Space for Social Inequality Researchers: A View From Geography

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Chapter 10
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We are writing as geographers attempting to engage a sociological audience on what we see to be two important domains of contemporary spatial theory. Our goal is to create bridges of understanding between disciplines that, as the editors note in their introduction, have for too long developed on non-intersecting paths. There are of course exceptions to this general rule. Over the 20th century, one can certainly point to the sharing of concepts and methodologies found in the Chicago School of urban sociology and to the post-war conversations in subfields such as human ecology, demography, and community studies. More recently, there has been productive theoretical traffic between the fields in the study of structure and agency, particularly in its Giddensian form. Yet we agree with the editors that there is room for much greater productive interchange.

Geographers have, of course, produced a rich literature on the theorization of space; after all, this is the discipline's core object, parallel to that of society for sociologists. In this paper, we offer a discussion of two distinct versions of spatial theory, both of which are relevant to the study of social inequality, broadly conceived. The first of these is the discrete understanding of space carried out within geography's dominant rubric of "spatial science," and in particular its more recent "socially relevant" offshoot. Discrete space is conceptualized as abstract and absolute, a backdrop to social relations that unfold unevenly across space and at a number of different scales, from the local and regional to the national and global. The methodological focus in this tradition is to begin with spatial variations in social inequalities and to employ modeling strategies to gain insight into social processes underlying these variations. The studies by McLaughlin et al. and Cotter et al. in this volume, for example, employ modeling strategies often seen in this approach. The second approach

is relational in character, focused on internal relations of space and society. As opposed to external relations that identify causes and effects operating between discrete spaces and social forces, internal relations require a dialectical approach that refuses separation between them. Tickamyer et al.'s article in this volume most closely reflects this approach, while Leicht and Jenkins also suggest that political sociology might usefully move in this direction. In this dialectical perspective, one that has found favor among critical realists in geography (e.g., Sayer 2000), researchers direct attention to the broader social processes that work themselves out, often in unique ways, in particular places, but see those places as simultaneously part-and-parcel of social relations as they operate at a number of scales. Because this tradition requires attention to the dialectic within and between social *and* spatial processes, it stands as a relational counterpart to the more discrete view of space adopted in socially relevant spatial science. While the articles in this collection may be seen as falling closer to one or the other approach above, many also contain elements that straddle both approaches, a point discussed further below.

Our larger goal in discussing the evolution of these two traditions, as well as their theoretical and methodological principles and selected applications, is to create a stronger bridge of understanding between sociologists and geographers concerning different approaches to studying space and social relations. With these two theoretical reference points in mind, the paper then turns to address one of the other primary goals of the volume – achieving a better understanding of scale in the analysis of social inequality. Scale emerges as a completely different object of analysis under the two theories of space: on the one hand it is the level at which data is collected and theories and models developed and tested; on the other hand it is the socially produced outcome of both horizontal and vertical socio-spatial relations – what Brenner has called scalar structuration (1998). In the following section, we present the broader historical and theoretical context for the development of both the spatial scientific and critical realist perspectives of space and spatial

relations. Next, we offer a brief review of scale from the standpoint of these two theoretical positions, showing how they lead to quite different approaches to the question of the "missing middle" noted by the editors of this volume. We conclude the paper by arguing for the value of using both approaches in the study of social inequality.

THEORIZING GEOGRAPHY'S OBJECT OF ANALYSIS

In order to facilitate sociological comparisons with geography, we begin by referencing the larger epistemological and ontological categories that form the foundation for discrete and relational theorizations of space. Figure 1 lists some of the most important binaries to have influenced both theories of and methodological approaches to space. The account we provide below discusses how theorizations of discrete and relational space differentially crisscross the other binary relations shown in the figure. For example, in our discussion of discrete and relational space, spatial science is shown to be characterized, in the broadest terms, by generality and order, while critical realist geography is structured by particularity and chaos. Keeping this picture in mind, we can now move to some of the specifics behind the theorization of space as an object of study in geography.

Toward a Socially-Relevant Spatial Science

Prior to the 1950s, a largely empiricist, "regional geography" (Hartshorne 1939) dominated the field. Ontologically speaking, this school was predicated on the understanding that geography's objects included both natural and cultural phenomena, and that they and their associated processes interacted in specific areal settings to give a unique character to places. Though regional geographers claimed objectivity (Hartshorne 1939) and ultimately sought to identify causal processes under the banner of explanation (James 1952), they were better known for providing in-depth but idiosyncratic descriptions of local settings. Methodologically, the interdependence of phenomena in space limited the extent to which regional geographers might generalize their findings, much less discern spatially

or temporally invariant laws under a model of positivist science (Hart 1982). They were, in this view, particularlists rather than generalists, describers rather than explainers. Accordingly, in studies of this period, researchers were quick to ascribe causality to the particular qualities of a region, especially those of the natural environment, and to the people who labored in them, rather to large scale social forces that connected those regions in wider webs of resource or labor exploitation.

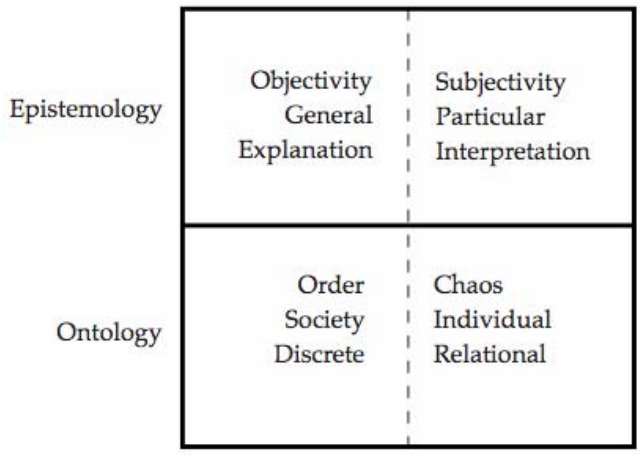

Figure 10.1: Major Epistemological and Ontological Binaries Structuring Geographic Theory

Schaeffer (1953) provided the first significant challenge to the regional school in what became known as "spatial science." He argued against the prevailing methodological provincialism of regional geography, suggesting that geography should adopt the explanatory objectives of other, more mature social sciences, such as economics. In strongly generalist terms, Schaeffer challenged geographers with the task of identifying spatial laws, an objective consistent with an orderly

worldview in which spatial processes (e.g., distance-decay with respect to a node/location) played a role independent of other processes. The notion that space could have independent effects on other processes and was worthy of investigation in its own terms deepened in the succeeding years in the programmatic statements of Bunge (1962) and Nystuen (1968). Their geometric approach conceived of space through a Cartesian absolutism built on an isotropic plane filled with objects whose coordinates underwrote several "geographic primitives," including location, distance, direction, scale, and connectivity. Developed from these were higher-level concepts and models, including those dealing with cores and peripheries, inertias and mobilities, and the locations of production and consumption centers.

A slightly different approach was found in the delineation of spatial units under the directives of what Berry (1964) called a geographic matrix, a conceptual device that carved up absolute space enabling researchers to theorize variations across any conceivable spatial unit. Berry's conceptualization helped underwrite countless studies of spatial variation, wherein researchers measured, described, and (usually statistically) explained magnitudes or proportions of natural or social variables by reference to measures of other variables taken on the same spatial units. What Bunge's and Nystuen's deductive, geometric approach had in common with Berry's inductive, data-analysis approach was a common privileging of the left hand side of each of the epistemological terms in Figure 1. The paradigm was characterized, at least in its early phase, by a largely unquestioned faith in objectivity, and its practitioners also sought general determinations through the identification of presumptively orderly causal processes. Allied to these moments was an ontological view of space as an absolute rather than relational object, and this in turn underwrote spatial science's strict separation of spatiality from social relations.

Notwithstanding this separation, many spatial scientists were quick to engage the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. An important development from the standpoint of

social inequality research was the emergence of what has been called a "socially relevant spatial science" – an emphasis on the spatial side of social justice that continues today and is emblematic of some of the studies appearing in this volume. Socially relevant geographers loosened their earlier adherence to a model of objective science in order to focus normative attention to social problems (Morrill 1969). This effort sanctioned interventionist policy statements under the assumption that spatial analytic tools (e.g., optimization routines, regression) were well suited for determining the best (from most efficient to most egalitarian) spatial arrangements for societies (e.g., King 1976; Smith 1974).

Spatial scientists also turned their attention to human cognition and action in space and time (see Golledge and Stimson 1997 for a review). In the initial flush of spatial science, the role of individuals in the construction of spatial variations was largely ignored, but in the late 1960s a move to behavioral approaches redressed this oversight (see Brown *et al.* 1972). Drawing on both the psychological literature and the influential work of Herbert Simon (1947), behavioral geographers argued that the neoclassical assumption of *homo economicus*, which provided one foundation for most deductive spatial theories (such as those governing the locations of firms), was unrealistic (Wolpert 1964). More relevant to understanding spatial patterns were the perceptions, decision-making processes, and actions of individuals, as well as the wider decision-making environments within which they operated. While both achievements advanced thinking in spatial science by introducing discussions of subjectivity and the active role of individuals, neither overthrew the dominant ontology that led, methodologically speaking, to geography's definition as the field that mapped and analyzed spatial variations.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the ontological view of space as a planar dimension filled with objects underwrote the application of increasingly more sophisticated statistical, mathematical, and technological approaches to spatial measurement and analysis. Models

were tested in the real world, often with large data sets analyzed through applications of the general linear model (Johnston 1978).

The development of geographic information systems (GIS) technology in the 1980s and 1990s extended the range of analytic approaches within spatial science (see Longley et al. 1998). GIS has made it possible to combine overlay and statistical analyses using different types of spatially distributed data – collected for areas, points, lines, or surfaces – whether derived as part of a special survey, through the census, using satellite-based remote sensors, or in some combination. During the mid-1990s, there developed powerful critiques of the power/knowledge implications of GIS (e.g., Pickles 1995), but within a few short years normative concerns came to play a central role in what is now variously known as critical, participatory, or community GIS (Elwood and Leitner 2003; also see the *URISA Journal* issue on Participatory GIS, Part I and II, Volume 15, 2003).

What, then, are some of the implications of a spatial scientific view of space for researchers interested in the class, gender, race, and other foundations of social inequality? It seems pertinent first to remark that while spatial science has traditionally been associated with the objective aims of science more generally, a distinction should be made between objectivity as the absence of bias, on the one hand, and the possibility or even responsibility of normative analysis, on the other. For as we have noted, spatial scientists have not been averse to drawing either policy (King 1976) or even radical (Peet 1977) conclusions from their analyses. Glassmeier's (2005) use of spatial analytic tools to investigate poverty at both the national and regional scales, identifies, in a US context, regions "in distress", and is one such example of this ongoing tradition. Indeed, there are numerous other examples of research informed by Marxist and other critical theories that employ quantitative analyses to examine variations based on discrete spatial units for which social and other variables have been collected (Conway et al. 2001; Lobao et al. 1999; McHaffie 1998). Sociologists studying inequality from a critical perspective, as does the new generation of research on spatial inequality,

clearly have at their disposal a wide range of research questions and associated methodologies, many of which can be informed from the perspective of spatial science. This combination is present and informs research questions in many of the empirical analyses assembled in this volume. An overview of these questions, written from the perspective of socially-relevant spatial science might look as follows:

- How is social inequality manifested differently across geographic areas, and with what sort of dynamics?
- What are the factors – whether rooted in local, regional, or more general processes – that can be brought to bear on our explanation of inequality?
- How do these factors themselves vary in their explanatory power across different contexts?

In considering these sorts of questions for the study of one form of social inequality, that of poverty, we here point briefly to the work of Jones and Kodras, who in 1980s and 1990s produced a number of spatial analyses of poverty, with an emphasis on women's poverty (Jones 1987; Jones and Kodras 1986, 1990; Kodras 1986, 1997; Kodras and Jones 1991; Kodras et al. 1994). Their work was conducted at both the state and county scales, and consisted of analyses of rates of poverty and welfare program adoption. Independent variables selected in these analyses ranged from social-demographic and economic factors, such as minority populations and unemployment rates, to political ones, such as the administrative rules and payment levels of state-run welfare programs. In addition to assessing the nation-wide significance of these factors in explaining variability in poverty, their research program concentrated on identifying both social and spatial instabilities in these models, a task that involved modeling parameter variation (Jones and Casetti 1992) as a result of unique spatial effects or of the co-presence of interactive social, economic, and political factors (Jones 1987; Jones and Kodras 1986; Kodras 1986; Kodras et al. 1994). The major finding from

these studies is that poverty and welfare participation models are highly sensitive to spatial and social contexts: there is no justification for a single, nationwide model of poverty or welfare. The factors that influence deprivation and use are actually regional or "subnational" in character, as Lobao and Hooks discuss in this volume, owing either to the unique characteristics of places or to particularities of co-present substantive determinants, such as the strength of the social safety net of welfare programs or the structure of the local economic mix. Accordingly, these works point to a paradigm of instability and particularity in modeling inequality, a task that is also well addressed by the theoretical framework of critical realism, to which we now turn.

Critical Realism and Relational Spaces of Inequality

For several reasons, the mid-1980s was a propitious period for the entry of critical realism into geography (Sayer 1984). First, at the time geography was theoretically divided between what appeared to be an overly structural Marxism, on the one hand, and an overly volunteristic humanism, on the other. For some, structuration theory (e.g., Giddens 1984) was one solution to this opposition (see discussion by Peet 1998). Commensurate with structuration theory was critical realism's theorization of social systems as "open" (Sayer 2000). In both structuration theory and critical realism, "practical knowledge" is key to everyday and *long durée* reproduction, transformation, mediation, and, potentially, elimination, of this or that structure and its associated causal mechanisms.

Second, critical realism offers a hierarchical ontology of structures, mechanisms, and events, with social processes mediated and activated under conditions of "contingency." This leads to a both/and stance with respect to the general and particular binary. Critical realists distinguish between necessary relations (i.e., underlying causal structures and their mechanisms), without which an object/event could not be possible, and contingent relations, which determine the actual occurrence and specific qualitative and quantitative aspects of objects/events (Jones and Hanham

1995). Contingencies impart their own causal power on objects/events, but whether they do so or not is purely a contextual matter requiring empirical investigation, usually through case studies of their actual, on-the-ground, operation. Realists therefore assume that general processes exist (via necessary structures and mechanisms) and that the role of the social scientist is to explain their operation. At the same time, they retain concepts of particularity and indeterminacy (at least in the sense of "to-be-decided") by theorizing and investigating the operation of contingencies in the realm of the empirical (Sayer 2000).

With this in mind, we can now turn to the question of space in critical realism. In any early account of this issue, Sayer (1985) appeared to adopt the "space-as-stage" perspective that was prevalent in spatial science at the time. He argued that space can explain events only at the concrete, empirical level; aspects of the real world, such as local contextuality and the effects of different on-the-ground spatial arrangements (propinquity, juxtaposition, spatial effects from other areas, etc.), cannot be theorized at the necessary level of abstraction; they exist at an entirely different level in realist ontology. This argument, however, came during a period of robust theorizing by geographers aimed at understanding the conjoint and mutually constitutive roles of space and social relations (Harvey 1989; Massey 1984; Soja 1980). This theory, which came to be known as the "socio-spatial dialectic" (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1989), was well suited for a merger with the causal language of critical realism, such that today most critical realists in geography – as well as most Marxist-feminist geographers – subscribe to a dialectical view of social and spatial relations.

In this view, social structures and mechanisms, as well as contingencies, need to be theorized alongside space, putting spatialization – to borrow from E. P. Thomson – "at every bloody level" of the realist ontological hierarchy. Thus, for example, the uneven incorporation of places into capitalism (Smith 1990) is intrinsic rather than extrinsic to capitalism's very nature (Harvey 1982), and must, therefore, be incorporated into the understanding of the most abstract conceptualizations

of necessary relations. Space-time compression (Harvey 1989), for example, refers to the capitalist compulsion, identified by Marx, to "annihilate space by time," speeding up accumulation by compressing spatiality so as to overcome barriers to value realization, and thereby bringing into close contact ever more distant spaces. Nor can we understand social relations of patriarchy and racism without reference to the role of built environments that alternatively embed and express these relations in material and symbolic forms – how else (on the head of a pin?) could these relations be understood, much less practiced? At the same time, the dialectical embeddedness of these structures and mechanisms within fields of spatial relations greatly complicates their study, for together they undermine the taken-for-granted delineations of social and spatial relations. Not only do social processes and resultant inequalities operate in tandem with concrete spatial contexts, they can also be theorized as stretched relations connected to more distant structures, which are themselves spatialized.

In Figure 2 we offer a hypothetical example illustrative of critical realism. It shows an approach to the study of poverty, as informed by a critical realist theorization of class, gender, and race relations. Here, gender- and race- based processes are shown to operate as contingent relations alongside class-based capitalist relations. The latter, a set of necessary relations, operate through the mechanism capital mobility, which leads in turn to uneven regional development and ultimately to pockets of locally-manifested poverty, a process described by the editors in the introductory chapter to this volume. These pockets are differentially inflected by the contingencies of race and gender in specific contexts. At each level of the analysis, space (on the right hand side) is shown to inform understandings of the social relations behind these structures, mechanisms, and events. Spatial relations infuse these social processes, from the uneven development of capitalism, which is at once dependent on the opening of new spaces of accumulation (Harvey 1989; Smith 1990), through the meso-level geographies of production and social reproduction (Marston 2000), which are tied to the

operation of patriarchy and racism through the built environment and the particularities of local contexts and their interdependencies with other more remote contexts. Finally, poverty is lived in concrete places and shaped through the everyday micro-geographies of livelihood and social action, demanding, perhaps, a sensitivity to the subjective practices of various social actors, as Tickamyer et al. in this volume indicate.

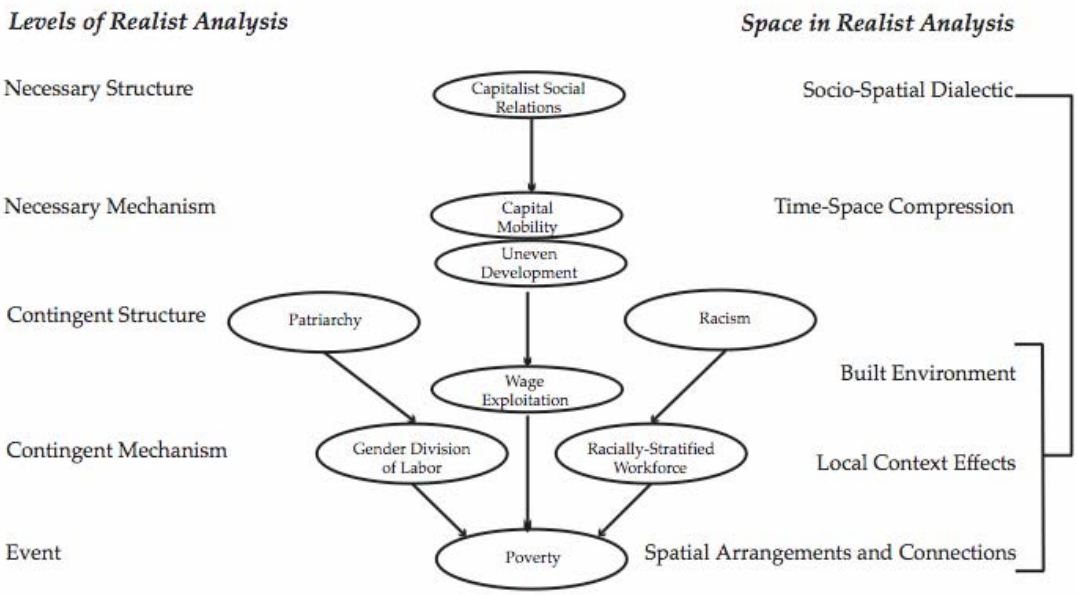

Figure 10.2: Hypothetical Case of Socio-Spatial Explanation in Critical Realism

In this way, the figure sketches a critical realist research framework of social inequalities that can be investigated for the ways in which social and spatial relations work together, by facilitating flows of capital across spaces and creating new social structures of difference in distinct locations and at particular scales. Social inequality studies informed by this dialectical view of spatiality must therefore grapple with the interconnected socio-spatial relations that operate through space,

stratified by scales that are global, regional, and local. Finally, it should be noted that critical realism while lending itself better to qualitative research, does not inherently preclude the use of quantitative data analyses. Rather, it calls for such analyses not to be simple variable-based interpretations: research needs to be grounded in assumptions about space-society as mutually constituted, to take into consideration social-spatial processes, and to recognize that general relationships and outcomes expected from theory will be spatially-contingent.

SCALING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

One of the goals of this volume is to promote research on social inequality at the spatial scale of the "missing middle," a level of analysis between the national and urban at which the geographic dimensions of social inequality show perhaps their greatest relief. This is because, on the one hand, national or even state level analyses will necessarily mask many internal variations, especially in the operation of social and economic forces that become averaged for such units. On the other hand, while urban and intra-urban analyses of social problems such as poverty or health and educational disparities can be finely tuned to reveal the micro-geographies of social and economic processes, these units of analysis are often covered by the same policy regimes, making it difficult to both discern the interaction between socio-economic and policy factors and to assess the impact of variations in policy on social inequality. Given the tensions between the general analyses of spatial science – even when modulated by a concern for the particular in studies that explicitly examine the variability in model behavior across context – and the resolutely contextual character of critical realist studies – even when guided by theoretical understandings of general causal forces such as capitalist wage relations – the "missing middle" takes on a weight of importance that exceeds a mere "filling the gap." One could argue, in fact, that analyses attuned to the middle might help split

the difference, both theoretically and methodologically, between the general explanatory aims of spatial science and the more contextual ones of critical realism.

It is important to realize, however, that any effort to construct such a ground – or even a conversation between adherents of both theoretical perspectives – will not be easy, for their underlying ontological differences over discrete versus relational understandings of space result in two rather different conceptualizations of scale itself. It will therefore not be enough to argue that meso-level scales hold not only empirical but also theoretical solutions to wider debates over theory and methodology in geographical or social inequality research. In the remainder of this section we address some of these fundamental differences over scale, noting how they direct researchers to theorize scale in different ways, with distinct implications for researching social inequality.

Scale, of course, has a long history within the discipline of geography (see Sheppard and McMaster 2004). From regional geography through contemporary spatial science, the existence of scales as independent empirical objects has been unquestioned. One can find occasional references in the early literature that tied commonly employed scales of analysis to our bodily size and field of vision (e.g., James 1952), but for the most part the hierarchy of local-to-global, intersected by a cascade of neighborhood, urban, metropolitan, regional, sub-national, and national levels, was taken as an *apriori* truth. As Taylor (1982) put it: "the three scales – global, national, and urban – are as 'natural' as social science's division of activities into economic, social and political. This spatial organization is simply given."

Such a perspective was thoroughly commensurate with the discrete ontology of spatial science, in which social processes were divorced from spatial ones, and research designs followed suit accordingly (e.g, Haggett 1965). Spatial scientists were therefore trained to ask themselves these sorts of questions: At what spatial scale can we best see this or that social process operating? How can we handle spillover effects when the spatial scales available to us in the form of secondary data

are non-overlapping with the processes we are interested in studying? And, how do we handle situations in which the processes we are studying are working at multiple or even different scales? In response, they developed a series of "analytic approaches." They were first careful not to commit the "ecological fallacy," tying generalizations to the unit of analysis rather than to, for example, individual behavior. Second, knowing that different processes were captured by different scalar units, and that without a careful match of the two one might miss entirely the operation of important processes, they worked to redesign their data collection according to the nature of the problems of interest. Berry (1973), for example, proposed using an empirically derived, multi-county "daily urban system" as preferable to state, single-county, or urban data sources in the study of urban systems. Research devoted to constructing appropriate scalar units continues (Wheeler 2001). Work on spatial autocorrelation by Cliff and Ord (1981) contributed to geographers' ability to model spillover effects and to control for interdependencies in spatial units, a topic addressed by Irwin in this volume. And, research using multilevel modeling (Jones and Duncan 1996; Subramanian et al. 2001) has led to a growth industry (Centre for Multilevel Modeling 2005) for assessing the joint and separate effects of variables operating at different scales in a single, multi-hierarchy model. What all these methodological developments have in common is their reliance on a discrete ontology of social forces operating across distinct (if interacting) spatial levels of varying degrees of extensiveness. This reflects the view of scale put forth in socially-relevant spatial science.

In the mid-1980s, paralleling the rise of critical realism, a number of geographic researchers began developing a different theory of scale – one based on the assumption that fixed scales do not exist and that, instead, scale is socially "produced" or even "constructed" (Brenner 1998; Cox and Mair 1988; Herod and Wright 2002; Jonas 1994; Jones 1998; Marston 2000; Smith 1990; Swyngedouw 2004). Swyngedouw, for example, ties the production of scale to the operation of social power:

> I conceive scalar configurations as the outcome of sociospatial processes that regulate and organize power relations. . . Scale configurations change as power shifts, both in terms of their nesting and interrelations and in terms of their spatial extent. In the process, new significant social and ecological scales become constructed, others disappear or become transformed (Swyngedouw 2004: 132-133).

While other writers differ in terms of their theoretical and substantive interests, they all share in common a relational approach that seeks, like the socio-spatial dialectic, to theorize scale and social relations together. Given the "messy" geographies of social relations, scales are theorized to emerge in complex ways, but always in tandem with the uneven unfolding of social relations (especially of capital, Smith 1990). Typical in this regard is the concept of "scalar structuration," developed by Brenner, in which:

> *[s]cales evolve relationally within tangled hierarchies and dispersed interscalar networks*. The meaning function, history and dynamics of any one geographical scale can only be grasped relationally, in terms of upwards, downwards and sidewards links to other geographical scales situated within tangled scalar hierarchies and dispersed interscalar networks. . . Each geographical scale is constituted through its historically evolving positionality within a larger relations grid of vertically 'stretched' and horizontally 'dispersed' sociospatial processes, relations and interdependencies (Brenner 2001: 605-606, italics in the original).

Theoretically and methodologically, critical realism is well suited for developing research questions tied to the social production of scale. For example, Brenner's "tangled hierarchies" share affinity with the complex operation of contingent mechanisms within critical realism (see Figure 2), while the search for dispersed horizontal processes is consistent with critical realism's recognition that effects in one locality can share interdependencies with those in another. Researchers within this

dialectical tradition therefore employ intensive methods (Sayer 2000), usually based on qualitative data, to trace the complex flows that crisscross, and give rise to, distinctly social platforms (Smith 2000) of space (see also Tickamyer, et al., this volume).

From within this perspective, the "missing middle" turns out to be more complicated than we might have first thought, for it will always be complex and dynamic, much more like Massey's (1994; 2004) "power geometries" than simply slipping another layer within Taylor's (1982) original formulation of the global, national, and urban. It would have to be complex because this view of scale admits no easy sorting of social processes to their "appropriate" spatial containers. And it would be dynamic insofar as "social networks, political institutions, economic resources and territorial rights" are always being reconfigured, creating "new geographies – new landscapes of power and recognition and opportunity" (Howitt 2003: 150). Not lastly, at its limit, the relational view of space can make problematic the hierarchy at work in the concept of scale (Marston et al. 2005). As Massey (2004:8) sums it up:

> If space really is to be thought relationally … then 'global space' is no more than the sum of relations, connections, embodiments and practices. These things are utterly everyday and grounded at the same time as they may, when linked together, go around the world. Space is not outside of place; it is not abstract, it is not somehow 'up there' or disembodied.

We see two implications of Massey's comments for the "missing middle." First, she implies that this meso-level scale should have a methodological range bounded by the relations and connections that form the practices of social actors, including capital, labor, and the state. These can, of course, be spatially quite extensive, particularly when one thinks of the impact that national level economic and policy decisions can have on actors' quotidian practices. Yet, second, her comments suggest that it might be most appropriate to think in terms *of* those practices and to follow their

relations and connections outward, rather than to assume in advance their linkage to wider sets of social relations. The missing middle is thus a valid and worthy object of inquiry insofar as it provides an opportunity to interrogate the links and flows between, and the fixing and breaking apart of, various social and spatial relations.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this chapter by suggesting that geographers and sociologists would benefit from an increased dialogue about social and spatial relations. As this volume makes abundantly clear, sociologists are certainly witnessing their own "spatial turn," focusing attention on the complex spatial relationships that constitute social inequality at several scales, including the national, regional (or subnational), and the urban. Geographers have, for a long time, also been interested in investigating the spatiality of social inequality, and often draw from sociology's rich theoretical and empirical research to do so. We argue that two key approaches in geography – a socially-relevant spatial scientific and a critical realist one – lend themselves well to the research featured in this volume. Spatial scientific approaches provide valuable insights into the generalities of various socio-spatial relations, while critical realist approaches point to the importance of studying on-the-ground spatial arrangements and connections.

On balance, the research in this volume can be seen to straddle these two approaches. The socially-relevant spatial science approach comes closer to the interests of some contributors, those particularly concerned with investigating general regional spatial dynamics of inequality through quantitative data analyses. Even here, some elements of a critical realist approach are present, as the authors sketch out various "paths of inequality," from the general to the particular and examine some of the relationships we highlight in Figure 2. For example, Saenz et al. see discrimination as varying contextually, producing different regions that vary in welcoming or hostility toward Mexican

Americans. They consider how particular regional attributes condition which groups of Mexican Americans are likely to leave their home of origin and migrate to a new place. Oakley and Logan view historical decisions about New York City's zoning policies as filtering down to neighborhoods, creating distinct patterns of service allocation which vary from other cities and from outcomes suggested by general theory. And Cotter et al. recognize that racism results in varying socially constructed environments that reach down to influence family and individual experiences of social inequality.

In other articles, authors are interested in theorizing space in ways that are more relational, closer to the critical realist view. For example, Tickamyer et al. argue for going beyond sociology's past conventional view of ecological units as simple containers and toward a theorization of spaces as constituted through the formation of "regional identity, culture, political economy, and livelihood practices." Leicht and Jenkins and Lobao and Hooks argue for the need to conceptualize the state in a more relational framework that takes into account nesting of political processes and actors in different scales.

As we suggested in the previous section, targeting the "missing middle" provides a particular opportunity for advancing the study of social inequality for geographers as well as sociologists. By examining meso-level scales we are sensitized to how social and spatial processes operate at levels that mediate and interconnect national and urban level processes, as well as to grounded human agency. At the same time, as we go about studying those processes, new tensions emerge as we try to define how best to understand, study, and theorize that inequality. Thus, while it is safe to say that geographers taking a spatial science position and those taking a critical realist tradition will view these meso-level scalar relations as important in their examinations of social and spatial inequality, they will likely differ in how they theorize those relations. It might therefore be difficult to negotiate between the ontological assumptions that underpin the critical realist and spatial scientific views of

those meso-level social *and/or* spatial processes, because of their different approaches to those relations.

That said, there are geographers (Del Casino et al. 2000; Jones and Hanham 1995) and other social scientists (Grimes and Rood 1995) writing on behalf of methodological and theoretical commensurability. From this perspective, meso-level scalar analyses directed at the "missing middle" are less a contradiction of paradigms than a way to bridge the sometimes wide divide between theoretical approaches. Put simply, no single theoretical approach can resolve all the answers to our questions about socio-spatial inequality. Thus, it is necessary to think beyond the boundaries of paradigmatic approaches, space and place, generalizability and particularity, and discrete and relational space, and examine social inequality and its inherent spatialities from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Social inequality researchers thus could work productively through multiple paradigmatic frameworks that investigate both general processes and particular practices. For example, Kodras (1997), a geographer, explores the changing "map" of U.S. based poverty through both a quantitative study of socio-spatial inequalities and a qualitative analysis of how people engage that inequality through real world experiences.

We therefore see a rich opportunity for geographers and sociologists to continue to dialogue over different views of space. One part of this effort, as Tickamyer et al. in this volume make clear, can be comparative analyses between places complemented by studies that examine the same problems at different scales. As Grimes and Rood (1995) point out, taking multiple theoretical perspectives and applying them to the same case (or cases in a comparative context) may help us to resolve where one theory's limits are and another's begins. It is our hope, therefore, that sociologists interested in social inequality continue to expand their vision of spatial relations and consider how they might examine processes that are almost always "messier than our theories of them" (Mann 1986: 4, cited in Del Casino et al., 2000, 535).

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