Feature: Historical Geographies of Moral Regulation

Afterword: remapping the terrain of moral regulation

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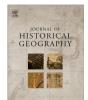
Abstract

This paper provides a commentary on the papers in this special feature, and on the conceptualisation of scale and moral regulation in the sociological and geographical traditions more generally. It uses three recent monographs on empire and moral regulation to illustrate the current challenge to assumptions of scale embedded in the methodological nationalism characteristic of some comparative historical sociology. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, key moral regulation projects were in fact developed in transnational and imperial spaces, exhibiting a place-transcending moral universalism that was at the same time productive of space, particularly insofar as it remade the moral scale of the nation. The attention paid here to these dynamic, scalar, moral geographies informs the discussion of the different, though complementary, ways in which the topic of moral regulation is approached in the preceding papers. It is argued that the remapping of the moral terrain demonstrated here suggests that the various scales involved (self, body, home, nation, empire, the universal) are the negotiated and contested products, rather than the preconditions, of moral regulation.
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The papers in this collection of essays on the scalar politics of moral regulation make a significant contribution to our understanding of how such moralising geographies depended not just on the imaginative and material construction of sites and spaces but also on that of *scale*. They all demonstrate — allowing inevitably for their individual inflections and emphases — the active production of scale in such moral projects, the necessity for any such interventions to be impelled by, to invoke, instantiate and institutionalise, the politics of scale: that is, the normative and ideological frames, the appropriate fields for intervention, the nested hierarchies of administration, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and so on. These papers seek, in the words of Stephen Legg, to retain a human geography with scale.[1] In the face of recent critiques, all I think deny the charge that scale is redundant or vacuous, neither replaceable with the language of 'site' nor reducible to the operation of networks.[2] We may insist instead that 'scale' is appropriately treated as dynamic and dialectical: 'Spatial scales are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested and restructured in terms of their extent, content, relative importance and interrelations'.[3] In paying such proper attention to these questions of scale, these papers do far more than illuminate the historical geographies of moral intervention in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though they do this well. They also provide productive ways of thinking about the concept and the practice of moral regulation, whose operations of course are still very much with us, whether we use this term or not.

In this afterword, I want to bring out what I consider to be the central arguments made in these papers, but also to draw them out further, to reflect conceptually on where moral regulation is now, and where we might take this critique. I do so very modestly — these papers really do speak for themselves, and readers will surely take different elements from them than I have done — but I hope that the authors will recognise their arguments all the same. I need to apologise too for the fact that the route that I want to take is a somewhat roundabout one: I begin these remarks with a consideration of the concept of moral regulation in relation to the sociological and geographical traditions, focussing on the dialogue

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[1] S. Legg, Of scales, networks, and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 (2009), 234–253.

[2] The recent scale debate, too large to summarise here, followed the critical intervention of S. Marston, J. Jones, K Woodward, Human geography without scale, *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005), 416–432.

[3] E. Swyngedouw, Scaled geographies: nature, place, and the politics of scale, in: E. Sheppard, R.B. McMaster (Eds), *Scale and Geographic Inquiry: Nature, Society and Method*, Oxford, 2004, 129–154, 133.

between the two disciplines. I argue here that scale is only implicit in the original blueprints of the academic questioning of moral regulation, and that it needs to be brought out, clarified, and critically developed. I then use some recent historical work on moral regulation on the moral politics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism, including my own, which may be taken as notable for such an explicit and thoroughgoing rethinking of scale. There is plenty of other recent work to which I might have turned, but these monographs do seem to me to illustrate most succinctly the critique of earlier inadequate conceptions of scale in histories of moral regulation. All this is by way of an extended prelude to a discussion of the four papers in this special issue, where I want to draw together the argument for the fundamental importance of understanding the dynamic nature of scale and its weaving together of both material and imaginative moral geographies.

Moral regulation in the sociological and geographical imaginations

> If each state had as its chief aim, not to expand, or to lengthen its borders, but to set its own house in order and to make the widest appeal to its members for a moral life on an ever higher level, then all discrepancy between national and human morals would be excluded.
>
> Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals*[4]

To begin at the beginning, then. The study of moral regulation is a long established theme within the *sociological* tradition, arguably constitutive of the entire pioneering project of social science.[5] In his influential lectures on civil morals, perhaps the founding sociological text, certainly the most cited, Durkheim clearly works with a set of spatial metaphors in order to capture the nature and function of moral regulation. Famously, Durkheim portrayed the moral impulse as an 'inward activity', the social evolutionary inheritance of 'forces that turn from the outward to the inward'.[6] Such moralising forces are not merely interior and subjective; rather they relate back, moving outward once again, to society and its principal political frame, the state. The state, for Durkheim, was the only realistically viable organ of moral discipline and education: as Daniel Chernilo puts it, for Durkheim, 'the regulation of social life has to be carried out within a certain scale and range, and, so far, that scale has been provided by the nation-state'.[7] The state is thus conceived in an enabling as well as constraining sense, not indeed the gaoler but the guarantor of liberty: long before Foucault's analyses of liberal governmentality, though

lacking his critical attack, Durkheim argued that there was no freedom without such internalised restraint, and the interiorisation of this 'spirit of discipline' was one of the principal elements in the attachment and responsibility to the collectivity that more or less defines the moral sense in this tradition of thought.[8] Furthermore, in his related remarks on the potential and growing conflict between patriotism and what he terms 'world patriotism' — that is, the conscience/consciousness, global and universal, of humanity writ large — Durkheim invokes not only space but *scale*, and this time not as a kind of physiological or psychological referent, but directly in relation to the concrete political geography of the world order.[9] Durkheim's brief reflection — 'We might say that the moral forces come to have a *hierarchic order*, according to their degree of generality or diffusion' — indicates at once an awareness of the scalar politics at the heart of this conception of the sociology of morals and the thorough inadequacy of such a neat, nested formulation for any meaningful geography of moral regulation.[10] Geographical scale *must* thus be crucial to the question of morality and moral regulation, but how to conceive of its significance remains unclear in this sociological tradition.

On the plus side, it is at least now widely recognised that moral regulation as a series of *practices* necessarily has a geography — its various projects embedded in place, directed by material and discursive geographies, designed to combat the improper behaviour of other people, in other places. We may define such moral regulation, generally, as 'a form of politics or practices whereby some agents act to problematise the conduct, values or culture of others on moral grounds and seek to impose regulation on them'.[11] But Philip Corrigan, drawing on Mary Douglas's definition of impurity, early on defined the target of such moral regulation as 'behaviour and moral beliefs which are "out of place"', a definition that leads rather more straightforwardly to a recognition of the *moral geographies* that animate moral regulation.[12] In brief, behaviour that might be acceptable, to some, when carried out in one place, by one set of people, becomes the target of moral indignation when located elsewhere and when characterised as the work of other communities. There is a nice example of this from James Bliss' work on what he terms the 'spatially oriented' legal regime in early twentieth-century Canada, a set of legal practices that bore down heavily, for instance, on Chinese gambling dens in Victoria and Vancouver whilst normalising racetrack betting by 'white' Canadians in Ontario; for Bliss, 'the significance of recognising "place" within the moral regulation perspective is the discursive context provided by spatial specificity: how certain activities are discussed and debated depends on where they occur'.[13] Writing with the same early-national period in Canada in mind, Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo similarly focused on the highly

[4] E. Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals*, tr. C. Brookfield, London, 1992, 74. The lectures on which this collection is based were first given between 1890 and 1900, and were not published in Durkheim's lifetime.

[5] This is in comparison to Geography's relative neglect of the theme of morality and moral regulation. See R. Lee, D.M. Smith, 'Introduction: geographies of morality and moralities of geography', in: R. Lee, D.M. Smith (Eds), *Geographies and Moralities: International Perspectives on Development, Justice and Place*, Oxford, 2011, 1–12. The most important treatment is: D.M. Smith, *Moral Geographies: Ethics in a World of Difference*, Edinburgh, 2000.

[6] Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals* (note 4), 71; S. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim. His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study*, London, 1975, 410–434, is still very worthwhile as an overview.

[7] D. Chernilo, *A Social Theory of the Modern State: The Political Forms of Modernity Beyond Methodological Nationalism*, Abingdon, 2007, 72.

[8] On this 'unlikely' but important pairing, see W. Ramp, Foucault and Durkheim on the genesis of the disciplinary society, in: M.S. Cladis (Ed), *Durkheim and Foucault: Perspectives on Education and Punishment*, Oxford, 1999, 71–104.

[9] This 'ethical hierarchy', and the normative ambiguities involved in the attempt to reconcile nationalism and cosmopolitanism is discussed well in Chernilo, *Social Theory of the Modern State* (note 7), 61–73. See also I. Varga, Social morals, the sacred and state regulation in Durkheim's sociology, *Social Compass* 53 (2006), 457–466.

[10] Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals* (note 4), 72–73, emphasis added.

[11] A. Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation*, Cambridge, 1999, 1. For an excellent review of the literature, see H. Ruonavaara, Moral regulation: a reformulation, *Sociological Theory* 15 (1997), 277–293.

[12] P. Corrigan, On moral regulation: some preliminary remarks, *Sociological Review* 29 (1981) 313–337, reprinted in A. Glasbeek (Ed), *Moral Regulation and Governance in Canada: History, Context and Critical Issues*, Toronto, 2006, 57–73, quotation from page 68; see also T. Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, Minneapolis, 1996.

[13] J.R.Q. Bliss, '*A gentleman in one place, a criminal in another': regulating early Canadian gambling venues*, Master of Laws thesis, Faculty of Law, University of British Columbia, 2000; quotation from page 101.