



# Unchaining the Micro

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## Unchaining the Micro

In 2005-06 *Transactions of the Institute of Economic Geographers* featured a debate about scale: given the tendency to examine scales with a hierarchical logic, should we abandon thinking about scales altogether? <sup>1</sup> Although aware of the problem (or unconvinced that there is a problem), most geographers remain persuaded that analysis benefits from consideration of the interrelation of processes operating among scales (Brenner 2001; Swyngedouw 1997). But the problem addressed in the *Transactions* debate still requires attention. In addition, there is another problem: the idea that processes operate among different scales suggests that analytical priorities should not be given to any one scale of analysis, but disciplines and subdisciplines, including economic geography, tend to have scale biases. For example, while the discipline of economics has reserved an entire subdiscipline for microscale analysis ('microeconomics'), economic geography as a subdiscipline of geography has tended to neglect this scale; further while economic geography has tended to emphasize the mesoscale in analysis, mainstream economics<sup>2</sup> has largely ignored it.

Even for those interested in jettisoning scale altogether, it may be worthwhile to consider disciplinary, analytical predilections as a lens through which we may identify and interpret avenues of inquiry that have been open and also closed. My purpose here is to account for why, theoretically (and with reference to the problem of hierarchical logic), the microscale has been largely overlooked in economic geography; why the microscale has important explanatory value specifically in light of the type of inquiry pursued in economic geography; and how examination of microscale dynamics can open geographic research to new types of questions and help interpret phenomena otherwise obscured.

Any one of a number of perspectives can be brought to bear on any one scale of analysis; thus the ensuing discussion is pitched at the critical intersection of perspective and scale. Consider at the outset perspective at the disciplinary scale. While both economics and economic geography encompass a wide variety

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie Marston, JP Jones, and Keith Woodward (2005) suggested that geographers eliminate scale as a concept and replace it with a 'flat' ontology that avoids hierarchical logic. Rebuttals followed. Scott Hoefle (2006) offered a reminder that scale issues put geography as a discipline on the academic map and that it would be suicidal to jettison 'the golden egg'. Chris Collinge (2006) critiqued Marston et al's. alternative flat ontology, indicating that it inadvertently commits the same errors to which it reacts. Andrew Jonas (2006) echoed Scott Hoefle's view that that scale issues are crucial to human geography and argued for increased focus on the interrelation of processes operating at different scales without losing site of specific sites. My view is that Marston et al. (2005) aptly called attention to tendencies to fix a specific hierarchical logic on scales of analysis, but that it is more sensible to constructively develop an approach to scale that recognizes and avoids the problem (indeed, this is the intention of this paper!) than to toss the concept of scale altogether.

<sup>2</sup> Heterodox approaches in economics (e.g. Veblen-inspired institutional economics, evolutionary economics, political economy) do, however, focus on mesoscale contexts. I thank Gernot Grabher for bringing this to my attention.

of specific approaches, and acknowledging that some individuals have forged overlap between the two disciplines, the parameters of economics and economic geography overall profoundly differ.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I call attention to the generally top-down and bottom-up logics of economics and economic geography, respectively. Broadly, the predilection of mainstream economics at both the micro and macro scales tends to work with formal models that make homogenizing assumptions about real world complexities and often simulate the real world through quantitative modeling; even when agency is highlighted, as in microeconomics regarding managerial ingenuity and entrepreneurialism, the crux of the matter here is that behavior is predictable in light of general patterns that characterize the economy-at-large. In contrast, economic geography tends to work from the ground, up, and commonly (though certainly not exclusively) entails qualitative analysis. From this vantage point, and as I will elaborate, I suggest that the microscale in economic geography is especially conducive to poststructural, notably Foucauldian-inspired conceptualizations, particularly the interests Foucault developed in the latter part of his life regarding governmentality and resistance (Faubion 2000). Below I develop the argument that despite comparatively 'grounded' thinking in economic geography, microscale dynamics in this subdiscipline nonetheless are conventionally viewed as *dependent* on dynamics operating at the macroscale. I also suggest that concepts such as governmentality in relation to resistance can fruitfully unchain the micro from the meso and macroscales while still accounting for the interrelation of processes operating at different scales.

### **Definitional preamble on scales**

Although definitions of scales may seem apparent, the meanings that are imparted can vary relative to discipline, specific approach, and research practices. Further, meaning imparted by a particular perspective at a specific scale affects meaning imparted at other scales. Thus at the outset I offer the following brief clarification of terms and their meanings. I begin with the macroscale and give most attention at the end of this section to microscale issues, which have received the least attention in economic geography.

The *macroscale* refers to societal-scale structures and formal and informal institutions that shape collective and individual behavior and decision making. Whereas in economics the macroscale tends to be viewed as the aggregation of microscale behaviors, in economic geography – in which research has been, at the least, inspired by Marxism – the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Both in economics and economic geography microscale dynamics are interpreted, even if implicitly, in terms given by macroscale structures and institutions (as evident in broad patterns), though this macro-micro relation is implicated via different intellectual routes in the two disciplines.

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<sup>3</sup> Some incisive critiques of economics from a geographic perspective include: Martin and Sunley (1998), Scott (2004), Sheppard (2001).

The *mesoscale* refers to specific contexts in which behavior and decision making occur, and can signify spatially circumscribed places or other types of contexts, such as networks that are spread across space, and symbolic and virtual places. The mesoscale is a crucial geographic lens because it is seen to operate as a mediating context by which societal-scale influences touch down differently in different places (as elegantly articulated by Doreen Massey's (1984) geomorphological metaphor). Whereas economic geography emphasizes the mesoscale (and neglects the microscale), mainstream economics neglects the mesoscale, which draws attention to variation in capitalism across space and thereby contradicts the homogenizing assumptions common in economics. The different areas of neglect and emphasis in economics and economic geography are further sensible in terms of research practices: whereas economics tends to emphasize theory at the expense of empirically grounded research, and infrequently entails field research (Fagerberg 2000), economic geography tends to emphasize empirically grounded research and, relatedly, fieldwork, for which mesoscale analysis is especially conducive.

The *microscale* refers to individualized action, thought, and feeling and can be understood in relational terms (individual actors, not groups, interacting) and/or in terms of individual actors' thoughts, feelings, and behavior alone. This definition is actor, not place-oriented. The relative nature of scale problematically renders a place-oriented approach a definition by way of example, not by principle. Definitional issues surrounding the microscale are similar to those regarding 'local', which refers not to a specific type of place but rather to the problems specific to a particular place in relation to a broader context and the relation of these context-specific dynamics to those in other places (Ettlinger 2001, pp. 9004-9005). Exemplifying the microscale by workplaces is tantamount to defining 'local' as a neighborhood, when actually 'local' can be used to refer as much to a neighborhood relative to a city as to a nation relative to the global economy. Workplaces often are perceived as microscale in the context of economic geography, which traditionally is concerned with industries or multilocal firms, but they can be understood as a mesoscale issue if analysis focuses on them generically rather than on specific dynamics within workplaces – a microscale issue. Further, if analysis focuses on specific individuals and/or their relations, then workplaces, bars where workers 'hang out' (Grabher 2002), and so forth are mesoscale contexts for the microscale dynamics under study.

The emphasis on context in economic geography has meant that microdynamics are situated relative to the mesoscale, whereas the neglect of the mesoscale in mainstream economics helps explain why actors in microscale analysis commonly are conceptualized in economics as context/less. The accepted embeddedness of microscale behavior in mesoscale contexts in economic geography can, however, be problematic. Specifically, there is a tendency in economic geography to privilege the spatial context (e.g. workplace, firm, network, community) over the actors, and ironically commit the ecological fallacy

common in economics, namely that individual members (of a group) in a place necessarily share behaviors, values, decision making, even history. This problem suggests a particular type of spatial fetishism in economic geography that implicitly privileges the meso over the microscale.

Elsewhere (Ettlinger 2003, pp. 13f.) I have argued for fluidity, not just in terms of conceptualizing subjects of study in the spirit of actor network theory, but also in terms of analysis itself, continually moving between spatial context and actors. From this perspective, analysis focuses neither on actors nor their contexts, but rather on the relation between the two. Consistent with a space-time framework (May and Thrift 2001), I suggest that context in microscale analysis should entail multiple spatial units because actors in daily life carry their thoughts and feelings across these units (Ettlinger 2004). This approach is microscale and relational; it is concerned with linking individuals' thoughts and feelings with social relations across space and over time. In this light, boundaries around spatial contexts – e.g. home, work, community – are socially constructed by both everyday actors and academicians who study them. People's geographies are *untidy* in the sense that experiences from different contexts across space and over time blur in the mind, producing incoherent identities and values. An individual's behavior and decision making in any one context may derive from any one of a number of configurations of thoughts and feelings that are tied to a range of contexts. Thus, I suggest that if a particular analysis were to focus on a single, bounded spatial unit (e.g. a workplace), interpretation would be unduly partial without attention to dynamics occurring elsewhere (e.g. home, church, recreation center) that impinge on the specific context under study.

The 'untidy geographies' perspective is consistent with other frameworks, but differs in several respects. It is consistent with ideas that connect phenomena at different scales such as 'a progressive sense of place' (Massey 1993, 2005) and 'a politics of place' (Amin 2004), but differs insofar as it is pitched more at bridging dynamics at the micro and mesoscales than at the meso and macroscales. It bears some resemblance to Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger's (2002) enterprise of linking microperformances across the global economy in virtual space insofar as it shares a concern for interconnectedness of microscale dynamics, but it differs regarding the nature of identity and social relations. Whereas Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002, p. 906) represent the linkage of microsociologies as harmonious – as "drawn together as if they were in one place", the untidy geographies framework suggests *incoherence*, as identities and values form from a kaleidoscope of experiences across space and over time, and may conflict; this perspective acknowledges and helps interpret *problems*, including suboptimal performance from a strictly economic vantage point when other, non-economic logics surface and configure with the dynamics of a workplace, collaborative project, firm, and the like. Non-economic issues of dis/trust (Crossman and Lee-Kelley 2004), "bad company" (Grabher and Ibert 2006), inability to access the complexities of different local contexts (Hughes et al. 2001), and uneven power relations (Symons 1997) pervade the terrain of

virtual space and can rupture the economically constructed discourses that surround firms, inter and intra-firm projects, and networks.

Frameworks that bridge scales in economic geography have tended to link dynamics at the macro and the mesoscales, or at the meso and microscales. Here I will argue that a complementary conceptualization of governmentality and resistance offers a useful framework towards linking dynamics across all these scales while avoiding a necessarily hierarchical gaze. First, at issue is not just upscaling and downscaling, but rather, the relation between perspective and the scaling of phenomena, as elaborated below.

### **Explaining the neglect of the microscale in economic geography**

Although economic geography has become open to poststructuralism, it has been dominated by modernist thinking, which encompasses both neoclassical analysis and its most prominent critical challenger, Marxism<sup>4</sup>. These apparently antithetical paradigms share an adherence to predictive, totalizing logic. Despite decidedly different intellectual routes, both neoclassical and Marxist frameworks view behavior in terms of the capitalist system and give analytical priority to economic phenomena such as the drive to accumulate capital and achieve efficiency and competitive advantage; other dimensions that might be considered, such as patriarchy, or more broadly, identity politics and discrimination against difference beyond issues of class (e.g. by gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, and so forth), are considered theoretically subservient.

From the vantage point of modernist paradigms, macroscale structures and formal and informal institutions characterize phenomena at the microscale because it is assumed that all actors behave in accordance with the same economic logic, even though the logic may play out differently in different contexts, at the mesoscale. The microscale may be useful descriptively as a stage for mesoscale dynamics and macroscale influences, but theoretical insight is given by the macro (economic) environment and mediating contexts. Capitalist individualism in this context is a matter of how actors make use of their resources according to the accepted (and predictable) logic of *homo economicus* that governs the economy. Agency at the microscale is, thus, not exactly “independent”, but rather, a dependent feature of the hierarchical fix to which the *Transactions* debate reacted.

The unilateral logic of modernist analysis has the benefits of rendering microscale behavior predictable by that logic and permitting conclusions that

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<sup>4</sup> Marxism here encompasses postMarxist approaches. The ‘post’ prefix is a subject that warrants at the least an entire manuscript. In brief, for my purposes here, the ‘post’ in postMarxism extends analysis beyond the realm of material conditions to discourses, while analysis of discourses adheres to classical emphasis on structures of the capitalist system.

predict by the same logic by which phenomena are explained; it offers certainty as well as precision to academic analysis. In contrast, a landscape of multiple logics is untidy. Non-economic logics may include, for example, experiences in and outside workplaces that may pertain to power relations outside economic pursuits, or behavior that in some way leads to individuals' satisfaction that is defined outside the realms of efficiency, accumulation of capital, and competitive advantage; such non-economic behavior may be governed by any of a host of positive and negative 'non-economic' sentiments: altruism, affection, jealousy, pride, and so on. Admission of non-economic logics and the possibility of their surfacing to govern behavior in a particular context suggest that any one of a number of possible outcomes may obtain because it is unclear which logic or configuration of logics may impinge on any one occasion. Lack of a unilateral logic renders prediction problematic and analysis imprecise.

### **'We have never been modern'<sup>5</sup>: recognizing microscale dynamics of multiple logics**

The precision, replicability, and predicatability of modernist thinking of any kind may, however, be viewed as an urge to bring certainty and conciseness to a complex world where uncertainty and imprecision are as common as their antitheses. For the same reason that economic geography generally distinguishes itself from economics – by working from the ground-up, rather than confining itself to formal models based on assumptions that are tenuous 'on the ground' – it may be sensible to consider a landscape of multiple logics. If we examine microscale settings, indeed we become cognizant of surprising outcomes, as microscale dynamics change the course of otherwise apparent trajectories. Examples with which readers might be personally familiar include meetings (of faculty, students, other organizations) in which the dynamics of a moment change the course of an otherwise orchestrated enterprise; the recent US film *Good Night and Good Luck* (Warner Independent Pictures 2006) representing one newsman's crucial role in the demise of McCarthyism is a reminder of the potential power of agency amid formidable structures of constraint. Rather than squeeze such instances into 'exceptions' to, or 'deviations' from, conceptual frameworks that cannot predict them, we might consider such instances as relatively widespread. This understanding helps interpret phenomena that otherwise are cast as inconsequential 'in the final analysis' because they are outside a norm.

The view adopted here casts norms as socially and politically constructed – as discursive phenomena that require evaluation relative to material realities. For example, the category 'cultural industry' has been constructed as a category and a norm with reference to a specific group of industries that produce images such as film, design, advertising, and so forth (e.g. Florida 2002, 2005; Power and

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<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour's (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern* critiques modernist thinking and recognizes the non-modernist character of our lives.

Scott 2004; Scott 2000). Yet, if we consider the images produced by durable goods manufacturing – automobiles, for example (Sheller 2004), we find that the cultural is part of all industries and constitutes an analytical lens, not an exclusive object of analysis. Further, the norming process necessarily also excludes – not just industries, but also *people*. In particular, the presumption that culture industries are peopled by “the creative class”, notably white-collar workers (Florida 2002, 2005), implicates academe in othering processes that deny voice to creative persons in formal and informal industries that are labeled ‘non-cultural’. This is where microscale analysis opens inquiry to reveal insights otherwise obscured. Examining individuals’ behavior in a workplace may show, for example, that some so-called pink and blue-collar workers may be far more creative than some white-collar workers, both in terms of performance and in terms of manipulating power relations. A classic case regarding performance: the underpaid and overworked secretary who actually manages the office as well as strategic decision making while the overpaid and underachieving boss flits from lunch break to cocktail hour. The lesson is that creativity is not inherent to, or located in, an occupation but rather entails informally developed skills that *some* people across a range of occupations can engage. Creativity is exclusive not to an a priori category but to those individuals who develop creative skills and navigate social relations effectively; moreover, creativity is not a static attribute but a dynamic quality that may or may not be tapped. Regarding creativity towards manipulating power relations, consider the office worker who recognizes that actual decision making often is made not by the boss but by the secretary, and accordingly goes through the secretary rather than the boss with requests for task assignments, equipment, and so forth; creativity in this scenario pertains not to the nature of a task but to the way in which individuals may construct tasks by way of navigating complex social relations that are laced with power. Crucially, observing creativity as evident in both these examples requires analysis of microscale dynamics. Scrutinizing norms or categories by way of microscale dynamics reveals an untidy world of similarities as well as differences among otherwise perceived discrete groups.

The main point is *not* that groups or categories should be eliminated because they are problematic! People routinely construct, and furthermore, *use* established categories to navigate the complexities of social relations, and one might reasonably argue that a complete absence of categories would result in serious problems of communication. Just as scale should not be abandoned because it has been used problematically, so too the problems engendered by the practice of constructing groups or categories (Butler 1990) require identification, critical examination, and positive engagement.

The problem of constructing groups entails two, interrelated dimensions: classification and homogenization. Tendencies to classify or categorize emphasize differences while obscuring similarities and impeding common ground among groups. As indicated, this problem is evident in how the category “cultural industry” has been constructed so as to obscure image production related to

automobiles and other durable goods, as well as behaviors, skills, and voices of *people* outside so-called “cultural industries”. The other face of classification and the erection of boundaries among groups is homogenization, which emphasizes similarities while obscuring and suffocating minority expressions within groups. For example, members of a (constructed) group of people (e.g. by class or occupation, race/ethnicity, gender and so forth) often are assumed to share values, goals, and material circumstances. Consider, however, the different discursive and material circumstances across occupations within an industry, and further, as in the above example of a workplace in a “cultural industry”, the potentially different navigational skills developed by people irrespective of their occupation. Obfuscation of possibly profound differences within groups misses the dynamics of situations and results in spurious representations. At issue is not jettisoning groups or categories, but rather, developing a critical consciousness about similarities and differences both within and among groups.

Further, overlooking similarities and differences within and among groups regarding behavior, decision making and social interaction can miss cues for transformational change. For example, economic geography as a subdiscipline documented industrial restructuring during the 1980s and ‘90s largely in terms of externalization strategies that relied on trust between clients and suppliers – a system that drew inspiration from the Japanese *keiretsu* model; yet, *keiretsus* have disintegrated in Japan in the wake of the Asian Crisis, many US firms have reinstated least cost approaches that play the global market for the lowest price, and Japanese firms since the late 1990s have imitated such US strategies at the expense of traditional client-supplier relations (Associated Press 2001; Citron and Wolfson 2006; *The Economist* 1999, 2000; Ezrati 1999; Helweg 2000; Zachary 2001). It is remarkable that this transformation has been largely undocumented in economic geography at any scale.<sup>6</sup> Even though macroscale events (e.g the Asian Crisis) may trigger localized reactions, the main point is that conundrums in systems of social relations and changing behaviors can be observed at the microscale – in workplaces and in the social relations between people in different workplaces (such as a client and supplier firm). Behaviors (in this case, least cost strategies at the expense of social relations, trust, and so forth), which once may have been considered outside the norm or dominant mode, may surface with greater frequency and strength. Fundamentally at issue is giving attention to the relation between dominant and minority sentiments, values, behaviors, and so forth. The view adopted here does not reverse the conventional emphasis on dominant patterns and processes to privilege the minority; rather, the aim is to privilege neither but to interrogate the relation between the two to interpret ongoing change. Specifically from the vantage point of scales, it is sensible to think about the ‘place’ of scales in transformational change.

Although there is probably little disagreement that long-run, strategic change requires changes at multiple scales, scant theoretical attention has been given to

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<sup>6</sup> Ettlinger (forthcoming) elaborates on this “turnaround” – i.e. Japanese firms imitating US strategies emphasizing least cost following the reverse imitation in the previous decade.

a relative chronology of change relative to scales – necessary if change is understood as evolutionary rather than revolutionary. I suggest that *behavioral* changes occur initially at the microscale and can be observed at that scale. This is not to say that change (in its totality) necessarily begins at the microscale, but rather that behavior that reacts to large-scale change (such as the Asian Crisis) occurs first at the microscale. Prompted perhaps by macroscale pressures, individual actors make decisions and localized social interactions occur in microscale contexts that can have far-reaching effects such as changes in workplace practices, mounting debt in banks, and so forth.

Grounded action in microscale contexts offers a frame of reference for formal procedures as actors construct change in institutions, be they formal or informal. This is a bottom-up view of long-run change in the sense that institutional change, resulting either from policy or collective citizen action or both, occurs not in a vacuum but rather follows daily practices that channel reactions to opportunities and constraints, aspirations, and plans for change. As Foucault (2000a, p. 343) suggested,

“...the fundamental point of anchorage of the [power] relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found outside the institution... power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above “society” whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of.”

Yet bottom-up change that is long run must eventually intersect with top-down efforts to institutionalize changes in social relations (North 1990). At issue is not whether long-run change operates from the top or the bottom because both are necessary; rather, the main point is that there is a relative chronology of types of change at different scales.

Macroscale dynamics remain crucial predictors, but specifically of the status quo, of phenomena that follow previous patterns and processes while playing out differently in different contexts. While mesoscale dynamics help interpret variation relative to the status quo, microscale dynamics help interpret unpredictable behavior that is outside the status quo and may potentially affect the course of events. This said, unpredictable phenomena occur in a context of macroscale influence and mediating contexts at the mesoscale. How then are we to understand the relation among processes operating at all scales while also accounting for non-conformist behaviors?

## **Situating the microscale: governmentality and resistance**

Towards resolving the above-stated question, the coupling of Foucault's (2000b) concept 'governmentality'<sup>7</sup> with resistance offers a useful analytical framework. Although Foucault devoted relatively little space to issues of resistance (Hindess 1997; Moss 1998), as Mitchell Dean (1999, p. 7) has suggested, Foucault's later work requires critically synthesizing a variety of ideas that he developed separately. Below I offer a synopsis of 'governmentality' and then make two interrelated points. The first is ontological; I suggest that 'governmentality' and resistance are *necessary* complements, although Foucault engaged with resistance to a considerably lesser extent than, and disconnected from, governmentality.<sup>8</sup> The second is epistemological; I suggest that the (implicit) interrelation between governmentality and resistance suggests an approach to knowledge that weaves together processes operating at the micro, meso, and macroscales without the hierarchical logic characteristic of modernist analysis.

In brief, governmentality (Foucault 2000b) pertains to issues of governance, which Foucault understood to be an art in contexts in which individuals are free. People have choices because they are free, and thus governing individuals is a complex matter that cannot rely on physical coercion. Governance as an art requires that those with authority who are charged with insuring certain types of behavior must design tactics (not laws) by which individuals with free choice will discipline themselves daily in accordance with the norms set by government. Katherine Gibson's (2001) study of restructuring in Australia offers an interesting example of how 'victims' of restructuring are complicit with the system that subjects them: one interviewee who decried the laying off of countless workers at power plants (including his friend) lamented "the numbers" (i.e. statistics on productivity, rooted in a mentality of quantification dating back to the initial development of the power industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century); ironically, "the numbers" legitimized for him the cold-heartedness of restructuring. Individuals contribute to the societal discourses that beget organizations, programs, and the like that subject them.

Crucially, Foucault (2000b, p. 220) emphasized that 'the state' is not monolithic, not unified, "no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction". He viewed 'the state' as fragmented into a multitude of agents and organizations, each designing site-specific tactics to carry out societal-scale norms. 'Government', then is a

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault presented his concept 'governmentality' as part of series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France, 1977-'78.

<sup>8</sup> I think it was more than modesty that prompted Foucault (1994c, p. 284) to say in response to a question about his later work, "I'm still only at the beginning of my work; clearly I haven't finished it". His later work, while perspicacious, nonetheless entails loose ends. In particular, the relation between the art of governance, 'governmentality', and resistance to it is inexplicit.

“complex of men and things... men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those things that are wealth, resources, means of subsistence... ways of acting and thinking, and so on; and finally, men in their relation to those still other things that might be accidents and misfortunes.” (Foucault 2000b, pp. 208-209)

Governance iterates in the context of contingent circumstances. Logically, then, the complexity of all the actors (government officials and their web of networks amongst themselves as well as with subject-citizens) renders the connections between all individuals and government norms far from perfunctory. Thus although governmentality entails the subjection of individuals by their self-discipline as free subjects, one might reasonably suggest that the possibility of rupture – windows of opportunity for self-expression outside societal norms – is omnipresent, though realized only in some instances relative to contingent conditions. The possibility (not necessarily the probability) for non-conformist behavior lies in every imperfect context. Yet Foucault is frustrating on this point because his ideas about governmentality seem lacking on the dimension of freedom that permits non-conformist behavior.

One can, however, look outside Foucault’s specific lecture on governmentality to find glimpses of his thoughts about resistance, which accounts in part for, and gives rise, to, new forms of subjectivity (Foucault 2000a, p. 336). Elsewhere Foucault (2000d, pp. 324-325) discusses resistance as far deeper than denunciation and more a matter of questioning accepted forms of rationality (as in the political rationality that forms the basis of governmentality); he also distinguishes criticism that is radical and oriented to transformation (Foucault 2000e, p. 456).

The possibility of non-conformist behavior depends in part on the contextual issue of contingent conditions that may offer windows of opportunity. Towards this end, in an interview (Foucault 2000c) and in “Questions of Method” (Foucault 2000f) Foucault clarified his analytical interest in localizing problems to reveal their singularity and to examine the locally specific configurations of power relations that defy uniform constructs. Foucault’s (2000f, pp. 226-227) epistemology entails the combination of ‘eventualization’ – “making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant” and a ‘procedure of causal multiplication’ that constructs around a singular event “a ...‘polyhedron’ of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite”, thereby “lightening” causality and casting phenomena as multidimensional and unpredictable.

Rebutting accusations of being apolitical, Foucault (2000c, p. 294-295) emphasized that his overriding concern is to *use* eventualization and a procedure of causal multiplication to engage why and how systems of governance come

into being to “enable us to transform... with the conviction that it [analysis] may be of use”. The complex, contingent nature of processes operating in specific places implicitly is entwined with the idea of resistance towards transformation.

In turn, the “use” of analysis clarifies Foucault’s concern with linking the localized microphysics of power with generalization. Regarding discipline, Foucault (2000c, pp. 294-295) commented that:

““Discipline” isn’t the expression of an ‘ideal type’ (that of “disciplined man”); it’s the generalization and interconnection of different techniques themselves designed in response to localized requirements (schooling, training troops to handle rifles)”.

Foucault’s analytical interest in localizing problems – situating them in time and space – speaks to the value of mesoscale analysis while ‘governmentality’ helps interpret the relation between macroscale societal norms and the microscale power relations that configure in specific contexts.

There are two reasons why the macro-micro relation as per ‘governmentality’ is not exactly top-down as in modernist perspectives. First, it is the self-disciplining of free agents that reinforces societal norms; thus, as opposed to the modernist perspective in which microscale dynamics are given by macroscale norms, individual behavior and societal norms are mutually embedded. This said, arguably the relation between macroscale norms and individual behavior is somewhat asymmetrical, with the former holding power over the latter because tactics designed by those in authority guide the behavior (Foucault’s “the conduct of conduct”) of free agents. Yet if we consider resistance and the contingency of conditions in localized problems, then we may conclude differently. Specifically, governmentality operates to guide individuals’ decisions so they will act in accordance with societal norms, but resistance at the microscale permits (even if it does not predict) radical criticism, transformation, reconfiguration of power relations, and the development of new subjectivities. The possibility of resistance in an uncertain world unchains the micro from the macro while analysis of mesoscale dynamics helps interpret variation in how and why resistance to macroscale norms occurs. The ‘unchaining’ of the micro from the macro does not mean, then, the absence of a relation, but rather the effort to disengage from a relation and (at least an attempt to) develop a new one.

Thinking about agency in the context of a coupling of governmentality and resistance clarifies why ‘agency’ does not translate simply into ‘microscale’: free agents may choose a path of resistance to norms, or they may operate in conformist mode like a marionette of structure. The relation between agency and microscale is itself a complex and contingent matter because agency operates at the microscale *in different directions*. And the direction of an individual’s or a group’s path toward resistance or conformity is unpredictable from a non-essentialist perspective that recognizes both similarities and differences within

and among groups and the wide range of context-specific circumstances across material and identity politics.

### **Consequences for the nature of inquiry in economic geography**

Although economic geography in comparison with economics is relatively 'grounded', the grounding has taken the form of a particular type of spatial fetishism that privileges the mesoscale while dependently tying microscale dynamics to macroscale structures, norms, and the like. Bringing the above concerns to analysis in economic geography is suggestive about the nature of inquiry. Thinking about governmentality opens inquiry regarding the macro-micro relation in terms of how mentalities – neoliberalism, for example – come about; how they 'touch down' differently in different contexts; and crucially, how daily practices in formal and informal workplaces and other spheres of life (e.g. home, bars, nodes on the internet) that are connected to workplaces unconsciously reproduce macroscale (e.g. neoliberal) norms.

Thinking about resistance offers one interpretation of imperfect workings of the system. While the economic geography literature on networks, for example, focuses mainly on the different ways in which business 'works' through types of social ties in places or across space,<sup>9</sup> popular media offers examples of problems, bottlenecks, breakdowns in communication with dramatic negative consequences for business (e.g. Engardio 2001). If we expand our conceptual and empirical frame of reference to include *disarticulations* in social relations of production and consumption, then we are left with how to interpret unplanned behaviors that conflict with goals, which often are framed unidimensionally relative to issues of competitiveness. Certainly, all imperfections do not necessarily derive from resistance; however, resistance is indeed one of a number of processes that can result in 'competitive disadvantage', 'suboptimal performance', 'ineffective communication'. The type of resistance to which I refer is rarely a matter of formal protest; rather, it is a matter of individuals uncovering and acting on covert, multidimensional thoughts rooted in experiences from different contexts (home, leisure, non-work communities) that in some way disarticulate with the often unidimensional goals of a particular context conceptualized in economic terms (e.g. industry, firm, workplace, 'community of practice' (CoP)<sup>10</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> The economic geography literature has been split between a traditional emphasis on interaction *in* places (e.g. Morgan 2004) and critical reactions that focus on how various types of networks across space are possible (e.g. Amin 2004; Ettliger 2003; Faulconbridge 2006; Grabher and Ibert 2006). The recent international workshop on communities of practice (CoPs) ("Communities of practice: a driver for innovation and competitive advantage?" 2006) opened dialogue on this (see footnote #10).

<sup>10</sup> In recent years, economic geographers have developed an interest in the concept 'communities of practice' (CoPs), which emerged in the academic literature in the 1990s (Brown and Duguid 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; relatedly, see Nonaka 1994) and recently was elaborated in an international workshop ("Communities of practice: a driver for innovation and competitive advantage?" 2006; see also Amin and Cohendet 2004). In brief,

Just as we can step outside the industry, firm, workplace, or CoP to recognize the multiple contexts that constitute individual actors' psyches in any one place of business (workplace, bar, golf course, node in cyberspace), we might also step outside economically conceived goals to recognize a variety of other types of goals that may be social, political, cultural. Recent enthusiasm over CoPs, for example has generated tremendous insight into varieties of situated learning and their geographies, though the goals have not strayed far from conventional emphasis on innovativeness as connected with competitiveness. The main point is *not* that competitiveness in general, and innovativeness in particular, should be abandoned; rather, they might fruitfully be integrated with other, non-economic goals – social justice, for example (Lee and Smith 2004). Otherwise we divorce ourselves from ethics and presume, even if implicitly, that research is valueless, neutral, and accordingly, we set the stage for spurious representations, problematic exemplars, and replication of errors. Consider, for example, Etienne Wenger's (2004, p. 6) use of the World Bank as an exemplar of CoPs; specifically, he directed attention to how World Bank practitioners develop CoPs among client countries, whence proposals for fighting poverty flow. On the contrary, critical ethnographic work on the World Bank (e.g. Stiglitz 2002; Wade 1996, 2002) suggests more of a set of fiascos, in part due to the absence of any sort of bottom-up processes to which Wenger referred. One problem is that discourses (e.g. solving problems of global poverty) often depart from material realities (e.g. top-down context/less policies that are imposed throughout the world, often with devastating consequences). One might argue in this particular case that the problem may be a matter of taking discourse at face value without critical ethnographic field work; more generally, however, unidimensional goals of innovativeness and competitiveness can frame both the discourse and material basis of evaluation *even while serious problems of social injustice are incurred*. The view here is that academics, as one type of agent and carrier of discourse, cannot afford to pretend that unidimensional thinking is neutral; circumventing issues of social justice does not mean that the content of analysis disconnects from social *in*justice.

Beyond viewing phenomena such as CoPs as a means through which knowledges are generated and communicated, we can think of CoPs as a set of relations occurring at the mesoscale that link macroscale norms and microscale practices. As such, consensual democracy that links CoPs to the broader political economy (Amin 2005) may reproduce norms either positive or negative, or more likely, mixed; it depends. Although governmentality tends to be understood implicitly as ontologically negative in light of its regulatory character, from a normative vantage point we might ask if some governmentalities might be

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CoPs refers to a set of practices for generating knowledges to achieve innovativeness among business people (e.g. entrepreneurs) with shared interests, and they can occur in a single location or spread across space as actors share their learning through various channels of communication.

constructed that are ontologically positive and connected with ethics; the same holds for phenomena such as CoPs, when conceptualized in multidimensional (not singularly economic) terms. The approach developed here views CoPs as capable of re-creating norms, as well as a context in which norms may undergo radical criticism and revision. The coupling of governmentality and resistance offers a lens through which to view the macro-mesoscale relation and how microdynamics can (although not inevitably) change otherwise given trajectories. More generally at issue are questions such as how *specific* CoPs come about; why and how they differ from, and are similar to, others; and under what circumstances resistance to norms of a community might be viable enough to change practices, thereby opening avenues towards the institutionalization of revised norms.

The possibilism of this approach is not about relativism, but rather is oriented to theorizing the contingent conditions under which certain outcomes may or may not occur, and normatively, theorizing how conditions might be constructed to achieve particular outcomes. This approach has been relatively uncommon in economic geography; it was elegantly articulated in the late Iris Young's (2000) last book *Inclusion and Democracy*, which unfortunately does not engage economic issues. J.K. Gibson-Graham's (2006) work is normative, though it tends to cast positive futures outside the capitalist system, in a *post-capitalist* system. The view here is sympathetic but more concerned with how to manipulate capitalist environments towards a convergence of different types of goals. The advantages of critical normative thinking, given that there is no 'arrival' but continual 'becoming', is that an agenda based on new principles helps change discourses and puts issues 'on the table'. From this vantage point, the difficulty in 'arrival' is not resolved but is somewhat offset by the delineation of new principles and directions to help avoid a perpetual replication of the same problems. Thinking normatively specifically regarding governmentality and resistance requires becoming cognizant of the macroscale norms that guide individual conduct, uncovering the kaleidoscope of thoughts that derive from experiences in a variety of contexts, acting on those thoughts, and connecting otherwise covert thoughts among different people so as to affect and revise practices. Of course, such thoughts and connectivity can be oriented in a variety of directions, negative and positive. The agenda embraced here pertains to the convergence of the usually divergent processes of efficiency, innovativeness, and competitiveness on the one hand, and social justice and deliberative democracy that is sensitive to issues of difference on the other (Ettlinger 2007).

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