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Counter-hegemonic Strategy from the Global South: A pluri-scalar War of Position

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Introduction

Within the context of the crisis of capitalist world order (Gills 2020), a resurgent interest in the historical question of strategy in/for progressive transformation against the accumulated power of global capital spans the social sciences and activist camps.¹ Except for human geographers (e.g. Castree, Featherstone and Herod 2008; Sparke 2008), however, neglected in these discussions is the role of socio-spatial theory in engendering structural transformation within the constraints of the prevailing historical structure.² To this end, this article integrates neo-Gramscian with human geography theory and method in elaborating the notion of “pluri-scalar war of position”, incipiently defined as “multidimensional struggle over minds and strategic places at and across different interlocking scales simultaneously in the construction of a historic bloc” (Muhr 2013a: 7). The concept evolved from research into the emergent spatiality of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA-TCP)/Petrocaribe between 2005 and 2012. Starting from a place-based community in Venezuela and extending into distinct though increasingly interconnecting places in other countries (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Brazil), I argued that a pluri-scalar war of position was mobilised as a propositive, or pro-active, stated socio-spatial strategy during Hugo Chávez’s hemispheric leadership, driving the production of a global South counter-space.³ Prior to intensified imperialist hybrid warfare since 2015 (AFGJ/NSCAG 2019; Aponte-García and Linares 2019; Barreto 2018; Camp and Greenburg 2020; Milani 2021; Weisbrot and Sachs 2019), counter-hegemonic solidarity relations extended transnationally also into places in the imperialist core. In London, Venezuelan petroleum subsidised public transport for

¹ See: Anisin (2020); Bieler and Nowak (2021); Blackledge (2019); Bookchin (2015); Carroll (2016); Featherstone and Herod (2008); Disney and Williams (2014); Egan (2019); Gordon (2012); Hosseini, Gills and Goodman (2017); Kellogg (2017); Panitch, Albo and Chibber (2012); Sankey and Munck (2020); Sparke (2008); Vasilaki (2018).

² Structures, rather than fixed and static, are here viewed as relatively durable “slow processes”, in comparison to other processes (Sayer 2018: 108).

³ See my PhD research (Muhr 2008), published in revised version (Muhr 2011), and related publications as referenced. The PhD thesis contains photographic documentation of some of the place-based examples mentioned in this article.

low-income residents in exchange for technical expertise in urban planning, accompanied by cultural cooperation (Massey 2011). Across the USA, Venezuela provided below-the-market-price heating oil and development project funding for dispossessed individuals, households and communities (Muhr 2013b).

While Bob Jessop has drawn attention to the relevance of place, space and scale in Antonio Gramsci's writings (Jessop 2008), the pluri-scalar war of position, with its emphasis on emancipatory collective action jointly by state and non-state actors, strategically transforms what Doreen Massey termed "power geometries". The Venezuelan government has been applying this concept since 2007 in an effort at reconfiguring the hegemonic power relations within and beyond the national territory. Power geometry embodies the idea that social space is imbued with, and a product of, power relations. Any power geometry is the product of unequal control over the very social processes in relation to which different social groups and individuals are placed in distinct and highly differential and varied ways, with some empowered and others disempowered by the very same processes (Massey 1991). Acknowledging the existence of unequal power geometries is a precondition for emancipatory political action, and counter-hegemonic strategy that seeks to change the socio-spatial positionings of subaltern individuals and collectivities relative to these geographies of power (Massey 2009).⁴

A schematic overview of contemporary ideas on strategy in the next section elicits some of their limitations from a geographical perspective. Subsequently, the conceptual elements of pluri-scalar war of position are systematically discussed, arguing for the importance of capturing state power on the one hand, and for a politics of place-space-scale on the other. The conclusion outlines some limits to the pluri-scalar war of position as a progressive democratic transformation. This requires some initial clarifications and caveats. First, key theoretical arguments and empirical examples, or illustrative snapshots, are purposefully selected in accordance with the objective of the article. The references point the reader to the more comprehensive and contested background discussions. Second, a reconciliatory approach to the divisive counter-posing of Marxist (materialist/political economic) and post-structuralist (culturalist) traditions is adopted (Brenner 2019: 35; MacKinnon 2010). Thus, *social*, as in social production, social structure, and socio-spatial, assumes a broader understanding than social relations of production (and that society is not reduced to mode of production), as concomitant multidirectional and mutually constitutive, interdependent economic, political, cultural, ecological, legislative and infrastructural relations, flows, processes and material and discursive practices. Third, the overall argument developed is reflected in two complementary conceptualisations of "the global South". In nation-state centric or methodologically nationalist terms, where countries appear as homogenous, territorially bounded units or containers of societies and social action, the global South is a group of developing countries – a clearly demarcated South–North binary as depicted on the well-known front cover of the 1980 *Brandt Report*. Formal international membership in the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe, for instance, fits this notion. The global South, however, is also associated with intra-national and transnational relations of exploitation, deprivation and inequalities, i.e. the selective social inclusion and exclusion of places and

⁴ Gramsci's concept of "subaltern" enhances the Marxist category of "class" by including classes and non-classes (socially and politically marginalised and disaggregated groups) (Galastri 2018).

segments of societies across nation-states. Within such a socio-geographic understanding, the *globalised* South coexists with the *globalised* North within and across countries in both the geographical north and south. A global South identity can be constructed through inter- and transnational solidarity-building in resistance to common historical experiences of structural oppression, subalternisation, exploitation and peripherisation (Berger 2020; Chisholm 2009; Horner 2020; Kleinschmidt 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Tafira 2019). The previously highlighted counter-hegemonic gambit introducing Venezuelan-supplied home heating oil to low-income communities in the UK and USA territories epitomises this notion of global South. Therefore, fourth, this article is not *about* Latin America-Caribbean but resonates with Emir Sader's call to (re)develop theory for strategy *from* (from within and in dialogue with) revolutionary praxis in the global South (Sader 2012).⁵ Thus transcending mere normative theorising, synthesising while refining pluri-scalar war of position in this article addresses conceptual ambiguities (Chiasson-LeBel and Larrabure 2019: 95), while reasserting the importance of socio-spatial theory for transformative politics.⁶

Strategy (I): Contemporary ideas

Johan Galtung's seminal reflections on strategy as political process raise the pertinent questions of *who* the carriers of a strategy may be, *how* they are going to exercise it, and *where* in social and geographical space (Galtung 1979). Historically, these questions have divided the left along offensive and coalition-building or united-front approaches, with the latter frequently dismissed as reformist (Kellogg 2017). Gramsci (1971: 237–238) distinguished these as “war of manoeuvre”, as revolutionary “frontal attack” on the state when state power is concentrated, and “war of position”, as strategic collective action when the power of the dominant group(s) is diffused in the state/society complex. Contemporary critical scholarship responds to the implicit methodological challenges variously. On the one hand, despite their fundamental philosophical and theoretical differences, the so-called anarchist-autonomist and critical-liberal approaches (see Carroll 2016; Cox and Nilsen 2014) share a more or less pronounced isolated local activism combined with an oppositional stance to the state, power, hierarchy/leadership and organisation, including political parties. Championing horizontalism, voluntarism and micro-political episodic events, however, undermines sustained structural transformation (Carroll 2016; Cox and Nilsen 2014; Disney and Williams 2014; Harvey 2017; Muhr 2010a; Purcell 2012;

⁵ “Praxis” draws from (post-)Marxist, feminist and liberation theology thinking and expresses the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, as in Paulo Freire's action-reflection cycle (a continuous process of acting-reflecting-acting upon the world, with the objective of transforming the inequitable society or “structure[s] of oppression”, Freire [1970] 1996).

⁶ As will become clearer, this is a geographical relational approach: a *socio-spatial ontology* that conceptualises space as socially produced through relations that extend beyond specific places while constituting place and scale; *relational epistemologies*, that inter alia recognise various counter-hegemonic practices and formations across difference while theorising *from* rather than about them; and a *politics of possibility* that associates academic activism with challenging hegemonic knowledges (Elwood, Lawson and Sheppard 2017). “Ontology” refers to one's fundamental assumptions or beliefs about how the world is, and “epistemology” to how to achieve understanding of the world (Harvey 1996: 79). A relational-processual ontology is fundamental to dialectics, which to discuss, however, is beyond the scope of this article (for this, see Hart 2018; Harvey 1996: 46–68; Ollman 2003).

Raby 2006; Roberts 2012; Sader 2012; Williams 2008).⁷ Typically relying on the ubiquitous “top down”/“from above” *versus* “bottom up”/“from below” antagonism, whereby the first is usually associated with the state as an oppressive force and the second with progressive societal actors, approaches of this kind nourish the essentialist assumption that there is something inherently desirable, progressive or empowering about the local scale (which is not necessarily the case) (Purcell and Brown 2005). Moreover, *from below*, originally associated with “development from below”, was never narrowly anti-statist. To the contrary: the Third World state was ascribed an emancipatory role in countering the neo-colonialist/imperialist hegemony of neoclassical economics and the growth-based “trickle down” mantra imposed externally (“from above”) by an emergent transnational capitalist class (TCC), *inter alia* composed of capitalist core governments, elites, technocrats and private corporations (Stöhr and Taylor 1981). Critiquing the activist catchphrase *Think globally, act locally* as a strategically disabling binarisation, socio-spatial theorists have persistently argued for contentious politics to operate at and across multiple scales simultaneously, from local to global (Gibson-Graham 2002; Herod 2011: xiii; Howitt 1993; Mansfield 2005; Massey 1995: 325; Massey 2007: 15, 166–167; Smith 1992; Swyngedouw 1997a; Taylor 1994).

On the other hand, the strategic imperative of coalition-building by bridging divergent visions among alternative and localised transformative praxes and projects across political and geographical settings is increasingly recognised (Bieler and Nowak 2021; Carroll 2016; Hall, Massey and Rustin 2015; Hosseini, Gills and Goodman 2017; O’Byrne 2020; Purcell 2012; Rahnema 2019; Sader 2012; Sankey and Munck 2020). While overcoming the divisive revolution-versus-reform imagination and the state/society dichotomisation, instead calling for counter-hegemonic states/social movements alliances, empirical studies commonly take the form of isolated local or national cases, often for comparative purposes (e.g. Sader 2012; Sankey and Munck 2020; Disney and Williams 2014; Williams 2008). However, the structural complexities of hegemonic globalisation processes require a relational approach that permits connecting cases and their actors from distinct places across space-time (Roncallo 2013). This is increasingly (implicitly or explicitly) acknowledged by proposals that relate unifying to constructing a global counter-hegemonic bloc encompassing political forces in formal power structures, such as progressive states and governments, political parties, and international organisations, and wider social forces including grassroots movements, trade unions, transnational think tanks, and non-government organisations (Álvarez and Chase-Dunn 2019; Carroll 2016; Gills and Chase-Dunn 2019; Hall, Massey and Rustin 2015; Hosseini, Gills and Goodman 2017; O’Byrne 2020; Purcell 2012). As strategic objectives and visions are formulated, however, the methodological-processual question of *how to get there* remains underexplored: how to build alternative organisational structures against bourgeois cultural hegemony and the accumulated material and institutional power of global capital. The next two sections systematically address this question, first by

⁷ Despite a rich repertoire of imageries – “pockets of resistance”, “the anti-hegemonic locale”, “transnationalism from below”, “horizontal networks”, and the like – the failure of the Occupy movement once more reveals the limits of this approach (Muhr 2010a; Roberts 2012). Gramscian/neo-Marxist inspired movements, linked to progressive parties and/or state apparatuses, such as the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement, are outside this category (Purcell 2012).

presenting essentials of neo-Gramscian method, upon which the conceptual elements of a politics of place-space-scale are discussed.

Strategy (II): Reshaping global historical structure

For Gramsci, a war of position constituted the only viable strategy for socialist transformation in the West due to bourgeois hegemony: a regime in which a “fundamental” (potentially hegemonic or revolutionary vanguard) social group or class successfully constructs the sub-alterns’ active consent to their conception of the world, while coercion is enforced as a disciplinary measure (Gramsci 1971: 12, 229–241). An all-pervasive ideology, which appears as “common sense” as it becomes universalised as a hegemonic worldview, functions as “intermediary” in the production of consent: the discursive sedimentation of knowledge via political, economic, cultural and moral institutions and relations that appear to be operating in the general interest or general will by including some subaltern interests (concession-making), whilst ensuring the leadership of the dominant class (Gramsci 1971: 328, 376; Mouffe 1979: 181). In the construction of neoliberal hegemony since the Second World War, the TCC, in contrast to the progressive movement, had long understood the “war of ideas” and systematically established institutions (think tanks) for achieving cultural (ideological) hegemony (George 1997).

War of position is organically linked to historical bloc (also, historic bloc) formation, through a “historical congruence” between ideologies, material forces (the dominant social relations of production), and institutions (Gill 2008: 60). This goes beyond a mere class alliance. It is a strategy that coheres different class interests across diverse classes, strata and social groups (Bieler and Morton 2004). This allows the dominant class to position itself as the expression of society’s “collective will” for strategic political action (Gramsci 1971: 194, 263, 267). The resulting “integral state”, or state/society complex (Cox 1996), is an organic, dialectical unity of political society and civil society to which the subalterns are subjugated (Gramsci 1971: 194, 263–267; Thomas 2010: 137; Galastri 2018: 46). That is, the state apparatus becomes integrated with the so-called private sphere comprising educational, religious and corporate capitalist institutions, including the bourgeois media, as well as inter-governmental bodies and the family (Bieler and Morton 2004; Carroll 2016).

For Robert Cox, hegemony implies a relatively stable and unquestioned “structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities” (Cox 1996: 151). As historical structure, this order stipulates the arrangement of state forms and state/society complexes and social forces, including production relations as well as such non-class social relations as ethnicity, religion, peace, gender, and ecology (Bieler and Morton 2004: 90). The method of historical structure permits analysing hegemonic world orders and counter-hegemonic possibilities in a non-deterministic fashion. Through this framework, hegemony is permanently (re)constructed within each of three dialectically constitutive *spheres* – a triangle of states, social forces and world order. Within each of these three spheres of action a set of interrelated *forces* operates: material capabilities (productive and reproductive); (competing) ideas; and institutions (Cox 1996; also see Sinclair’s [2016] extension of this framework). These are at the same

time products and facilitators of a particular world order, and change can emerge from any of these forces (Cox 2007). Although the historical structure, or “framework for action”, constrains action, collective action can generate an alternative configuration of forces, a rival or counter-structure. This, however, always involves a partial reproduction of the prevailing historical structure (Cox 1996: 97–101).

The explanatory and political significance of this approach must not be underestimated. For example, the Latin America-Caribbean progressive governments of the 2000s/2010s – notably Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela – have widely been criticised for continued resource extraction while promoting eco-socialism (see Bell 2017, and Lalander and Lembke 2018, for insightful discussion). Frequently, this has been interpreted as hypocrisy or even “betrayal” by the presidents (Kovel 2014: 16). Rather than simply blaming state power holders in oil producing/exporting nations, a historical structural analysis posits that resource extraction in a particular place is intertwined with global capitalism – a spatiality of oil production and consumption (Biersack 2006; Huber 2008; McCarthy 2012; Peet, Robbins and Watts 2011). Thus viewed, it may be more appropriate to speak of a contradiction (which certainly needs addressing over time) produced by the structural transformation/reproduction dialectics, as resource extraction and its global South redistribution via the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe at the same time means the strategic mobilisation of material capabilities for counter-hegemonic politics.⁸

Cox (1996: 140) accords with Gramsci that a war of position is the only way to achieve structural change. In certain contexts, a war of manoeuvre might be tactically appropriate, even necessary (whereby Gramsci mentions strikes, but anarchist-autonomist struggles might equally be included here), however, always within a politics of a war of position (Gramsci 1971: 229, 232; also Blackledge 2019; Egan 2015). In contrast to mass strikes, smaller-scale strikes and episodic events do not pose a direct or structural threat to global capitalism (Egan 2019). However, they can contribute to destabilising the common sense and, as will be discussed in the subsequent section, to place-(re)making. As Uri Gordon states from an anarchist perspective, “[t]he strategic choice is not dichotomous, but rather involves selecting the best-situated forms of intervention that render the tension between anarchist values and non-anarchist struggles productive rather than destructive” (Gordon 2012: 1748). In practice, strategic alliances among traditional Marxist forces (labour unions and political parties) and new social movements in anti-austerity contention in Portugal during the 2000s/2010s demonstrate that historical divisions among the left can be overcome (Accornero and Pinto 2015; Lisi 2016). Equally, for Nicos Poulantzas democratic socialist transformation required combining war of manoeuvre and war of position, turning the state apparatus into a “strategic site of political struggle”, rather than viewing the state as a monolithic bloc and simply an instrument of oppression (Poulantzas [1978] 2000: 128–135, 254–258). Bob Jessop’s strategic relational approach reiterates that the state is neither a unified subject nor a neutral “thing” but a set of social relations and hegemonic institutions within the state/society complex (Jessop 2008: 3). As a framework for the study of state formation and transformation through the structure/agency dynamic, Jessop introduces the heuristic

⁸ Contradiction as “a union of two or more processes that are simultaneously supporting and undermining one another” (Ollman 2003: 84).

concepts of “structurally inscribed strategic selectivity” and “strategically calculated structurally oriented action” (Jessop 2008: 41):

This refers to the ways in which the state considered as a social ensemble has a specific, differential impact on the ability of various political forces to pursue particular interests and strategies in specific spatio-temporal contexts through their access to and/or control over given state capacities – capacities that always depend for their effectiveness on links to forces and powers that exist and operate beyond the state’s formal boundaries. (Jessop 2004: 50)

State forms, due to the social embeddedness of state apparatuses, are not pre-given and fixed; state transformation can occur through several key moments: social policies (broadly defined, including economic policies); re-scaling or spatial re-organisation of state functions, powers, and institutional forms; and changing modes of regional and global governance (Jessop 2008: 5–15). As political possibilities are shaped by the state form the struggle for an emancipatory mobilisation of state power for state restructuring becomes a struggle over state power. After all, legislative, juridical and policing/military power rest within the political state apparatus and also define a state’s positionality in relation to inter-governmental institutions, transnational corporate bodies, and other organisations of global governance. Therefore, as Gramsci’s notion of the extended state would suggest, a counter-hegemonic war of position must not restrict itself to struggles within civil society, but has to extend into the state apparatus, capture government and state power and reconstruct the state. A frontal, “dual-power strategy”, as Poulantzas ([1978] 2000: 263) argued, i.e. creating a parallel force external and in opposition to the state, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, leaves the wider power geometries unaddressed. Addressing these implies a conceptual extension of war of position: while Gramsci responded to the increased institutional complexity of modern capitalist states and societies (Egan 2019: 55–56), and understood the national as the “point of departure” for *internationalism* (Gramsci 1971: 240), the complexities of the global governance regime require the war of position to also extend to the *trans-* and *supranational*. The Venezuelan strategy illustrates this: state restructuring, from the bourgeois-colonial state towards the envisioned “Communal State”, is inseparable from the creation of new inter- and/or supranational counter-hegemonic institutions while seeking to transform existing ones, as exemplified in the creation of the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe and efforts of reconfiguring MERCOSUR, amongst others (Muhr 2011, 2017). This can combine with using hegemonic institutions, especially the United Nations apparatus, as for instance Nicaragua’s revolutionary Sandinista government of the 1980s demonstrated in its legal challenge to USA terrorism in the act of mining its harbours (International Court of Justice 1986).

In summary, counter-hegemonic bloc formation requires building up a socio-political base and cohering different ideas into a common sense. Such a common alternative vision needs to be constructed within the integral state, i.e. within the state apparatus and civil society. This requires leadership that is dialectically related with mass-based political party organisation, not necessarily as “vanguard” but through democratic centralism (Carroll 2016; Egan 2015; Gramsci 1971: 187–189; Harvey 2017; Purcell 2012; Raby 2006). Rather than a bureaucratic centralist party apparatus, this means overcoming the movement-versus-party dichotomy through political party formation (as a unified platform, e.g. for participation in elections) in dialectical relation with organised popular power, i.e. autonomous movements with a participatory and

internally pluralist and democratic structure (Raby, 2006: 132–196). The structural disadvantages of civil societal counter-hegemonic movements, in regard to limited material resources, time and logistics, adverse legislation and the state monopoly of power, can only be overcome by taking state power and strategically using available material capabilities. A progressive mobilisation of state power then means the state-promoted emancipation and organisation of the popular classes, through which the state drives its own transformation (Muhr 2012a). Finally, if the contemporary historical congruence between material forces, ideologies and institutions allows speaking of a TCC-led transnational and global historical bloc (Gill 2008), then state apparatuses, national and transnational civil societies, and the global governance regime simultaneously become strategic places, spaces and scales of social struggles in/for global counter-hegemonic historical bloc formation.

In 2009/2010, these ideas were instituted via an ALBA-TCP counter-hegemonic governance regime composed of two interdependent forces: inter-state political society, organised in a hierarchical structure composed of a Presidential Council and subordinate ministerial councils, committees and working groups that reflect the multiple dimensions of social transformation, drawn from member states; and networked (though not necessarily horizontal) transnational organised society, envisioned to convene in a Social Movements Council for building a social base by cohering local counter-hegemonic struggles from within the member territories as well as transnational-globally (Muhr 2012a, 2013a). This structure, although (to date) not fully operationalised despite regular summits and ministerial council meetings (e.g. ALBA-TCP 2020), provides a useful framing for exploring some of the socio-spatial implications embodied by it, in terms of how a counter-hegemonic politics of place-space-scale can drive a reconfiguration of global historical structure.

Strategy (III): A politics of place-space-scale

Socio-spatial relations are manifested in multiple forms and dimensions, including territory, place, scale, networks, locality, positionality and mobility. These are not separate categories, nor absolute ontological givens, but are socially produced in relation to each other, with none constituting *the* privileged spatiality for contentious politics (Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008; Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008). This foundational observation requires some explication. First, social production implies politics: the perpetual production and rearticulation of spatialities is mediated and continually contested through social struggle (e.g. Brenner 2019; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Purcell and Brown 2005; Swyngedouw 1997a). Second, in accordance with the focus of my research, the following elaborations concentrate on politics of place-space-scale as a strategically selective ensemble of socio-spatial relations (cf. Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008: 395), without suggesting that other spatialities are less relevant. For example, a politics of mobility and networking, as in the construction of the aforementioned transnational organised society, is integral to the production of this counter-hegemonic space. Third, hyphenating place-space-scale underscores co- and/or re-constitution through social processes, relations and connectivities associated with a distinct political project, such as the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe. Rather than placing emphasis on either – politics of place (Massey 2005), politics of space (Lefebvre 1991) or politics of scale (Smith 1992) – the triad

of place-space-scale offers a syntactic openness, beyond these categories. For the purpose of clarity, each is discussed separately as *politics of place beyond place*, *spatial politics*, and *scalar politics*.

Politics of place beyond place

Geographical place can be conceptualised in three fundamental ways (Agnew 2005, 2011; Castree et al. 2008; Cresswell 2004). First, as *location* or *site*, place is a specific point or node on a spatial surface, such as a city on a map with fixed coordinates, interconnected with other sites through interaction and movement between them. Second, as *locale* or material *setting*, such as buildings, roads and vehicles, place is where everyday-life activities and face-to-face social relations take place. Third, a *sense of place* is grounded in place-based individual and collective belonging, meaningful identification and attachment, which in turn makes each place unique. Massey's *global sense of place* integrates these three conceptions (Agnew 2005) while arguing that the character of a place derives from both its historical and present participation in multiple processes and social relations with elsewhere (people, commodities, ideas). Rather than a historically relatively isolated, introverted bounded space, place thus is a "meeting place" constructed through the unique mixture of influences that intersect in a particular location, irrespective of whether the place is a street, a region or a continent (Massey 1991: 28). Thus, as process, place is more like an "event" than a "discrete thing" (Paasi 2004: 538).

That the local and global are constitutively related – that the global is not somehow "out there" or "up there" as the metaphor of "the cloud" wants to convey, but that the global is locally produced in/from distinct places, and that the local is also globally produced – dissolves the local/global binary and enables transformative possibilities. As John Agnew argues, collective political agency "depends upon this 'open' and unbounded conception of place" (Agnew 2005: 91). First, as places are relationally constructed, they are neither homogenous nor static but have multiple identities as different social groups in a place are differentially located within the overall sets of socio-spatial relations, which also differentially condition collective agency (intentional or not so intentional) within these power geometries (Massey 1994: 121). For instance, Londoners' sense of place arguably differs according to class, race/ethnicity, gender/sex, and age (Massey 2007). While multiple identities and histories conjure in a place, the *dominant* identity or definition of a place, reflected in its social structure, political character or local culture, is the product of social struggle (Harvey 1996: 309, 316; Massey 1994: 120, 2007: 208). Therefore, conscious intervention, such as through state action as in Jessop's strategic-relational approach, can transform places.

Second, place is not simply the local. The identity of a place, its (re)constitution or (re)definition, is the product of local, within-place relations and processes and global processes and forces "stretched out over space" (Massey 1991: 28). As non-local forces are also place-based and interconnected with other places through (asymmetrical) power relations, action in one place affects – or can affect – other places (Massey 2007: 15–16, 167). Thus, Massey's power geometry expresses the dialectic of place-based collective agency and global structures (Agnew 2005). Since the social world is socially produced from places, a counter-hegemonic strategy has to

deploy a politics of place beyond place to transform the identities of local places elsewhere as well as their positionings (roles) within the wider power geometries (Massey 2007: 167, 171). While social action is always place-based, this should not get conflated with localism, or be delimited to place-bound action (Massey 2007).

An example from my research in Barrio Cruz Verde, Coro, in north-western Venezuela, illustrates these theoretical arguments for a “place-based but space-spanning politics” (Castree et al. 2008: 308). This *barrio* (a working-class neighbourhood) had derived its dominant identity from a history of deprivation, disorganisation and fragmentation. From 2004 on, students from the then newly-founded Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV), which is a state university that operates in all of the country’s 335 municipalities, assumed a key role in transforming local social relations through participatory action research. As an example of the emancipatory mobilisation of Venezuelan state power in legal, cultural, material and institutional terms, this seeks to foster relations of solidarity and collectivity in order to generate place-based organisation in the form of community (or communal) councils (*consejos comunales*) for local, popular self-management. These councils, of which there were 45,091 in mid-2020, operate as one instance in a politics of place beyond place within the national territory, forming the smallest organisational unit in the pluri-scalar processes of state restructuring towards the “Communal State” (Muhr 2011; República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2020; also, Domené-Painenao and Herrera 2019; Strønen 2017). In 2006, as an instance of place-based collective agency, the *barrio* community, supported by UBV Law students, appropriated an abandoned building to establish a communal health centre, from which the formation of several community councils in this neighbourhood followed. By 2009, reflecting growing inter-place linkages within the emergent ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe global South counter-space, the health centre had partially been staffed with Cuban doctors (Muhr 2008: 207–215, 2011: 159–166). The identity of this place, as well as the wider power geometries, were further transformed as local, place-based organised society actors, such as these, participated in the relational space of the Social Movements Council (Muhr 2013a).⁹

Spatial politics

David Harvey (2006) distinguishes between three co-existing, intertwined forms of space: *absolute space*, as fixed, bounded territory, such as administrative units, private property, and nation states; *relative space*, generated through the relative locations of “things” to each other; and *relational space*, which involves the social production of spatio-temporality. By taking government and/or state power, counter-hegemonic forces can gain control over the state’s territorial (absolute) space, including legislation and the monopoly of power at different levels of government. Political control, however, is contingent on the wider power geometries associated with global governance, manifested in a heterogeneity of social relations within and across national territories, such as networks of global corporate power (Agnew 2016:

⁹ This is only one example of place-(re)making and rescaling within the multidimensional strategy of Venezuelan state restructuring. Donald Kingsbury (2017), for example, although not explicitly framed by place theory, illustrates the (re)making of Caracas through counter-hegemonic state transport infrastructure policies.

200–202). A counter-hegemonic politics of space then needs not only concern itself with taking state power, but equally with transforming relative and relational space. In the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe, relative space-time has, for example, been transformed through newly created state transport systems, and the concomitant flows of people, goods and ideas, including direct sea and air connections between Latin America-Caribbean cities.¹⁰ These linkages change the relative locations of these places to each other while also transforming their identities, as these globally peripheral places had mostly only been indirectly connected with each other via the USA territory, and by airlines controlled by global capital.

Such connectivities not only reconfigure relative space, but simultaneously produce relational space, where social processes and relationships “*create/define* space and time” rather than occurring “*in* space and time” (Massey 2005: 8, 1994: 263, emphasis in original). As socially created space has a material as well as an ideological content, different socio-cultural practices produce different socio-spatial forms (Harvey 1996: 215; Lefebvre 1991: 31, 44). That is, the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe solidarity relations generate a particular spatial structure distinct to that of competitive, profit-driven global capitalism. Thus, different political projects produce “co-existing heterogeneity” (Agnew 2016: 201; Massey 2005: 8) – a multiplicity of spaces that “*interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another*” (Lefebvre 1991: 86, emphasis in original). For example, in El Salvador and Nicaragua, both global capitalist and ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe networks of petrol stations coexist (Muhr 2013b). They are material manifestations of distinct relational spaces that do not coincide with the absolute spaces (the national territories) they traverse. In fact, this counter-hegemonic relational space extended well beyond its absolute space (the joint national territories of the formal member states), for instance into Nicaragua before it joined, as well as into El Salvador and, as noted in the introduction, into the USA and UK (Muhr 2013b). Imagined as “transnational space” (Biersack 2006: 17–19), in this a politics of place beyond place and a politics of relational space become interwoven: a politics of “spatial (inter-place) relations” (Massey 2007: 193), or “flows of processes and things that extend beyond specific places to connect and constitute spaces and networks of relations” (Elwood, Lawson and Sheppard 2017: 749). In Nicaragua, for example, place-(re)making through establishing *ALBA Petróleos de Nicaragua* headquarters, *Misión Milagro* (Mission Miracle) ophthalmological centres, and thousands of *¡Yo, Sí Puedo!* (Sure I Can!) literacy points, conjoined with the production of relational space through, inter alia, flows of commodities, especially Venezuelan petroleum, and of people, above all Cuban literacy advisors and free-of-charge air transportation of deprived medical patients for treatment in Cuban and Venezuelan state hospitals (Muhr 2010b, 2015).¹¹ Massey captures this co-becoming of place-space as spatial politics in her definition of *the spatial* as:

constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of

¹⁰ Such as the Venezuelan state passenger airline CONVIASA, founded during Hugo Chávez’s presidency in 2004, see <http://www.conviasa.aero> (consulted 6th July 2021).

¹¹ For example, between 2006-2014, CONVIASA realised 506 flights transporting 78,416 *Misión Milagro* patients (<http://www.conviasa.aero/es/nosotros/misionmilagro>, consulted 6 September 2020).

national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. (Massey 1994: 4)

Scalar politics

Using scale as the structuring concept in pluri-scalar war of position should not suggest scale-centrism, but scale as both strategy and central methodological tool in spatial analysis (Brenner 2019: 25–28; Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008; Smith 1992; Swyngedouw 1997b; Purcell and Brown 2005). In the 1990s, the dominant conceptions of geographical scale in areal (scale as size, relative to other areas) and hierarchical terms (scale as fixed/static level or as “nested”) were challenged by a relational-processual notion of scale (Howitt 1993; Jonas 2015; Paasi 2004). The idea of scale as strategy, or scalar politics, depends on this latter move. In this view, scale structures or “differentiates space” (Marston and Smith 2001: 615). Categorisations include the body, household and other local and sub-national scales, such as buildings, municipal governments and ecological niches; national scales, especially nation-states; inter- and transnational scales, including cross-border and supranational regionalisms and transnational communities; and global scales, such as finance flows. As contingent outcomes of the dialectics between structural forces and social practices (Marston 2000: 220), scales and scalar arrangements are not absolute ontological givens. While scales may precede social action, they are not static, objective entities or moments to be filled with action but are perpetually (re)constituted through social praxis, regarding their content, extent, interrelations and relative importance (Blakey 2020; Brenner 2001, 2019: 47–50; Swyngedouw 1997a). Conversely, the way scales are produced can also shape social struggle and produce social outcomes (Herod 2011: 253; Howitt 2003: 146–147). Rather than just settings, scales are stakes in power struggles: “the scale of struggle and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin” (Smith 1992: 74). As Richard Howitt’s study of indigenous resistance explains:

... the social and political construction of scale is precisely social action – the concrete processes of organizing a political response, a vehicle for participation, recognition, and change. This is always ... a matter of links within and across scales to provide opportunities for transformation of existing power relations. What is crystal-clear ... is the need to link social, cultural, territorial, and institutional relations in constructing geographic scales at which social action may occur. (Howitt 2003: 150)

Scalar politics then denotes the conscious, strategic deployment of scale-making in the interest(s) of particular social groups, to legitimise or to contest existing power geometries (Jones, Sheppard and Sziarto 2017; Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008; Purcell and Brown 2005; Smith 1992; Swyngedouw 1997b). Building on Neil Smith’s “politics of scale”, scalar politics emphasises that it is not scale per se that is the object of contention, but particular, differentially scaled processes and institutionalised practices (MacKinnon 2010). Here, the inextricability of scalar politics and politics of place beyond place becomes explicit: while in any given power geometry places are distinctly and differentially scaled (Cresswell 2004: 54; Herod 2011: 41; Massey 2011: 4), counter-hegemonic place-based social forces, processes of empowerment and political organisation, can generate scales and reconfigure scalar arrangements (the prevailing power geometries) through their socio-spatial

interrelatedness with other places within and across scales (Brenner 2019; Howitt 2003). Thus, scaling is also part of place-making (Paasi 2004: 540). “Scaled places”, Eric Swyngedouw notes by reference to Massey’s global sense of place, then “become the embodiment of social relations of empowerment and disempowerment and the arena through and in which they operate” (Swyngedouw 1997b: 556).

Extending the example of the UBV, the establishment of new national (ministerial), subnational regional and municipal institutions across the entire national territory has generated a new scalar arrangement of the Venezuelan geographies of university education (a process termed “municipalisation”, via a satellite structure composed of eight UBV headquarters and over 1300 associated municipal centres). New inter- and transnational scales are produced through inter-governmental and inter-institutional agreements for non-commoditised student mobility across the global South – places that thus integrate in, while forming, this counter-hegemonic spatial structure (Muhr 2011: 208, 2016; also, Domené-Painenao and Herrera 2019; República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2019). Processes such as student mobility also drive the (re)constitution of political subjectivities and constituencies in the construction of transnational organised society. Simultaneously, local scale (re)construction beyond the material involves identity transformation, as previously argued with respect to UBV’s role in place-(re)making (a resignification of place), as well as at the scales of the body and the home by overcoming bodily-inscribed poverty and depreciation through social relations of solidarity and empowerment, through free-of-charge, universally accessible health care and education, and through political participation and cultural recognition (Muhr 2008, 2011). Place-(re)making, scale (re)construction and (re)scaling processes thus are mutually constitutive. For example, local scale *¡Yo, Sí Puedo!* literacy points relate with newly created institutions at national, international and supranational regional scales, such as the ALBA- TCP “Literacy and Post-literacy” project, the inter-state ALBA Bank and the Petrocaribe Development Fund (Muhr 2011, 2015). Transnational scales are produced, inter alia, through such cooperation relations as between the Venezuelan state petroleum company and Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran subnational scale actors (municipal governments, societal groups, organisations and individuals), strategically bypassing the neoliberal national governments of the day (Muhr 2010b; Muhr 2013b). A counter-hegemonic information structure, such as the multi-state teleSUR news network (Sapiezynska 2017; <https://www.telesurtv.net>), contributes to transforming individual and collective identities as part of place (re)making, while producing a range of scales by connecting local scale community media with national state TV stations and reaching individual users via the internet at a global scale. Rather than isolated instances (sometimes dubbed “pockets of resistance”), such counter-hegemonic practices and material manifestations become structurally interconnected within and across countries in the production of a global South counter-space.

While the strength of “multi-scalar” strategies as “simultaneously broadening the scale of action while drawing strength from reinforcing the local scale” has been stated (Jones, Leitner, Marston and Sheppard 2017: 143), *pluri*-scalar echoes Neil Brenner’s “plural usage of the ‘politics of scale’” as the socio-political production, contestation and/or reconfiguration of particular, differentiated spatial units and their positionalities in relation to other scales (Brenner 2001: 600). The concept conveys plurality beyond mere co-existence, that is, the simultaneous importance of interrelating and co-constituting scales or scalar practices (Mansfield 2005).

Furthermore, pluri-scalar war of position dissolves a rigid dichotomisation of hierarchical and relational-processual conceptions of scale. While much of the politics of scale theorising was grounded in movements-based contentious politics from outside and in opposition to the capitalist state and global governance structures, the counter-hegemonic pluri-scalar war of position strategically correlates state and non-state actors across the state/society complex: national and sub-national governments, institutions and inter-state relations, as for instance materialised in the ALBA Bank, as well as political parties and society actors, including organisations, associations, foundations, movements, cooperatives and such instances as literacy points. That is, while state scales, materialised in administrative, jurisdictional and regulatory institutions, are hierarchically ordered at different levels of government, a counter-hegemonic pluri-scalar war of position produces new scales of social organisation and governance. Concomitantly, this implies rescaling processes, i.e. a reorganisation of scalar structures as subaltern individuals and collectivities change their socio-spatial positionings relative to the hegemonic power geometries, thus transforming them, as the importance of other, pre-existing scales is reconfigured, or relativised. The aforementioned cases of transnational scale production across the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan/El Salvadoran territories is particularly illustrative, as in the latter two contexts the national government scale declined in relative importance through the empowerment of counter-hegemonic sub-national scale state and non-state actors and forces (Muhr 2010b, 2011). It is in these, and the other examples presented throughout this article, where the theoretical and methodological interrelatedness of counter-hegemonic politics – Jessop’s “key moments” of economic policies, social policies, rescaling and reshaping governance arrangements – and a politics of place-space-scale materialises.


Conclusion

This article has argued that progressive social transformation from, by and for the global South depends on counter-hegemonic forces capturing and mobilising state power for emancipatory ends, while strategically integrating war-of-manoeuvre-like place-based action in a pluri-scalar war of position, to transform the dominant power geometries across and beyond local places in the construction of a counter-spatiality. Inherently, this proposal seeks to add to contemporary efforts of constructing unity across diverse progressive actors, as an indispensable prerequisite for global counter-hegemonic historical bloc formation.

There are, however, limits to such a strategy. First, the tension between fixity and motion (fluidity) in socio-spatial relations and structures requires consideration (Brenner 2019; Elwood, Lawson and Sheppard 2017; MacKinnon 2010). Certainly, such scales as the nation-state do have greater fixity or durability than emerging counter-hegemonic scales. Also associated with path dependency (Brenner 2019: 107–108), this “dialectic of strategically selective structural constraints and structurally attuned strategic action” can be addressed through conscious deployment of a multidimensional, “polymorphic” strategy that, as in pluri-scalar war of position, seeks to reconfigure the existing historical geographies of spatial organisation simultaneously across multiple spatial forms, including territories, places, scales and networks (Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008: 395). Second, conjunctural specificity by

drawing from the case of Venezuela and the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe, can be viewed as limiting the strategy's wider relevance. Rather than seeking a blueprint, however, the dialogue between theory and practice in this article reiterates the importance of geography in/for progressive politics, while aiming at inspiring strategies in other contexts. Finally, a major limitation to democratic progressive social transformation, for which pluri-scalar war of position stands, is the increasing totalitarianisation of the neoliberal regime (Chauí 2021; Cupples and Glynn 2016), perhaps a reinvigoration of fascism altogether (Amin 2014). Repression, criminalisation, illegalisation and persecution increasingly target even critical-liberal individuals and organisations, not only so-called "radicals". This, however, underscores the imperative of capturing state power: to have the legal and coercive means at hand to control bourgeois "fascist-type reaction" (Poulantzas [1978] 2000: 264) to any effort of building a counter-hegemonic historical bloc. Even if government power is taken, as the elite-military coup d'état against Bolivian President Evo Morales of November 2019 once again has shown, strategies are needed to prevent the TCC from reacting "with unbridled terror" (Bookchin 2015: 149). Commonly a taboo among progressives, military alliances both within nations, such as the civic-military union in Venezuela, and internationally, as incipiently instituted in the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe (Muhr 2012b), are indispensable in/for any viable counter-hegemonic strategy.

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