and close-reading – it does suggest that researchers assume different methodological stances with respect to the investigative process.

Those accustomed to 'peeling back' layers of structural explanation – as in the skins of an onion – in order to identify the core or essence of a problem are faced with an illusionary centre. The challenge is how to think methodologically from the inside, following the intensities that enroll events and objects as well as the researcher her/himself. Echoing what is by now a popular enough notion – if still much less popular in practice than theory – we attend to Deleuze's focus upon the 'middle regions' (1994, 38; see also Braun 2004), where the onion's dense network of capillaries and baffles collaborate and conspire, exerting all sorts of pressures – precisely the intensive labour that goes into the production of the object, 'onion'. Through the site, moreover, we can extend Deleuze's suggestion by asking: 'Where else *could* you start?' Materiality is constantly in the middle of the inter-exertion of forces – even in the most enclosed instances of self-production or auto-affection (i.e. immanence). So what is this object if not a mesh of intensities that form the ever-present background and foreground through which hangings-together are contextualised and made possible, actual and real? Instead of layers, we encounter milieus crosscut with other milieus and folded onto one another, screens of ever-widening contexts of effect and explanation.

Once there, we find that sites, like onions, can be sliced. But notice how little we learn when we use a surgeon's tools to cut through all sorts of relationality, taking merely the sections we have demarcated, arbitrarily and exactly, as our objects. By contrast, a site-based methodology might be better thought of as a game of pick-up sticks: experiment carefully with the distributions you encounter so as to find what pressures and affects are working within and constituting them: test out all the relations. As we have noted above, the distributions of relations in a site – no matter how stratified or routinised – are never static; rather, they are matters of continuous variation. Like pick-up sticks, one can never expect to encounter the same distribution, and the number of possible relations is multiplied exponentially, even though one can expect varying repetitions of certain types of force relations. Method-wise, pick-up-sticks is not about finding one's way out, but about worming around by way of experimentation, testing the various pressures and intensities that go into the site's composition. As a result, research is experimentation, an ongoing process whose results are never a matter of stable states, but rather commentaries on relationality, affects and conditions of dynamic relation.

Orientation 4: The political decision (Swarming the fallen eagle)

There is perhaps nothing more recurrent within debates surrounding the macro and the micro, nor more common to scalar theorising, than the invocation of politics and political commitment as a test of the practical value and applicability of social theory. Certainly the most frequent arguments for the centrality of advancing the macro over the micro have come from those engaged in organising against what they identify as global political problems such as capitalism, racism or sexism. Our objection to this macro orientation is that too frequently the political can become calcified when pre-treated with a calculus of defined-in-advance geographies of thought and action. Perhaps the most pervasive example of this course of action is the measurement procedure wherein the possibilities for social change are weighed against the supposed 'size' of the object to be resisted. The obvious favourite in such reckonings are those readings of anti-capitalism that suppose that, in order to be effective, oppositional movements need to somehow be as expansive or pervasive as a macro-capitalist imaginary. It is in these sorts of approaches that we find activism intoxicated by the high-flying strategies of global ambitions.

By contrast, consider this account of the rampant exploitation within the garment industry's maquiladoras and sweatshops. While often centrally concerned with the ways that changing production processes drive the increasing devaluation of labour, the description invariably turns to the disturbing localised materialities that the body of the worker engages:

> Workers are subjected to chemical exposure and unhealthy levels of particles in the air that they breathe . . . It is not uncommon for employers to restrict workers' access to toilets or deny permission to leave work to visit a doctor . . . In many countries, employers avoid maternity benefits by forcing women to take pre-employment or regular pregnancy tests and discriminate on this basis by firing or not hiring pregnant women . . . There are cases of pregnant women being beaten and of women being injected with hormonal contraceptives under threat of firing, or forced to take birth control pills, sometimes being told the pills are vitamins. (Esbenshade 2004, 125)

While sweatshops are spaces that enable the extraction of surplus value and the devaluation of labour (Marx 2005), their specific materialities also point to bizarre bodily formations, forcefully related and perversely rendered: chemical-hormonal aggregates of infertility that negate any relation between capitalist and worker other than that of exploitable (non-reproductive) labour, assemblages of straining bodies that are increasingly conditioned by straining bladders, or lungs employed as an accumulation strategy for floating, cancer-inducing textile fibres (see also Woodward and Lea 2010).

What is more, most activists do not need to be reminded that all battles depend on the situated organisation and deployment of specific tactics (de Certeau 1984). It is not surprising then that new understandings of radical (anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, ant-fascist) politics point to situations and sites as the source for effective action (Day 2005). The manifesto of the Collectif Malgré Tout, a radical group founded in Paris in 1988, highlights the problem the macro (the world) presents for effective, situated politics:

> It is necessary to choose: either world or situation, because they are two mutually exclusive realities, in the same way that the individual and the political subject exclude each other. Is this an acknowledgement of the impotence of restricted, situational action in front of the world? Just the opposite: it is the 'world' that reduces any political action to impotence, because it removes it from concrete action . . . In this sense, it is necessary to be categorical: the 'world' as a totality of facts is a media illusion. There is only a multiplicity of situations, each of which relates to a problem, to a concrete universal that radically distinguishes itself from the 'world' as arbitrary totality. (Collectif Malgré Tout 1995, np)

A second example is Precarias a la Deriva Collectiones (2006), a feminist research-action project that emerged following the general strike of 2002 in Madrid, Spain. Recognising that traditional trade union strategies, like strikes, were ineffective in defending the rights of *precarias* – workers who are part-time, non-union, non-contractual and mostly female – Precarias enacts alternative forms of situated political intervention. These alternatives combine *derivas* – situationist drifts (analyses of everyday life through open awareness to the complex content of urban space) – with the Zapatista model of 'walking-asking' (actively listening as a political point of departure). The collective invokes *precarias* as a political strategy (and an identity) that contains within it daily forms of 'resistance, self-organization, and escape' for generating site-specific social change on the ground that is oriented to building new worlds, not seizing institutional power.

In short, in spite of the undeniably good intentions of macro-directed globe-talk, activism is always about

chipping away at the dynamic conditions of production that circulate within the very social sites where political situations present themselves. To think otherwise is to run the risk of demoralising radicalism and radical politics.

Conclusion

Sites are nothing novel. They are dense event-spaces of pervasive relations in which we find ourselves constantly immersed. Thus, it would be a mistake to think of their productions as necessarily progressive or even positive. Indeed, in general, these workings might most frequently be understood as processes of banality in which, howsoever we jockey and manoeuvre, we are, all of us, forever stuck. But it would also be a mistake to think of their production as definitively mundane, as only about the settled and the ordinary. From the point of view of the flies, sites can also be the locations where the unpredictable eruption of minoritarian events and spaces can produce specific and potentially transformative theoretical and political solutions that are anti-racist or anti-capitalist or pro-autonomy and pro-questioning. Following Deleuze (1994) in adopting as our ontology characteristics of 'pure difference', these solutions cannot be generalisable or formulaic, in the Riemannian sense. They are, instead, productive singularities that can, on their own terms, challenge varying and always different manifestations of oppression or exploitation as they express themselves in the real materiality of the world.

Notes

1 Methodologically, according to Deleuze, any science that is 'majoritarian' will inevitably operate through a system of 'functives' – utilitarian and perspectival stabilisations of difference for the purpose of scientific measurement – that will, it seems, inevitably return to reduction (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). By contrast, a 'minor' science (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) will remain ambulatory and experimental, or 'problematic' (Deleuze 1994). This means that it is impossible to predetermine exactly what such a science would look like (if not thicker versions of the descriptive practices that already exist), but it will certainly resist stratifying the topological and spatial possibilities open to the minoritarian embrace of difference and variation.

2 There are two operations at work in states of affairs that, thanks in no small part to Deleuze's adaptation of Bergson, allow for a 'becomings' approach to ontology: the actual and the virtual. By 'actual' we mean the very real, complex and incidental materiality within which we find ourselves constantly immersed: the material articulation, or actualisation, of the substances that make up the states of affairs *in extension*. Corresponding to this, moreover, is intensivity or virtuality – the seat of potentiality – in relation to which any situation is an expression of an operation that selects out potentialities to actualise. This formulation, however, is not to suggest a division between virtual and actual wherein a transcendental virtual world precedes or predetermines the world of actualities. Rather, virtuality expresses the relative, *potential* openness that inheres within even the most (apparently) closed of materialities.

3 The term 'site' comes with considerable conceptual baggage. The term figures centrally – but with an entirely different meaning (see below) – in urban geography's venerable 'site and situation' pairing (curiously enough, that nearly century-old formulation seems also to have French connections (Blanchard 1922; see Aurousseau 1924)). Likewise, confusion has arisen in comparisons of our understanding of sites to the spatiality assumed in notions of place, region and territory. The distinction between these terms and our treatment of the site hinges upon lingering assumptions in spatial thinking based in what Kant called the 'transcendental aesthetic' (Kant 1996). This form of representationalism claims that our (experiential) understandings of supposedly bedrock spatialities – including space and place (Wainwright and Barnes 2009) – cannot occur without the help of transcendent (mind/body, subjective/objective) and static (order/chaos, space/time) a priori categories. First order spatial concepts such as distance (Nystuen 1963) are fraught with the givenness of this Kantian perspective, and higher order concepts, such as scales and networks, are built from the same epistemological blocks. Today, whether we take these to be natural, transcendental or constructed, we often imagine 'spaces' in similar ways, and as geographers take upon ourselves the professional obligation of developing concepts in accordance with those mental constructs. For this reason, we should take as equally serious the observations by Deleuze and Guattari (1994) and Butler (1990), among others, that processes of learning and acculturation describe an 'involuntary adventure' (Deleuze 1994) whose clunky systems, structures and strata (e.g. scales) can catch only fleeting glimpses of a complex materiality otherwise overrun with confusing moments of change, crisis or bifurcation.

4 Such pointers will always be the co-products of their situations; hence, we offer them not as prescriptions detailing the 'correct' way go about researching the site, but as 'orientations', the contents of which must await the material specificities of a given situation.

References

Anderson B and Wylie J 2009 On geography and materiality *Environment and Planning A* 41 318–35

Ansell N 2009 Childhood and the politics of scale: descaling children's geographies? *Progress in Human Geography* 33 190–209

Aurousseau M 1924 Recent contributions to urban geography: a review *Geographical Review* 14 444–55

Belcher O, Martin L, Secor A, Simon S and Wilson T 2008 Everywhere and nowhere: the exception and the topological challenge to geography *Antipode* 40 499–503

Blanchard R 1922 Une méthode de géographie urbaine *La Vie Urbaine* 4 301–19

Bonta M and Protevi J 2004 *Deleuze and geophilosophy: a guide and glossary* University of Edinburgh Press, Edinburgh

Braun B 2004 Modalities of posthumanism *Environment and Planning A* 36 1352–5

Buchanan I and Lambert G eds 2005 *Deleuze and space* University of Toronto Press, Toronto

Butler J 1990 *Gender trouble* Routledge, New York

Collectif Malgré Tout 1995 Manifesto http://www.gtrlabs.org/manifesto_of_the_malgre_tout_collective Accessed 15 November 2009

Day R 2005 *Gramsci is dead: anarchist currents in the newest social movements* Pluto, London

de Certeau M 1984 *The practice of everyday life* University of California Press, Berkeley CA

DeLanda M 2002 *Intensive science and virtual philosophy* Continuum, New York

Deleuze G 1994 *Difference and repetition* Columbia University Press, New York

Deleuze G and Guattari F 1987 *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* vol 2 University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN

Deleuze G and Guattari F 1994 *What is philosophy?* Columbia University Press, New York

Derrida J 1981 *Positions* University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Derrida J 1997 *Of grammatology* The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore

Dixon D, Jones III J P and Woodward K 2009 Poststructuralism/post-structuralist geographies in **Kitchin R and Thrift N** eds *The international encyclopedia of human geography* Vol 8 Elsevier, London 466–86

Doel M 1999 *Poststructuralist geographies: the diabolical art of spatial science* University of Edinburgh Press, Edinburgh

Esbenshade J 2004 *Monitoring sweatshops: workers, consumers, and the global apparel industry* Temple University Press, Philadelphia PA

Friedman T 2005 *The world is flat: a brief history of the twenty-first century* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York

Gibson-Graham J K 2002 Beyond global vs. local: economic politics outside the binary frame in **Herod A and Wright M** eds *Geographies of power: placing scale* Blackwell, Oxford 25–60

Harvey D 1989 *The condition of postmodernity* Blackwell, Malden MA

Hiller J 2008 Plan(e) speaking: a multiplanar theory of spatial planning *Planning Theory* 7 25–50

Isin E F 2007 City.state: critique of scalar thought *Citizenship Studies* 11 211–28

Jackson P 2000 Rematerializing social and cultural geography *Social and Cultural Geography* 1 9–14

Jones III J P, Woodward K and Marston S A 2007 Situating flatness *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 264–76

Jones K T 1998 Scale as epistemology *Political Geography* 17 25–8

Kaiser R and Nikiforova E 2008 The performativity of scale: the social construction of scale effects in Narva, Estonia *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 537–62

Kant I 1996 *Critique of pure reason* Pluhar W S trans Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis

Katz C 1996 Towards minor theory *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 487–99

Kobayashi A and Peake L 1994 Unnatural discourse: 'race' and gender in geography *Gender, Place and Culture* 1 225–43

Laclau E and Mouffe C 1985 *Hegemony and socialist strategy* Verso, London

Latour B 1993 *We have never been modern* Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA

Law J 2000 Transitivities *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18 133–48

Law J 2004 And if the global were small and noncoherent? Method, complexity, and the baroque *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22 13–26

Legg S 2009 Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations and the scalar sovereignty of the government of India *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 234–53

Lynn G 1998 *Folds, bodies and blobs: collected essays* La Lettre Volée, Brussels

Marston S A 2000 The social construction of scale *Progress in Human Geography* 24 219–42

Marston S A and Smith N 2001 States, scales and households: limits to scale thinking? A response to Brenner *Progress in Human Geography* 25 615–19

Marston S A, Jones III J P and Woodward K 2005 Human geography without scale *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 416–32

Marston S A, Woodward K and Jones III J P 2007 Flattening ontologies of globalization: the Nollywood case *Globalizations* 4 1–19

Marx K 2005 Theses on Feuerbach in **McLellan D** ed *Karl Marx: selected writings* 2nd edn Blackwell, Oxford 171–4

Massey D B 2005 *For space* Sage, London

May T 2005 *Gilles Deleuze: an introduction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

McFarlane C 2009 Translocal assemblages: space, power and social movements *Geoforum* 40 561–7

Moore A 2008 Rethinking scale as a geographical category: from analysis to practice *Progress in Human Geography* 32 203–25

Natter W and Jones III J P 1997 Identity, space and other uncertainties in **Benko G and Strohmayer U** eds *Space and social theory: geographical interpretations of postmodernity* Blackwell, Oxford 141–61

Nevins J 2002 *Operation Gatekeeper: the rise of the 'illegal alien' and the making of the US–Mexico boundary* Routledge, London

Nystuen J D 1963 Identification of some fundamental spatial concepts *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters* 48 373–84

Pain R 2009 Globalized fear: towards an emotional geopolitics *Progress in Human Geography* 33 466–86

Painter J 2006 Prosaic geographies of stateness *Political Geography* 25 752–74

Peake L 2010 Gender, race, sexuality in **Smith S J, Pain R, Marston S A and Jones III J P** eds *The Sage handbook of social geographies* Sage, London 55–77

Precarias a la Deriva Collectiones 2006 A very careful strike: four hypotheses *The Commoner* 11 33–45

Remmert R 1998 From Riemann surfaces to complex spaces *Séminaires et Congrès* 3 203–41

Robbins P and Marks B 2010 Assemblage geographies in **Smith S J, Pain R, Marston S A and Jones III J P** eds *The Sage handbook of social geographies* Sage, London 176–94

Schatzki T 2002 *The site of the social: a political account of the constitution of social life and change* Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA

Secor A 2007 Between longing and despair: state, space, and subjectivity in Turkey *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 33–52

Soja E 1989 *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* Verso, London

Spinoza B 2000 *Ethics* Oxford University Press, New York

Wainwright J and Barnes T 2009 Nature, economy, and the space – place distinction *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* in press

Woodward K 2010 Events, spontaneity and abrupt conditions in **Anderson B and Harrison P** eds *Taking place: non-representational theories and human geography* Ashgate, Hampshire

Woodward K and Lea J 2010 Geographies of affect in **Smith S J, Pain R, Marston S A and Jones III J P** eds *The Sage handbook of social geographies* Sage, London 154–75

Woodward K, Marston S A and Jones III J P 2008 On autonomous spaces Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Boston MA