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Strategy in/for Progressive Transformation: A Pluri-scalar War of Position

Thomas Muhr

Introduction

This chapter addresses the historical question of strategy in and for progressive transformation, against the accumulated power of global capital (Galtung, 1979; Kellogg, 2017). In the current geo-historical moment this means some form of democratic eco-socialism and raises the question of how collective action may generate a counter-hegemonic structure within the constraints of the prevailing historical structure. The chapter develops the concept of a "pluri-scalar war of position", previously defined as "multidimensional struggle over minds and strategic places at and across different interlocking [spatial] scales simultaneously in the construction of a historic bloc" (Muhr, 2013, p. 7). As a geographical relational approach (Elwood, Lawson, & Sheppard, 2017) to transformative praxis, this concept integrates neo-Gramscian with human geography theory and method and is empirically grounded in a socio-spatial ethnography of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA-TCP)/Petrocaribe, conducted between 2005 and 2012.[1] In this I have argued that a pluri-scalar war of position was strategically mobilised through a politics of place-space-scale during the era of Hugo Chávez's Latin America-Caribbean leadership. Starting from a place-based community in revolutionary Venezuela, over time my research extended to distinct though interconnected places within and across scales in other national territories (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Brazil). In this process the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe emerged as one "counter- space" (Lefebvre, 1991), and hence are here treated as a single integrated formation. In fact, as a global South counter-space (Muhr, 2016a), counter-hegemonic solidarity relations extended transnationally also into places in imperialist territories, such as in the UK and USA. In London, Venezuelan petroleum was used to subsidise public transport for low-income Londoners in exchange for technical expertise in urban planning, accompanied by cultural exchanges (Massey, 2011). In the USA, Venezuela provided below-the-market-price heating oil and development project funding for marginalised communities (Muhr, 2013).

The pluri-scalar war of position, with its emphasis on emancipatory collective agency jointly by state and non-state actors, strategically transforms what Doreen Massey termed power geometries (e.g., Massey, 1991). The concept of "power geometry" was

[1] This chapter draws from my PhD research (Muhr, 2008a), published i n a revised version (Muhr, 2011a), and related publications as referenced throughout. The original PhD thesis contains photographic documentation of some of the place-based examples mentioned in this chapter.

mobilised by the Venezuelan government in 2007, in the effort of transforming the geographies of power relations within and beyond the national territory. Power geometry embodies the idea that 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 therefore a precondition for emancipatory political action. Counter-hegemonic strategy then seeks to change the socio-spatial positionings of subaltern individuals and collectivities relative to these geographies of power (Massey, 2009).

This chapter synthesises, while theoretically refining, the pluri-scalar war of position to reiterate the importance of place-space-scale as objects of inquiry for transformative politics. It also aims to make the concept more visible for progressive academia and activism. A brief discussion of contemporary strategies for progressive transformation lays the foundation for an exploration of the theoretical elements of a pluri-scalar war of position, bringing together neo-Gramscian concepts with critical human geography. Thus, I argue for the importance of capturing state power on the one hand, and for a politics of place-space-scale to transform the existing power geometries on the other. This requires some initial clarifications and caveats. First, clearly, the rich and contested discussions in the fields of knowledge drawn from cannot be recounted here. Rather, key theoretical arguments are purposefully selected in accordance with the objective of this chapter. Second, the concept of the *social* deployed here, such as in social relations, social structure and socio-spatial dynamics, assumes a broader understanding than the social relations of production, as concomitant multidirectional and dialectical economic, political, cultural, ecological, legislative and infrastructural relations, flows, processes and material and discursive practices. Third, use of the past tense regarding instances of the pluri-scalar war of position should not suggest affirmation of hegemonic representations of a collapse of the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe. Certainly, despite reversals and setbacks, the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe summits remain committed to "concerted political action" (ALBA-TCP, 2019), and the Caribbean Community continues to consider ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe to be central to Caribbean development (CARICOM, 2019).

Strategy: contemporary approaches

Contemporary critical scholarship addresses the issue of strategy in principally two ways: on the one hand, to overcome fragmentation among the global left, "meta-ideological" frameworks seek to bridge divergent visions among alternative transformative praxes and projects, to create new and coherent "politically productive relationships" across political and geographical settings (Hosseini, Gills, & Goodman, 2017), "convergence across difference" (Carroll, 2016), "networks of equivalence" (Purcell, 2012), or "unity in diversity" (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2015). Such unifying tendencies are directed at constructing a Gramscian counter-hegemonic bloc that encompasses political forces in formal power structures, in the form of progressive states or governments and political parties, and wider social forces including grassroots movements, trade unions, think tanks and non-governmental organisations

(NGOs). On the other hand, explicit engagement with strategy by such scholar-activist forums as the Socialist Register (Panitch, Albo, & Chibber, 2012) and the Special Forum responding to the late Samir Amin's renewed call for a Fifth International (see Gills & Chase-Dunn, 2019), despite problematising the inherent methodological nationalism in the very notion of *Internationale* and addressing tensions between "horizontal" and "vertical" organisational forms, rarely transcend a hypothetical-normative, imperative tone in terms of what *should* be done (e.g., Álvarez & Chase-Dunn, 2019; Juego, 2019; Karatasli, 2019; Tyrala, 2019). As strategic objectives are formulated, however, the methodological-processual question of *how* to get there remains underexplored. That is, how to build alternative organisational structures, against bourgeois cultural hegemony and the accumulated material and institutional power of global capital.

Implicitly, at times explicitly, this literature responds to what may be categorised as *anarchist-autonomist* and *critical-liberal* approaches to progressive transformation (Carroll, 2006, 2016; Cox & Nilsen, 2014). The first, often by reference to the Zapatistas in Mexico and anti-/alter-globalization movements (Graeber, 2002; Rousselle & Evren, 2011), and more recently the Occupy movement, advocates isolated local activism and micro-political episodic events embedded within an oppositional stance to the state, power, hierarchy/leadership and organisation (Carroll, 2006, 2016; Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Harvey, 2017; Muhr, 2010; Purcell, 2012; Roberts, 2012). The second, in the 1960s and 1970s associated with conscientisation and grassroots empowerment for organised, collective, movement-based, structural transformation, has been instrumentalised in "participatory development" as actor-centric, local-scale capacity-building while maintaining critical-liberal claims to grassroots democracy and local empowerment (e.g., Cornwall, 2011; Hickey & Mohan, 2004).

The voluntarism and localist reductionism underlying both approaches undermine their potential to generate sustained structural transformation, and these ontological limitations have been challenged. For example, critical alter-globalisation and globalisation-from-below literature occasionally did call for counter-hegemonic political alliances between states and social movements (Evans, 2008). From within development studies, critiques reengaged with structure/agency and state/society dialectics while borrowing such geographic concepts as "global sense of place" (Mohan & Stokke, 2000) and "multi-scaled strategies" (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Under-theorised as these efforts were, they did not destabilise "the local trap" and the essentialist assumption that there is something inherently progressive or empowering about the local scale (Purcell & Brown, 2005; also, Featherstone, Ince, MacKinnon, Strauss, & Cumbers, 2012). In fact, in the course of intense socio-spatial theorising over the past decades, critical geographers have consistently critiqued the activist catchphrase *think globally, act locally* as a strategically disempowering ontological binary, arguing instead that contentious politics has to operate at multiple scales simultaneously (Herod, 2011, p. xiii; Howitt, 1998; Mansfield, 2005; Massey, 2007, p. 15, pp. 166-167; Smith, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997; Taylor, 1994). Prior to exploring the theoretical underpinnings of these critiques through a politics of place-space-scale, the neo-Gramscian relational ontology and method needs discussing.

Constructing counter-hegemony

The historical division of the revolutionary left between offensive and coalition-building or united-front approaches (Kellogg, 2017) is captured in Antonio Gramsci's distinction between the "war of manoeuvre", as a revolutionary "frontal attack" on the state when state power is concentrated, and the "war of position", as strategic collective action when the power of the dominant group(s) is diffused in the state/society complex (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 237-238). For Gramsci, a war of position constituted the only viable strategy for socialist transformation in the West due to bourgeois hegemony as a regime in which a "fundamental social group" (class) successfully constructs the subalterns' active consent to their conception of the world, while coercion is enforced as a disciplinary measure (Gramsci, 1971, 12, pp. 229-241). An all-pervasive ideology, or hegemonic worldview, which appears as "common sense" as it becomes universalised, functions as an "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 by including some of the interests of subordinate classes (concession-making), whilst ensuring the leadership of the dominant class (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 328, 376; Mouffe, 1979, p. 181). As Susan George observed, in the construction of neoliberal hegemony during the post-Second World War era, the transnational capitalist class (TCC), or "Gramscian right", in contrast to the "progressive movement", had long understood the "war of ideas" and systematically established "intellectual institutions" to achieve "cultural hegemony" (George, 1997).

War of position is organically linked to historical bloc formation (Carroll, 2006). An historical bloc (also, historic bloc) is formed through "a historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies" (Gill, 2008, p. 60). This is not simply a class alliance, but a strategy that coheres "a variety of different class interests" across diverse classes, strata and social groups (Bieler & Morton, 2004, p. 90). This allows the dominant class to position itself as the expression of society's "permanent collective will" for strategic political action (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 194, 263, 267). The resulting "integral state", or state/society complex, expresses a "dialectical unity" of political society and civil society as an organically unified state-form (Thomas, 2010, p. 137). The state apparatus becomes integrated with the so-called private sphere, such as educational, religious and corporate capitalist institutions, including the mainstream media, as well as inter-governmental bodies and the family (Bieler & Morton, 2004; Carroll, 2016).

Robert Cox's non-deterministic method of historical structure lays out an ontology for analysing hegemonic world orders and counter-hegemonic possibilities (see Sinclair, 2016, for further elaborations). For Cox, hegemony is 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, p. 151). 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 & Morton, 2004). Within each of three dialectically constitutive spheres, which he characterises as a triangle of states, social forces and world orders, hegemony is permanently under (re-)construction. These dynamics open possibilities for constructing counter-hegemony: within each of the three spheres of action there are a set of mutually constitutive

forces: material capabilities, productive and reproductive, competing ideas and institutions (Cox, 1981). These are products and facilitators of world order, and change can emerge from any of these three forces (Cox, 2007). Although the historical structure, or "framework for action", constrains action, collective action can generate an emerging, alternative configuration of forces, a "rival structure" (Cox, 1981). The ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe, for instance, mobilises material capabilities, Venezuelan petroleum, for counter-hegemonic transformation.

Cox accords with Gramsci that "in the long run" global structural transformation can "only" be generated through a war of position (Cox, 1996, p. 140). A war of manoeuvre, in the form of strikes or anarchist-autonomous struggles, might be tactically appropriate, even necessary, however always within the politics of a war of position (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 229, 232). For Nicos Poulantzas, democratic socialist transformation was not a "straight choice" between war of manoeuvre and war of position, but rather a product of engagement with the state apparatus as a "strategic site of political struggle" (rather than as a "monolithic bloc") (Poulantzas, 2000[1978], pp. 128-135, 254, 258). Bob Jessop's strategic relational approach reiterates that the state is neither a unified subject nor "a thing" but an ensemble of social relations and hegemonic institutions within the state/society complex (2008, p. 3). As a theoretical framework for the study of state formation and transformation, the heuristic concepts of "structurally inscribed strategic selectivity" and "strategically calculated structurally oriented action" are introduced into the material and discursive structure/agency dialectic (Jessop, 2008, p. 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, p. 50)*

As state forms, due to the social embeddedness of state apparatuses, are not determined, an emancipatory mobilisation of state power can occur through "four key moments": economic policies; social policies (broadly defined); re-scaling (re-organisation) of state functions, powers and institutional forms; and changing modes of global and regional governance (Jessop, 2008, pp. 5-15). While political possibilities are shaped by the state form, "struggles over state power also matter" (Jessop, 2008, p. 5). Legislative and juridical power, in addition to the monopoly of violence and policing, rest within the political state apparatus and define a state's positioning in relation to inter-governmental institutions, transnational corporate bodies and other organisations of global governance. A counter-hegemonic war of position, therefore, must not restrict itself to struggles within civil society but has to extend into the state apparatus, capture state power and reconstruct the state. A frontal, "dual-power strategy" (Poulantzas, 2000[1978], p. 263), which is geared to creating a power external and parallel to the state, such as the Zapatistas, leaves the wider power geometries unaddressed.

In summary, building a counter-hegemonic bloc requires a "sociopolitical base" and "elements of cohesion" (Cox, 1981, p. 144; Cox, 1996, p. 140). A common alternative

vision needs to be constructed within the integral state, that is, within political society, or the state apparatus, and civil society. This depends upon leadership, which especially with regard to taking state power requires forms of non-vanguardist political party organisation (Carroll, 2016; Gramsci, 1971, pp. 187-189; Harvey, 2017; Purcell, 2012). The structural disadvantages faced by civil societal counter-hegemonic movements, regarding material resources, time and logistics, but also 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, 2012c). Finally, if the contemporary "historical congruence" between material forces, ideologies and institutions allows speaking of a TCC-led "transnational historical bloc" (Gill, 2008), then state apparatuses, transnational civil societies and the global governance regime simultaneously become strategic places, spaces and scales of social, political, cultural, ecological and economic struggles. The counter-hegemonic war of position must be "at once internal and global" (Cox, 1996, p. 232), which implies the formation of a global counter-hegemonic historical bloc.

In 2009/2010, these ideas were instituted via an ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe counter-hegemonic governance regime, composed of two dialectically related forces. First, inter-state political society is organised in a fixed, hierarchical power 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. Second, networked transnational organised society was envisioned to convene in a Social Movements Council, designed to build a socio-political base by cohering local, isolated counter-hegemonic social struggles from within the member territories, as well as globally (Muhr, 2011b, 2012c, 2013). This structure, although (to date) never fully operationalised, provides a useful framing for exploring some of the socio-spatial relations and processes embodied by it, in terms of how a counter-hegemonic politics of place-space-scale can transform the existing power geometries.

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, & Jones, 2008; Jones & Woods, 2013; Leitner, Sheppard, & Sziarto, 2008). This foundational observation requires some elaboration. First, social production implies politics: the perpetual production and re-articulation of spatialities is mediated and continually contested through social struggle (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Purcell & Brown, 2005; Russell, 2019; Swyngedouw, 1997). Second, in accordance with the empirical focus of this chapter, the following discussion concentrates on the politics of place-space-scale as a strategically selective ensemble of socio-spatial relations (cf. Jessop et al., 2008, p. 395), without suggesting that other spatialities are less relevant. For example, a politics of networking and mobility across space-time, both within and across scales, as in the construction of

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 the various social processes, relations and connectivities associated with a distinct political project. Rather than placing emphasis on either a "politics of place" (Massey, 2005), a "politics of space" (Lefebvre, 1991) or a "politics of scale" (Smith, 1992), the triad of place-space-scale offers a syntactic openness, beyond these categories. In what follows I discuss each of these three dimensions separately.

Politics of place beyond place

Geographical place can be conceptualised in three fundamental ways (Agnew, 2005, 2011; Castree, 2009; Cresswell, 2004). First, it can be seen as a "location" or "site", 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, place can be interpreted as a "locale" or material "setting", such as buildings and roads, where everyday face-to-face social relations take place. Third, a "sense of place" is grounded in place-based individual and collective belonging, meaningful attachment and identification, which in turn makes each place unique. Massey's "global sense of place" integrates these three conceptions while arguing that the character of a place derives from historical and current participation in multiple processes and social relations with "the wider world" (Massey, 1991, p. 28). Rather than a historically relatively isolated, introverted bounded space, place is thus defined as a "meeting place", constructed through the unique mixture of influences that intersect at a particular point (Massey, 1991, 2011; also, Elwood et al., 2017, p. 749).

Massey's conception dissolves the local/global binary and enables an openness to transformation. As Agnew argues, collective political agency "depends upon this 'open' and unbounded conception of place" (Agnew, 2005, p. 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 within these power geometries (Massey, 1994, p. 121). For instance, Londoners' sense of place is likely to differ according to class, race or ethnicity, age gender and sexuality. That is, places are constituted by difference and conflict. 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 contestation and struggle (Harvey, 1996, pp. 309, 316; Massey, 1994, p. 120, 2007, p. 208). From this perspective, 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 structural forces and processes "stretched out over space" (Massey, 1991, p. 28, 2007). 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, pp. 15-16, 167). Thus, Massey's concept of power

geometry expresses the dialectic between place-based collective agency and global structures (Agnew, 2005; Castree, 2009), and points to the necessity for a politics of place beyond place in order to transform the identities of local places as well as their positionings within the wider power geometries (Massey, 2007, pp. 167, 171). While social action is always place-based, this should not be conflated with localism, or delimited to place-bound action (Featherstone et al., 2012; Massey, 2007; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009).

An empirical example from a Venezuelan *barrio* (a working-class neighbourhood) illustrates these theoretical arguments (see Muhr, 2008a, 2011a). This barrio derived its dominant identity from a history of disorganisation and fragmentation. From 2004 on, students from the then newly founded Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV), which operates in all municipalities in the national territory, assumed a key role in transforming local social relations through participatory action research. The objective of the emancipatory mobilisation of Venezuelan state power in legal, material and institutional terms is to foster relations of solidarity and collectivity in order to generate place-based structures in the form of community councils for local, popular within-place self-management. These councils operate as an instance of a politics of place beyond place within the national territory, forming the smallest organisational unit in the pluri-scalar processes of state restructuring. In 2006, as an instance of place-based collective agency, the barrio community, legally supported by UBV Law students, appropriated an abandoned building to establish a communal health centre, as a first step towards the formation of several community councils in this neighbourhood. By 2009, reflecting inter-place linkages within the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe space, the health centre was partially staffed with Cuban doctors under the national government's solidarity cooperation with Cuba and the associated nation-wide health mission, Misión Barrio Adentro. 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, 2013).

Politics of space

Harvey (2006) distinguishes between three co-existing, dialectically intertwined forms of space: absolute space, as fixed, bounded territory; 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 state power, counter-hegemonic forces can gain control over the state's territorial space, including legislation and the monopoly of power at different levels of government. However, political control is contingent on wider power geometries manifested in a heterogeneity of social relations within and across these absolute spaces, such as networks of global corporate power (Agnew, 2016, pp. 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 goods, people and ideas, including direct sea and air connections between Caracas and Managua and Caribbean capitals. These links 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 via the USA territory, and by airlines controlled by global capital (Muhr, 2017, 2019).

Such connectivities not only transform relative space, but simultaneously produce relational space, viewed as a "product of interrelations": these can be understood as "embedded material practices", where social processes and relationships "*create/define* space and time" rather than simply occurring "*in* space and time" (Massey, 2005, p. 8, 1994, p. 263, emphasis in original). As socially created space has a material as well as an ideological content (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 31, 44), different socio-cultural practices produce different socio-spatial forms (Harvey, 1996, p. 215). Conversely, space is intrinsic to the workings of society and hence different political projects produce "co-existing heterogeneity" (Agnew, 2016, pp. 201; Massey, 2005). As Lefebvre put it, there is a multiplicity of spaces that "*interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another*" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86, emphasis in original).

For example, in the El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan territories, both global capitalist and ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe networks of petrol stations coexist (Muhr, 2012a). They are material manifestations of distinct relational spaces that do not coincide with the absolute spaces they traverse. In fact, the ALBA-TCP relational space extended well beyond its immediate membership, for instance into Nicaragua before it joined, and into El Salvador and, as mentioned, into the USA and UK (Muhr, 2008b, 2012a, 2013). As a "transnational space" (Biersack, 2006, pp. 17-19), in this a politics of place beyond place and a politics of relational space become interwoven, creating "flows of processes and things that extend beyond specific places to connect and constitute spaces and networks of relations" (Elwood et al., 2017, p. 749). In Nicaragua, for instance, place-making through establishing literacy points, ophthalmological centres and ALBA Petróleos de Nicaragua headquarters, conjoined with a politics of "spatial (inter-place) relations" (Massey, 2007, p. 193). This was manifested in flows of commodities, especially Venezuelan petroleum, and of people, such as Cuban literacy advisors and free-of-charge air transport for deprived medical patients to Cuba and Venezuela (Muhr, 2008b). Massey captures this co-constitution or co-becoming of place-space 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 national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace.
>
> *(Massey, 1994, p. 4)*

Scalar politics

Using scale as the structuring concept in "pluri-scalar war of position" should not suggest scale-centrism, but scale as strategy (Purcell & Brown, 2005; Smith, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997). In the 1990s, the dominant conceptions of geographical scale in terms of both relative areal size and hierarchical arrangement, as fixed or as "nested"

for instance, were challenged by relational-processual notions of scale (Howitt, 1998; 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 & Smith, 2001). Categorisations include the body, the household and other local and sub-national scales, such as buildings, municipal governments and ecological niches; national scales, especially nation-state governments; international and transnational scales, for instance cross-border 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), scales and scalar arrangements are not absolute ontological givens. They are nor static, objective entities or moments to be filled with action, but are perpetually (re)constituted through social praxis, in terms of their content, extent, interrelations and relative importance (Brenner, 2001; Herod, 2011; Swyngedouw, 1997). Conversely, the way scales are produced can also shape social struggle, that is, they can produce social outcomes (Herod, 2011, p. 253; Howitt, 2003, pp. 146-147). As scales become stakes rather than mere settings in social power struggles, then "the scale of struggle and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin" (Smith, 1992, p. 74).

Scalar politics then denotes the conscious deployment of scale construction and reconstruction in the interest(s) of particular social groups, to legitimise or contest existing power geometries (Jones, Leitner, Marston, & Sheppard, 2017; Leitner et al., 2008; Purcell & Brown, 2005; Smith, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997). Scalar politics emphasises that it is commonly particular, differentially scaled processes and institutionalised practices that are the object of contention, rather than scale per se (MacKinnon, 2011). Here, the intertwinedness of scalar politics and a politics of place beyond place becomes explicit: while in any given power geometry places are distinctly and differentially scaled (Cresswell, 2004, p. 54; Herod, 2011, p. 41; Massey, 2011, p. 4), counter-hegemonic place-based social forces, processes of empowerment and political organisation, can generate scales and reconfigure scalar arrangements and power geometries through their socio-spatial interrelatedness with other places within and across scales (Howitt, 2003; Paasi, 2004). Scaled places, as Eric Swyngedouw notes by reference to Massey, then "become the embodiment of and the arena through and in which social relations of empowerment and disempowerment operate" (Swyngedouw, 1997, p. 144).

Building on the example of the UBV, a new scalar arrangement of the geographies of university education in the Venezuelan national territory was generated by establishing institutions at national and subnational-regional and municipal scales, while producing new transnational scales through non-commoditised student mobility from places across Latin America-Caribbean and Africa – places that thus become integrated in this counter-hegemonic spatiality (Muhr, 2011a, p. 208; 2016b). Local scale (re)construction beyond the material involves identity transformation, as argued with respect to UBV's role in place-making, 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 social empowerment, including through health care, education, political participation and cultural recognition (Muhr, 2008a 2011a). Within the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe space, place-making, scale construction and re-scaling processes are mutually constitutive. Local Nicaraguan literacy points relate with institutions at supra-national regional scales, such as the ALBA Bank, as an inter-state institution, as well as the Social Movements Council where place-based

movements coalesced at regional if not global scales; these are interrelated with transnational scale production, such as through cooperation between the Venezuelan state petroleum company and Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran municipal governments, bypassing the neoliberal national governments of the day while establishing socialist forms of socio-productive organisation (see Muhr, 2008b, 2011a, 2012a, 2013).

These examples illustrate the strategic advantage of "multi-scalar" approaches, as "simultaneously broadening the scale of action while drawing strength from reinforcing the local scale" (Jones et al., 2017. p. 143). The concept of a pluri-scalar war of position, however, echoes Neil Brenner's "plural usage of the 'politics of scale'" as the production, contestation and/or reconfiguration of particular, differentiated spatial units and their positionalities in relation to other scales (Brenner, 2001, p. 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, the concept of 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 in opposition to the capitalist state and global governance structures (e.g., Leitner et al., 2008; Swyngedouw, 1997), the counter-hegemonic pluri-scalar war of position strategically integrates state and non-stare 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 (organisations, associations, foundations, movements), as in the Nicaraguan, El Salvadoran, London and USA cases. That is, while state scales, materialised through administrative, jurisdictional and regulatory institutions and structures, are hierarchically ordered, the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe counter-hegemonic pluri-scalar war of position has involved the construction of new scales of social organisation with new socio-spatial content and governance. Concomitantly, this implies 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 relative importance of other, pre-existing scales is reconfigured. 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. It is in these, and the other examples presented throughout this chapter, where the theoretical and methodological interrelatedness of counter-hegemonic politics – Jessop's "key moments" of economic policies, social policies, re-scaling and transforming governance arrangements – and a politics of place-space-scale materialises.

Conclusion: limits to "pluri-scalar war of position"

This chapter has argued that progressive social transformation depends on counter-hegemonic forces capturing and mobilising state power for emancipatory ends. It argues for structurally integrating place-based action within 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 the formation of a global counter-hegemonic historical bloc. The remainder of this conclusion briefly outlines some limits to this strategy.

First, the tension between fixity and fluidity in socio-spatial relations and structures requires consideration (Brenner, 2004; Elwood et al., 2017; MacKinnon, 2011). Certainly, scales such as the nation-state arguably do have greater fixity than emerging counter-hegemonic scales. This "dialectic of strategically selective structural constraints and structurally attuned strategic action" can be addressed through a "polymorphic" strategy that, as in the 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 et al., 2008, p. 395). Second, drawing from a distinct historical conjuncture, that is, historically specific geographies of counter-hegemonic socio-spatial practices and relations can be viewed as limiting the strategy's wider relevance. Rather than seeking a blueprint, however, the dialogue between theory and practice in this chapter reiterated the importance of geography for progressive politics, while aiming at inspiring strategies in other contexts. Finally, a major limitation to democratic progressive social transformation, including any pluri-scalar war of position, is the current context of what William Robinson conceptualises as "global police state" (Robinson, 2018). Authoritarian politics is now manifested in increasing repression, criminalisation, illegalisation and persecution of progressive actors, including even critical-liberal protagonists and organisations. As argued, however, this underscores the importance of capturing state power. On the one hand there is a clear necessity for any (global) counter-hegemonic bloc facing bourgeois "fascist-type reaction" to have the legal and coercive means "to prevent the bourgeois state from returning in full force with unbridled terror" (Poulantzas, 2000[1978], p. 264; Bookchin, 2015, p. 183). On the other hand, commonly a taboo among progressives, military alliances both within nations, such as the "civic-military integration" in Venezuela, and internationally, as incipiently instituted in the ALBA-TCP/Petrocaribe (Muhr, 2012b), are indispensable in and for any viable counter-hegemonic strategy.

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