



The ebb and flow of power: British flood risk management and the politics of scale



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rescaling of flood risk management (FRM) in Britain over the past 70+ years. Drawing on recent research in geography and elsewhere – which has engaged the politics of scale literature with the rescaling of water and environmental governance – we seek to illustrate the mis-match between the rescaling of the geographical unit of management and the nexus of power and control of those engaged in FRM. For those seeking positive examples of multi-level decentralised governance in water resource management, where power is shared across the spatial scales, our historical analysis struggles to find evidence. Rather, despite attempts to ‘hollow-out’ the state through the scaling ‘out’ and ‘down’ of FRM responsibilities, our evidence suggests that the control over key decision-making tools, resources and other modalities of power remains in the hands of a few key national-level decision-makers; it is the responsibility that has been decentralised, not least to those at risk of flooding. The application of the politics of scale theorising in a FRM context is innovative and, importantly, our case study demonstrates that such politics does not have to involve open conflict but is much more subtle in its deployment of power.

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1. Introduction

Significant recent literature has explored the spatial scale of environmental governance (e.g. Meadowcroft, 2002; Evans, 2004; Bulkeley, 2005; Mansfield, 2005; Reed and Bruyneel, 2010), the governance of natural resources generally (e.g. Zimmerer, 1994, 2000; Ribot, 2002; Rist et al., 2007) and the governance of water in particular (e.g. Swyngedouw, 1997a; Perreault, 2005; Norman and Bakker, 2009; Dore and Lebel, 2010; Lebel, 2006; Norman, 2012; Norman et al., 2012a; Vogel, 2012; Cohen and Davidson, 2011; Dore et al., 2012). Embedded therein is an acknowledgement of the importance of a scalar dimension in water governance, and that scale is an object of inquiry in its own right, albeit undertheorised (Brown and Purcell, 2005).

Scale, scalar politics and the politics of scale have received significant re-evaluation, many challenging the meaning of scale, how it should be conceptualised, and the different ways actors engage in scalar politics (e.g. Swyngedouw, 1997a,b, 2000; Marston, 2000; Brenner, 2001; Brown and Purcell, 2005; Marston et al., 2005). Whilst Marston’s call for a flat ontology and a ‘geography without scale’ has been vigorously debated (e.g. Leitner and Miller, 2007; Jonas, 2006; Collinge, 2006; Escobar, 2007), evidence

suggests that the dynamics of scale remain an important analytical lens for exploring natural resources governance (Norman and Bakker, 2009; Feitelson and Fischhendler, 2009).

Changing water governance across the globe reflects this thinking, entailing, amongst other characteristics, devolved decision-making through increased participation, a rise in community-level organisations and new decision-making processes: transformations from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ that have emphasised the value of a scalar perspective (see Norman et al., 2012a; Swyngedouw, 1997a, 1999, 2002; Dore and Lebel, 2010; Lebel et al., 2005; Dore et al., 2012; Molle and Mamanpoush, 2012; Sneddon and Fox, 2006; Perreault, 2005; Norman and Bakker, 2009; Cohen, 2012; Mackinnon and Tetzlaff, 2009). However, a parallel scalar perspective has not yet been applied to the flood risk management (FRM) context.

This paper aims to fill this void, by exploring how the scalar constructions of FRM in Britain have evolved, the power dynamics and social coalitions that have influenced this process across different scales, and the processes through which scales have been ‘fixed’ (see Boyle, 2002), by which actor coalitions, when, and the mechanisms used in this process: the modalities of control. By “the politics of scale” here we mean the use of scalar dimensions in arguments¹ within political processes to enhance the influence

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¹ Others might describe “fights”, “struggles” or similar expressions.

of those so arguing over other protagonists. Here the arguments concern water and more specifically flood risk management, and the political processes involved fundamentally concern power, its distribution and the resultant effects.

To begin, we overview the politics of scale literature, drawing, as have others, on [Brown and Purcell's \(2005\)](#) theoretical principles of scale as socially constructed, fluid and fixed, and as a relational concept. We highlight the significance of power in any account of scalar politics, recognising that scale is a socially constructed instrument of power which is embodied in, and expresses, the underlying power relations between, and ideologies of, actors ([Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008](#)). Here we also concur with [MacKinnon \(2010\)](#), [Swyngedouw \(1997b\)](#), [Brenner \(1998\)](#) and others concerning path dependencies and the significance of inherited – and in our case overlapping – scalar structures, as manifestations of prevailing power relations, on the emergence of new forms of scalar politics. However, unlike other case studies (e.g. [Perreault, 2005](#); [Sneddon, 2003](#); [Budds and Hinojosa, 2012](#)), we find little evidence of open conflict in this process.

We then contextualise our research within the burgeoning literature on water management and scale, noting the value of applying a scalar lens. Our story is one of progressive concentration of power at the national level followed, recently, by an apparent reverse towards the local. The rationales for these changes are analysed, emphasising the changing political and social contexts of the scalar reconstructions and the power relations involved. For those seeking positive examples of multi-level decentralised governance in FRM, where power is shared across the spatial scales, our historical analysis struggles to find evidence. Rather, despite attempts to 'hollow-out' the state through the scaling 'out' and 'down' of FRM responsibilities, our evidence suggests that the control over the modalities of power retention in this context remain highly concentrated and centralised; it is the responsibility that has been localised, not least to those at risk of flooding.

2. Scale and scalar politics

Given its roots as a foundational geographical concept, it is unsurprising that geographers analysing political economies have led the scale debates ([Delaney and Leitner, 1997](#); [Swyngedouw, 1997a](#); [Howitt, 1998, 2003](#); [Marston, 2000](#); [Brenner, 2001](#); [Jonas, 2006](#)), with a flurry of parallel arguments examining the value of a scalar analysis ([Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008](#); [Leitner et al., 2008](#); [Moore, 2008](#)). Indeed, [Marston et al. \(2005\)](#) have called for scale to be eliminated from geographical analysis, in favour of a 'flat ontology', provoking significant response ([Jonas, 2006](#); [Collinge, 2006](#); [Escobar, 2007](#); [Leitner and Miller, 2007](#); [Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008](#); [Jones et al., 2007](#)). This is not the place to examine this dialogue in detail, but these debates reinforce the usefulness of some scalar perspective to our understanding of environmental governance (e.g. [Gorg, 2007](#); [Reed and Bruyneel, 2010](#); [Neumann, 2009](#)) and water governance in particular (e.g. [Swyngedouw, 1999](#); [Lebel et al., 2005](#); [Sneddon and Fox, 2006](#); [Feitelson and Fischhendler, 2009](#); [Harris and Alatout, 2010](#); [MacKinnon and Tetzlaff, 2009](#)).

More widely, a plethora of recent research offers a rigorous evaluation of the theoretical nuances of scale from within political ecology, political economy, political geography and international relations. The merits of this literature have similarly been debated elsewhere ([Brenner, 2001](#); [Cox, 1998](#); [Delaney and Leitner, 1997](#); [Marston, 2000](#); [Smith, 1992, 1993](#); [Swyngedouw, 1997b, 2000](#); [MacKinnon, 2010](#)), and usefully categorised by [Brown and Purcell \(2005, 609\)](#).

First, scale is no longer regarded as an ontological given but is instead considered a highly politicised concept which is socially

constructed through political struggle ([Agnew, 1994](#); [Smith, 1995](#); [Delaney and Leitner, 1997](#); [Swyngedouw, 1997b, 2002](#)). Scale is an outcome of the strategies of political actors and, hence, any understanding of scale must evaluate the motivations, interest and strategies of those promoting particular scalar interests. This precludes the notion that any one scale is more sustainable or liberal than any other, and facilitates a 'theoretical solution' to the 'scalar trap' – whereby management at a particular scale is predetermined to be more sustainable, just or democratic than alternative scales ([Brown and Purcell, 2005: 608](#)).

Secondly, because scale is regarded as socially produced by actors through political struggle over time, scale and scalar arrangements are argued to be both fixed and fluid, being continually reorganised and reproduced ([Swyngedouw, 1997a](#)). The outcome can be the 'structuration of scale' ([Giddens, 1984](#)), resulting in the production and reproduction (fixing, unfixing and refixing) of entrenched scalar structures which can be somewhat hegemonic over time, with important implications for the political power of those articulating alternative scalar politics ([Brown and Purcell, 2005: 610](#)). Indeed, the evidence showing power as a socially constructed instrument of scale is most illuminating here ([Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008](#)), and attention to the politics of scale literature requires an analysis of the locus of power ([Reed and Bruyneel, 2010](#)).

Much of that literature has a political economy framing, linking with the neoliberal agenda and globalisation literature. This has led to arguments concerning the 'fluidity' and 'fixity' of scales; most notably in the dual rescaling, or 'hollowing out', of the state through the shifting of power 'upwards' towards global actors and 'downwards' to local actors, termed 'glocalisation' ([Swyngedouw, 2000](#)). Arguments have resulted about the potential to empower those disadvantaged at any particular scale by actively pursuing their aims at a different scale: actors seeking to 'jump scale' ([Smith, 1993, 1995](#)) to seek a new balance of power in pursuit of their interests ([Brown and Purcell, 2005](#); [Swyngedouw, 1999](#)). Or as [Cox \(1998\)](#) argues, actors seek to construct 'spaces of engagement' across scales in order to secure their own objectives.

This literature has also been criticised, however, for its treatment of scale 'as a real thing' rather than a concept used by actors through their scalar framings. To guard against this, [Kaiser and Nikiforova \(2008, 544\)](#) argue for a 'performativity of scale'. This shifts the focus away from scales *per se* and on to the discourses through which scales are articulated, thereby enhancing our understanding of the historically contextualised interconnectivity between scalar hierarchies by focusing on the scalar stances of actors, asking in particular why they take the stances they do and what are the effects over time.

Similarly, [MacKinnon \(2010, 22\)](#) has argued that it is not scale *per se* that is the object of conflict but, rather, it is the differential scaling of institutional practices and processes that is important, proposing the replacement of the politics of scale concept with 'scalar politics'. Scale is then an outcome of, or constituted through, discourse and practice ([Harris and Alatout, 2010, 49](#)). Scales and scalar hierarchies are then not products of social construction but are used by actors in 'scale talk' and 'scale politics' and it is these discourses that, over time, produce 'scale effects' ([Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008](#)).

Thirdly, that scale is a relational concept is an important theoretical principle ([Brenner, 2001](#)). Scales are not simply 'Russian Dolls' but are embedded and nested. Therefore, their analysis must focus on how the relations between these 'nested scales' are socially produced, rather than focus on any single scale in isolation ([Brown and Purcell, 2005](#)). Such a perspective then again asks researchers to analyse the agendas and interests of those actors pursuing particular scalar arrangements, recognising that scales

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