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Beyond the Big City: The Question of Size in Planning for Urban Sustainability

Henry Way^{a,*}

^a*James Madison University, 801 Carrier Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22807, USA*

Abstract

This paper develops a theory of size (distinct from scale) as a means to better understand how urban contexts shape and are shaped by various aspects of sustainability and livability. After considering the question of size in a broad conceptual way, the analysis turns to how size has been considered within urban geography. The paper then explores the opportunities and challenges for a size-based analysis of urban livability and sustainability and the questions posed by the experience of smaller cities. This discussion is a prospectus of potential areas of consideration and research on the issue of size, sustainability, and livability.

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1. Introduction

This paper introduces the question of city size to the consideration of urban sustainability, livability, and associated agendas. Seemingly neglected, or at least under-explored and under-theorized, the ways city size might contextualize and shape urban policies and development in these areas is worth examining. The proper consideration of the potential effects of size (in a range of forms) might add a further dimension to the ways in which these sustainability and livability-related agendas might be better spatially contextualized and locally grounded. It may help avoid some of the pitfalls of applying policies generated “elsewhere,” transferred problematically to cities of different sizes, and could contribute to a more locally developed sustainability plan better contextualized by the urban environment in which it

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-540-568-8186; fax: +1-540-568-2768.

E-mail address: wayha@jmu.edu

is deployed. More broadly, this paper develops Robinson's argument that "the spatial imagination adequate to capturing cityness – in its diverse forms – must necessarily be multiple and sophisticated"¹ by adding this further spatial dimension, size, to the consideration of urban processes.

In posing the question of how size matters to urban environmental and quality of life agendas and policies, this paper offers three related discussions. First, size itself as an epistemological and ontological spatial element will be considered, especially in relation to questions of the idea of "scale". The intersections of size, cities and urban geographical research will then be discussed, with a particular focus on how medium and small sized cities have been investigated. As an example of how size, urbanism, and sustainability and livability interact, the paper then suggests a range of ways and potential questions for how sustainability and livability agendas might be shaped by the size variable in smaller and mid-sized cities, drawing additionally on the author's research in a small city. This paper is very much an opening discussion of the question of "size", highlighting potential areas for further examination, and possible routes for more active research and future sustainable urban planning.

2. Theorizing "size"

In their broadside against the concept of "scale" in human geography, Marston et al

² reveal one of the factors underlying the opacity of "size" in the spatial understanding. Their first rationale for doing away with the scale concept is that "there is substantial confusion surrounding the meaning of scale as *size* – what is also called a horizontal measure of 'scope' or 'extensiveness' – and scale as *level* – a vertically imagined, 'nested hierarchical ordering of space'"³ Size is obscured in two ways: broadly, by the lack consensus about what is meant by scale, and the conflation of these two orientations (horizontal and vertical); and more particularly by the hierarchical (vertical) conception of scale being the dominant frame in geographical analyses. Geographical (rather than cartographic) scale, in its variegated conceptions, has been a central organizing, analytical, and critical idea in human geography, but one which may have hidden the ontological (and perhaps epistemological) role of size.

Marston et al draw on the works of Brenner, Agnew, Smith, Thrift and others to illustrate how two of the fundamental understandings of scale might be inconsistent. They introduce scale as a "hierarchical scaffolding", a set of vertical differentiations, a spatial "level", but also as something that does not exist (an "intuitive [fiction]" to quote Smith), not an ontological structure, but an "epistemological one – a way of knowing or apprehending"⁴. These juxtapositions may illustrate the confused notion of what scale may be, but together they also represent the way size might be thought of as fundamentally different from scale. Size, commonly defined as physical magnitude, extent, bulk, or relative or proportionate dimensions, is primarily not generated from vertical differentiation, hierarchical scaffolding or nesting. "Size" instead starts first with intrinsic quantities (such as area, population, volume, etc.). Scale, as commonly framed in geography, emerges relationally (the "local" is local in relation to the "global", for instance), whereas size has an autonomous foundation based on absolute measures, the relative component (large, small, etc.) only defined secondarily by that primary quantitative foundation. Size, one could say in short, is foundationally intrinsic; scale, essentially relational.

The second differentiation of size from scale is illustrated by the second set of descriptions cited by Marston et al. Whereas scale can be quite easily construed as an epistemological lens, an analytical framework, or conceptual fiction, (or heuristic, if we're being more charitable), size *does* have an ontological dimension. It is typically very material (number of people, volume of objects, territorial extent, etc.),[†] and that that materiality can be seen as a fundamental shaping context for social and environmental processes in a given place. Size is certainly not merely an abstract conception helping organize the understanding of the human world. It is a human creation in the sense that measurement is a human artifice, and to the extent that dimensions have to be defined and delineated (which, as geographers, we know is not a straightforward task). But, at its core, size describes a set of material, measurable circumstances in which things and processes exist.

[†] One can also argue that it can be produced immaterially: visions, ideas, etc. can be "sized" too; size can certainly exist as a mental construct. This paper will address these ideas in a partial way, but a consideration of the imaginative or discursive creation of "size" remains forthcoming.

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