

# Islands of practice and the Marston/Brenner debate: toward a more synthetic critical human geography

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that an important obstacle to the continued development of critical human geography are 'islands of practice', through which scholars become embedded in a research and writing tradition that limits their intellectual and political horizons. I use a recent nondebate in *Progress in Human Geography* between Sallie Marston and Neil Brenner as an illustration of how islands of practice can stifle intellectual exchange. The paper suggests that the best way to dissolve the islands is a methodological program to create a more synthetic approach that consciously integrates multiple aspects of the critical project.

**Key words:** collaborative research, critical geography, methodology, scale.

## I Introduction

This paper argues for a more synthetic critical human geography. I argue that current research in this tradition is plagued by what I call 'islands of practice,' through which scholars become deeply embedded in particular research and writing routines that limit their engagement with habits and arguments outside those routines. The term 'practice' here refers to the range of academic labor: data collection and analysis, writing, and discourse.<sup>1</sup> It refers to both intellectual and political aspects of academic labor. The term 'island' is used to suggest a metaphorical space that offers some room for maneuver and exchange, but always within clearly defined and confining limits. Such islands of practice divide up contemporary human geography in a range of ways: they are defined by scales (local/national/global); forms of domination (capitalism/patriarchy/racism/heteronormativity); topical specialties (economic/political/cultural); aspects of the world economy (north/south); settlement patterns

(urban/rural); methodologies (quantitative/qualitative); the human-nature split (economy/ecology) and so on. As my emphasis on 'practice' suggests, I contend that the divisions in critical human geography are primarily methodological rather than theoretical. That is, the islands are more a product of habitual research and writing emphases than they are the product of a theoretical claim that one aspect of social life precedes or determines the others.

If the divisions are methodological, they are surmountable; rapprochements are possible through a conscious and sustained effort to broaden habitual research foci beyond current horizons. Overcoming methodological splits requires explicit methodological projects that transcend various islands of practice and fuse their traditional foci into a more synthetic analysis. To be sure, such synthetic research exists and is under way, but the predominant methodological approach continues to be analyses situated within one of the traditions mentioned above (e.g., a focus on capitalism, patriarchy or racism). The paper contends that it is important to identify and understand islands of practice, and to develop ways to transcend them, because they represent one of the most important intellectual and political obstacles to the project of critical human geography.

In order to explore islands of practice in more detail, I analyse a recent nondebate in *Progress in Human Geography* between Sallie Marston and Neil Brenner. The subject of the Marston/Brenner exchange was the recent debate in geography about the politics of scale. While I intend for this paper to contribute to the debates on scale and help push scale theory beyond the Marston/Brenner stalemate, my primary goal is to use the Marston/Brenner debate as an empirical case study that helps geographers better understand islands of practice and suggest strategies for creating a more synthetic critical human geography. I argue that both Marston and Brenner are eloquent and correct in their main arguments and in their critique of the other's limitations. However, each is unable to either hear or heed the other's critique. This inability, I contend, is the result of particular islands of practice that limit the vision of each author. Brenner's piece reproduces a common research and writing emphasis on a particular social process: the productive relations of capital (Gibson-Graham, 1996). Marston's paper is limited by a near-exclusive emphasis on a particular scale: the household. Each is calling for the other to realize and transcend their island, and each fails starkly to heed the other's advice.

The failure of two of the most capable scholars in critical geography to realize and overcome their limits suggests that the problem of islands of practice is both real and acute in contemporary critical geography. Furthermore, there is much at stake in overcoming them. One problem is intellectual: the islands not only limit researchers' ability to analyse phenomena outside their particular research focus, but they also limit their ability to understand the focus itself. For example, it is impossible to understand the ongoing restructuring of the relations of production without analysing the changing relations of social reproduction and consumption, since each are bound up inescapably with the other. Marston (2000) makes this argument in her original paper. Similarly, one cannot understand a particular scale without analysing its relationships to other scales, since the meaning and importance of each scale is unavoidably embedded in its interscalar relationships. This is Brenner's (2001) argument in his response to Marston. A second problem is more purely political: there are persistent and deep divisions among critical geographers that impede their ability to critique and construct alterna-

tives to domination, inequality and injustice. For example, scholars whose main focus is capitalism are too often intellectually and politically isolated from scholars of patriarchy, racism or heteronormativity. Similarly, those who investigate more global-scale relations too rarely collaborate with scholars of local-scale processes. While diversity and debate within critical geography is absolutely necessary, there is also a need for a measure of solidarity that can provide a comprehensive analysis of resistance to injustice and inequality.

The list of divisions in critical geography goes well beyond the examples in this paper. Erik Swyngedouw, for example, has argued forcefully that political economy must do more to engage questions of ecology and environment. Given that the entire basis of capitalism rests on generating wealth by transforming and commodifying nature, such inattention to ecological questions is ultimately crippling to a proper understanding of the global political economy (Swyngedouw, 1997b; 1999). I have explored the limits of critical state theory in geography, arguing that the analysis of the state has been constricted methodologically because the analysis nearly always reads the state in the context of capitalist accumulation and capitalist social relations (Purcell, 2002). Out of habit, more purely political factors such as the legitimacy of the state-citizen relation, have been ignored. This narrowness has produced an incomplete analysis of the state. Another example I know well is urbanists who study the global north. Few would contend that cities and urbanization in the global south are unimportant and unrelated to northern urbanization, but research practice has created an insular tradition that studies and debates northern cities almost exclusively (e.g., Lauria, 1997; MacLeod, 1999; Purcell, 1997; Smith, 1996; Soja, 1996; Stone, 1989). I present the Marston/Brenner debate, therefore, as only one among many cases in which islands of practice stifle intellectual exchange and weaken the project of critical geography. I focus on one case in order to be able to explore in depth how islands of practice operate, why they stifle intellectual exchange, and how they might be overcome.

## II The Marston/Brenner debate

Over the last 10 years or so, there has been a proliferation of research and writing in critical human geography on the question of scale. Revolving around Neil Smith's foundational work in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Erik Swyngedouw, Helga Leitner, Andrew Jonas, John Agnew and Andy Herod, among many others, have been developing an increasingly sophisticated approach to scale throughout the last decade (Agnew, 1997; Delaney and Leitner, 1997; Herod, 1997; Jonas, 1994; Swyngedouw, 1992; 1997a). In a 2000 issue of *Progress in Human Geography*, Sallie Marston published a paper that has quickly become one of the canonical texts in this literature (Marston, 2000). Her argument is that the recent scale work has focused too heavily on the question of capitalist production. 'What is missing from this discussion about the social construction of scale,' she argues, 'is serious attention to the relevance of social reproduction and consumption' (Marston, 2000: 219). She argues that our understanding of scale will remain incomplete without much greater attention to all aspects of capitalism: production, reproduction and consumption. Moreover, she stresses the importance of examining the way capitalism articulates with patriarchal gender relations in the

production of scale. In order to demonstrate what an analysis of scale based on reproduction and consumption might look like, Marston develops a case study that develops the importance of the household as a key scale in the changing relations of reproduction and consumption in the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She rightly claims that the scale literature has mostly ignored the household scale and has focused instead on other scales, such as the urban, regional, national and global.

A year later in *Progress in Human Geography*, Neil Brenner published a response to Marston's piece (Brenner, 2001). His concern is to make clearer the differences between scale and other geographical concepts such as space, place, territory and so on. His argument focuses on the way Marston treats scale in her case study. He suggests that Marston's paper fails to analyse the *relationship* between the household and other scales, and it is therefore less an analysis of a scale than of a site or a place. In the same issue, Marston joined with Neil Smith to respond to Brenner's paper (Marston and Smith, 2001). They contend that Brenner's article dismisses the importance of the household as a key scale in capitalism and perpetuates the blindness in the scale literature to issues of social reproduction, consumption and patriarchy. What emerged from this exchange was mostly a disconnected nondebate; Brenner fails to engage Marston's call for more attention to the household, social reproduction and patriarchy, and Marston and Smith fail to engage Brenner's call for a more precise, relational concept of scale. My argument is that both Marston and Brenner are right. Each makes an extremely valuable contribution to the literature, but both are also wrong in that each ignores (or cannot see) the value of the other's argument.

### 1 Why Marston is right

Marston's original article made the important argument that the literature on scale has been dominated by analyses of the rescaling of capitalist production and the state. It has tended to ignore:

- 1) how social reproduction and consumption, as part of the architecture of capitalist social relations, are being rescaled;
- 2) how other forms of domination, such as patriarchy, racism or heteronormativity, are scaled and being rescaled.

In her article she concentrates mostly on the first exclusion, arguing that 'questions now driving the scholarship on scale tend to focus on capitalist production while, at best, only tacitly acknowledging and, at worst, outrightly ignoring social reproduction and consumption' (Marston, 2000: 219). The dominant tradition in scale research in geography has offered an insightful analysis of how capitalist production and the capitalist state are being rescaled in complex ways in an effort to address the 'crisis of Atlantic Fordism', in which the relatively stable social compromise of the post-second world war era began to unravel in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see, among many others, Goodwin and Painter, 1996; Jessop, 1998; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Peck and Tickell, 1994; Swyngedouw, 2000). In the Fordist-Keynesian era, the argument goes, capitalist production and the state were dominantly organized at the national scale. Over the last 20 years these forms have been partly denationalized and 'glocalized' as both capital and the state have become increasingly organized at supra- and

subnational scales. This rescaling has been a key strategy for regulating and partly resolving the crisis associated with the breakdown of the Fordist era of mass production. Marston contends that this dominant scholarly discourse tends strongly toward productivism. It must be broadened more to fully address the rescaling of social reproduction and consumption, as well as the rescaling of patriarchal gender relations.

Though she does not frame it explicitly in these terms, it is fair to read Marston as making a primarily methodological critique rather than a theoretical one. The problem she identifies is not necessarily that the scale literature makes a positive argument that capitalist production and the state are primary, and that they determine reproduction and consumption or patriarchy. The problem Marston points to can be seen as a problem of methodological focus. Those who study rescaling almost exclusively investigate changes in capitalist production and the state, and almost never examine changes in reproduction and consumption. They are, essentially, in the *habit* of researching and writing about production and the state, and their discourse does not range beyond these issues. An extension of this position would be that scholars in political economy do not make the ontological argument that capitalism determines all other forms of domination, but that research in political economy *implies* determinism because almost all research examines the processes of capitalist domination and ignores other forms of domination. The resulting dialogues and debates about this research similarly focus on capitalist domination and are silent on other forms of oppression. I argue that the important problem Marston identifies is a problem of a research tradition in which particular foci predominate – for scale research in political economy, these foci are capitalism, production and the state. The scale tradition tends to ‘at best only tacitly acknowledge and at worst outrightly ignore’ (Marston, 2000: 24) other topics such as reproduction and consumption, or racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity.

Marston, then, is identifying an ‘island of practice’ in the scale literature. Scholars are engaged in the continuing program of research and debate in which they are trying to work out contemporary changes in the global political economy. In this program, certain routinized patterns have developed such that certain issues have been extensively examined, while other issues have been left partly or completely out of the investigation. The solution to this island of practice is a conscious methodological project to expand the scope of analysis and to broaden the focus of the literature’s discourse. As Marston rightly argues, the problem with the literature’s narrow focus is not only that scale theorists are depriving the world of their analyses of reproduction and consumption, or gender, race and sexuality. The problem is also that the rescaling of capitalist production and the state – because it is deeply intertwined with reproduction, patriarchy, etc. – cannot be understood in isolation. It requires a more comprehensive approach that understands the many different aspects of rescaling. Not only do islands of practice exclude certain topics from the discussion, they also weaken the analysis of the research focus, since no issue can be properly understood by itself.

It is certainly true that in the past there was a greater degree of ontological disagreement on these questions and political economists in particular were unwilling to admit the importance of reproduction, consumption and racism/sexism/heteronormativity, or to see them as equally important as capitalist production and the state. This unwillingness has long been the greatest impediment to a synthetic critical human geography, and it is the primary reason feminists and other geographers have had to struggle so resolutely to include the household, the home, patriarchy and reproduction into the

analysis of contemporary society. But it is fair to say that that ontological denial has become less and less common, as political economists are much more likely today to accept in principle a central role for nonproduction and noncapitalist processes. Nevertheless, the problem of silences and deficiencies in the scale literature still exists, and quite clearly. I think we can discover much of the explanation for this paradox in Neil Brenner's response to Marston. Brenner agrees that social reproduction and consumption are important issues in the analysis of rescaling and capitalism. He is sympathetic to Marston's 'forceful critique of approaches to geographical political economy that neglect to examine the constitutive role of gender power relations – specifically of patriarchy – in the reproduction and regulation of capitalism' (Brenner, 2001: 596). He supports her call to include the household as a key scale in the analysis of contemporary rescaling processes and agrees in theory (pp. 596–97) that the household is a crucially important sociospatial unit within capitalism.

Brenner's response is representative of a common critical exchange between political economy and its critics within critical geography. Typically, a political economist would be accused of not including a particular social process in his (usually) analysis, whether it be racism, patriarchy, reproduction, etc. He would respond sympathetically, agreeing that racism, patriarchy, reproduction, etc., are all important. He would then counter, however, that his particular research focus is on production or the capitalist state or labor. 'You can't do everything,' he might claim, 'we have to specialize.' This response, however reasonable it may be, is an evasion. It reproduces exactly the problem of islands of practice. Our political economist claims innocence by accepting in principle the importance of nonproductive and noncapitalist processes, but he unintentionally admits guilt by falling back on his methodological approach and research habits, which exclude all but a few social processes. This methodological limitation and the literature's consequent island of practice ultimately produces an analysis that strongly suggests that production, the state and capitalism are the only important forces, even if it denies such reductionism theoretically. This common defense amounts to lip service; it takes no substantive steps to counter the methodological limits of contemporary political economy. What is required from political economy is not agreement in *principle* that other processes are important, but agreement in research *practice*.

In her article Marston shows that this lack of practice characterizes even the influential scale work of Neil Smith, whom she otherwise sees as more open to the inclusion of new perspectives. She writes that Smith:

acknowledges that the relations of social reproduction (and their confrontation with gender systems and patriarchy) are as important as capitalist economic production to understanding the politics of scale. And, *although he has yet to follow up in any substantive way* on the conceptualization of the home as 'established by units of social reproduction and . . . internally differentiated primarily according to relations of gender construction and social reproduction' (Smith, 1992: 75), he identifies the home as a socially produced scale – a scale that is thoroughly implicated in wider social, political and economic processes. (Marston, 2000: 232, emphasis added)

Marston praises Smith for acknowledging in principle the importance of social reproduction, and she downplays his failure in practice 'to follow up in any substantive way.' However, I suggest that it is this failure to follow up that is precisely the problem. No longer is it sufficient for those within the political economy tradition to acknowledge in principle the importance of processes other than production and the state and social relations other than capitalist relations. The imperative now is for political economists to 'follow up' on such assertions in a 'substantive way'. This imperative necessitates a

conscious and sustained research agenda and disciplinary discourse that examines the inter-relationships between production, reproduction and consumption, and between capitalism and other forms of domination. The project is not merely additive. It is not merely to graft new paragraphs addressing new topics onto the well-worn analyses. Rather, the project must be integrative; it must be to develop research strategies that can begin to understand contemporary social relations more holistically, as a set of complex and mutually determining processes, none of which can be apprehended in isolation. To be sure, trying to do everything at once is problematic. First steps such as investigating, for example, how capitalist restructuring is deeply intertwined with the restructuring of gender or race or sexual relations in particular places, while difficult, is certainly not impossible (Brodkin, 2000; Oberhauser, 1995; Valocchi, 1999; Wright, 1998). This agenda might proceed through individual research, but since there is much truth behind the claim that 'you can't do everything' collaborative research projects seem more likely to produce more balanced and capable analyses.

When viewed in this context, Brenner's response to Marston's original paper is quite problematic. Brenner acknowledges the basic truth of Marston's critique, but then he proceeds to address a wholly different issue. He offers a theoretical critique of the way Marston treats scale, rather than engaging Marston's critique of the scale literature's methodological limitations with respect to reproduction, consumption and patriarchy, and suggesting new ways to integrate these issues into the investigation. He fails to respond to the imperative that Marston lays out: that what scale research desperately needs is for its research practice to move beyond the limits of production and the state so it can understand more broadly the rescaling of a range of social processes. Brenner's failure to respond to and build on Marston's agenda reproduces the island of practice that Marston identifies. It acknowledges that Marston has a point, and then goes on to develop an analysis that does not 'follow up in any substantive way' on Marston's call for more attention to reproduction, consumption and gender relations.

On the one hand, my critique of Brenner's piece is unfair because it is oblique. I am criticizing Brenner for what he fails to say, rather than for what he does say.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in the context of a response to Marston, where the very problem is what political economists *are not talking about*, the effect of Brenner's failure to engage social reproduction, patriarchy, etc., and to suggest new ways forward for such an engagement reproduces precisely the island of practice. More discourse that fails to engage the issues of social reproduction and patriarchy (among other issues), and limits itself to issues traditionally within the research discourse on scale only worsens the problem that Marston identifies.

## 2 Why Brenner is right

Brenner's larger project is to define what he sees as 'the limits to scale'. He is concerned to avoid the danger of an 'analytical blunting' of the concept of scale, arguing that it is important to distinguish between scale and other geographical concepts such as place, territory, locale, site, etc. Scale is not interchangeable with these other concepts and the more it is treated as equivalent the more its specific analytical power will be diminished. This danger is particularly acute in contemporary critical human geography, where in recent years scale 'has become a buzzword . . . [that] has attracted

unprecedented methodological and empirical attention' (Brenner, 2001: 591). Brenner's implicit fear is that the current fashion for talking about scale is tempting researchers to use scale terminology when their analysis is actually presenting a place, a territory, or some other geographical entity. He worries this 'overstretching' does a disservice both to scale and to other geographical concepts that are not being employed when they should be. It leaves readers wondering just what scale is, and if it is really as important as everyone is making it out to be. Much of the skepticism about recent scale research, in fact, could well be a reaction to this overuse of the term rather than a real objection to the utility of the scale concept itself (Amin, 2002; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997).

In explicating the particular qualities of scale, Brenner starts with what he calls the 'established truism' (2001: 599) that scales are historically constructed and are therefore being continuously made and remade through political struggle. This insight is the primary source of the catchphrase 'the politics of scale' (Blomley and Pratt, 2001; Brenner, 2002; Edwards *et al.*, 2001; Gilbert, 2001; Smith, 1990: 172; Swyngedouw, 2000; Williams, 1999). Brenner's addition to this truism is to stress the particularly *relational* nature of scale. This is not an original idea – he draws principally on work by Richard Howitt (1998) – but it is relatively less discussed than is the social construction argument. Brenner argues that each scale cannot be understood as an independent entity but must be understood with respect 'to its *embeddedness* or *positionality* within a broader scalar hierarchy' (2001: 600). It is each scale's relationships with other scales, Brenner argues, that must form the object of inquiry in scale research, because those relationships define the particular specific qualities of scale. Without this relational focus, he argues, one is really not talking about *scale* at all, but about some other geographical concept, such as territory, place or site.

Brenner articulates his relational definition of the 'limits to scale' by presenting two common ways of approaching scale: one singular and one plural. The singular approach focuses on the 'production, reconfiguration or contestation of some aspect of sociospatial organization *within* a relatively bounded geographical arena – usually labeled the local, the urban, the regional, the national, and so forth' (Brenner, 2001: 599). This approach generally stresses how a particular process is contained within one geographical unit; it usually fails to analyse the relationships between the unit in question and other scales. To be sure, such interscalar relationships are implicit in any account of how a process becomes confined to a specific scale (since it is presumably being prevented from operating at other scales). Nevertheless, Brenner argues, for the analysis to be particularly about *scale* the relationships must be more than implicit; they must be made an explicit object of inquiry. As it tends to neglect interscalar relationships, for Brenner the singular approach is most often not really a discussion of scale at all. It is instead an analysis of another geographical entity.

The plural approach, by contrast, examines many scales at once, and investigates the changing inter-relationships among them. This approach is more sensitive to 'the process of scaling' (Brenner, 2001: 600) which Brenner understands to mean the continuous reorganizing through political struggle of the hierarchical inter-relationships among scales. Brenner cites the classic example of this plural approach, which is Erik Swyngedouw's (1992) argument about the 'glocalization' of the world's political-economic geography in which the former hegemony of the national scale is weakening and the local (subnational) and global (supranational) scales are gaining more importance. Swyngedouw's piece and the many analyses it inspired in political



economy examine how global restructuring is reworking the scalar inter-relationships that order political and economic life. The recurrent theme is the de-nationalization/globalization that have characterized the transition from the Fordist-Keynesian era to the current era of post-Fordist and neoliberal arrangements. For Brenner, the best scalar analyses focus on the changing relationships among scales.

This singular/plural distinction, for Brenner, defines the limits to scale. Though he does not say it so starkly, he is suggesting that the plural approach is in fact an analysis of scale, and the singular approach is not an analysis of scale but an analysis of some other sociospatial entity. He uses this set of distinctions to critique Marston's account of the household. He argues that Marston's account, because it focuses almost entirely on one scale, is a singular approach to scale. Within the context of Marston's piece, therefore, the household does not appear as a scale at all, but really as some other geographical unit: a site, a sphere or a place. It is important to be clear that Brenner is not suggesting that in general the household cannot be a scale. Nor is he suggesting that no other work on the household has not offered relational analyses. Rather he is saying specifically that Marston's (2000) paper offers a singular analysis of the household and therefore does not illuminate the household's particularly scalar nature. Marston's paper does not situate the household in relation to the other scales that are involved in capitalist reproduction and consumption. 'Even though it is repeatedly *labeled* as a geographical scale, the household operates more prominently in Marston's analysis as a sociospatial arena, territory, locale or place rather than as a geographical scale in the technical sense of the term proposed above' (Brenner, 2001: 598). On my reading, this critique applies also to Marston's later elaboration of the household as a scale (Marston, 2002).

It is this last quote that captures the essence of why Brenner is right. Marston's paper does indeed overstretch the concept of scale. She characterizes her study as an analysis of the household as a scale, but she does not develop the particularly scalar qualities of the household. For example, in arguing that the household became a primary site for consumption in early twentieth-century capitalism, Marston does not show how the relationships among scales were reshuffled, such that a previous arrangement in which, say, the village scale was the hegemonic scale of consumption and reproduction but gave way, through political struggle, to an arrangement in which the household became the principal scale within a scalar hierarchy, and other scales, such as the village, the urban, or the region, diminished in relative importance. In fact, it is possible to infer that Marston herself is not convinced she wants to talk about the household *as a scale*. At times it appears as a 'sphere,' as when she identifies 'a gender transformation of the public sphere through a reconstitution of the private sphere of the home' (Marston, 2000: 235). More often, it is labeled a 'site', such as when she identifies 'the home as a site of social reproduction' (p. 234) or when she identifies her focus as 'the scale of the household, as it is the site where the interactions among the relations of production, social reproduction and consumption have received the most thorough scholarly attention' (p. 233).

These are not merely semantic quibbles. These instances reveal the overstretching of scale that Brenner identifies. Marston's paper seeks to analyse the household as a scale, but her actual discussion strays often from scale to all sorts of other geographical units. It is therefore never clear if the paper is really talking about scale, even if it is framed that way. The particularly scalar nature of the household remains underdeveloped.

Near the end of the paper, Marston returns to using the word *scale*, and argues that the activism of nineteenth-century middle class women rescaled social life. 'The scale transformations that were enacted were profound, with effects that reached out beyond the home to the city, the country, and the globe' (p. 238). It is precisely these effects that Brenner would have Marston discuss in more detail – to articulate how the scalar inter-relationships that characterized reproduction, consumption and gender relations were challenged and remade through women's activism – but Marston only hints at such inter-relationships, she does not develop them.

Thus Marston's island of practice is directly analogous to Brenner's. Her analysis is situated in a research tradition that has had to struggle (against much resistance) to establish the household as an acceptable sociospatial unit of study (England, 2000; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Holloway and Valentine, 2001; Katz and Monk, 1993; Marston, 2002; Oberhauser, 1997; Rabrenovic, 1995; Saegert, 1981). That struggle has necessitated detailed and focused attention on the household and the home. Marston's paper occasionally points to other scales, but they never take a constitutive role in the narrative. The piece is about the household, and other scales are only implied, never engaged. The narrative focus on the household means her account 'at best tacitly acknowledges and at worst outrightly ignores' other scales (Marston, 2000: 219) – the same sin Marston accuses the scale literature of committing against social reproduction and consumption. This shortcoming means not only that Marston overlooks other scales, but also that she cannot fully analyse the household itself, since the household *as a scale* is fundamentally constituted through its relations with other scales. While from her account we can gain great insight into the household as a site, place or sphere, we can gain less insight into the household as a scale. This shortcoming in no way undermines her original call. If anything, it makes it more urgent. The household *is* an important scale and the recent scale literature has paid far too little attention to it. Marston's singular analysis of the household does not yet fully present the household *as a scale*, and so it is all the more critical to develop the analysis further.

### 3 Why Marston and Smith are wrong . . . and right

In this context, Marston's response (with Neil Smith) to Brenner is also unsatisfactory (Marston and Smith, 2001). First, they contend that Brenner dismisses the idea that the household is a scale as worthy of analysis as the national state. They see it as 'simply arbitrary that the home is relegated to a "place" or "arena", while the state gets to be a multifaceted "scale"' (2001: 618). As I have tried to make clear above, this critique ignores Brenner's point. Brenner does not argue that the household is not a scale and cannot take a position in scalar analyses; he argues that *in Marston's analysis* the household does not appear as a scale because she limits her narrative to the household only and does not examine the inter-relationships among scales. They argue that Brenner dismisses 'the scale of the household as a 'singular' rather than a 'plural' construction' (Marston and Smith, 2001). On the contrary, he critiques Marston's *treatment* of the household as 'singular' rather than 'plural', and argues that it is not therefore truly a scalar analysis.

Marston and Smith confront the issue of the relational nature of scale in only the briefest way and at the very end of their response. They contend that there were 'clear

statements in the original paper about the multiscale embeddedness of constructions of the household scale' (Marston and Smith, 2001: 618) and they apparently believe these statements, allowed Marston to confine her analysis to a single scale. Brenner's point, however, is that these statements are not enough. Asserting that a particular scale is embedded in other scales is very different from developing a full analysis of how scalar inter-relationships were produced and reproduced through political struggle. This critique runs parallel to Marston's critique of the scale literature and a critique of political economy research more generally. Just as analyses of scale cannot merely assert the importance of other scales and then proceed to focus on a particular scale, so scale research cannot nod in agreement at the importance of social reproduction and consumption, and then proceed to focus on capitalist production and the state. More generally, geographical political economy cannot continue to stipulate that gender, race, sexuality, etc. are important and then continue to confine its analysis only to capitalism.

Despite their failure to address Brenner's points about scale, Marston and Smith rightly criticize the main weakness in Brenner's paper, which is that he does not engage in any substantive way to Marston's call to expand the methodological foci of scale research. Before he develops his main argument about scale, Brenner makes a fairly anemic attempt to counter Marston's claim about the absence of social reproduction and consumption in scale research. He argues 'these issues have long been analysed in quite scale-sensitive ways by important figures in geographical political economy' (2001: 595). He cites Castells' work in the 1970s and Harvey's from the late 1980s to argue that social reproduction and consumption have not been absent (Castells, 1977; 1983; Harvey, 1989). Marston and Smith deride this defense. They counter that 'the suggestion that questions of social reproduction and consumption have "long been analyzed in quite scale-sensitive ways" and the implication that this is therefore sufficient . . . betrays a deep prejudice and blindness toward the issues at stake in discussions of social reproduction' (Marston and Smith, 2001: 617). Though they do not develop the precise nature of Brenner's blindness (it is important to note that the space for their response was quite limited), his indication toward Castells and Harvey ignores the question of attention to social reproduction in the post-1990 round of scale research, which was the subject of Marston's initial critique. Furthermore, it refers back to a limited tradition that examines all social relations, including reproduction and consumption, as capitalist social relations. This limitation makes it difficult for political economists to grasp a critique like Marston's that conceptualizes social reproduction and consumption as also deeply structured by patriarchal gender relations. Whatever the virtues of 1970s Castells and Harvey, they certainly did not include a sophisticated analysis of patriarchy. Although Brenner does go on to acknowledge Marston's argument about the neglect of patriarchy, his initial instinct to refer back to Castells and Harvey has the effect of reinforcing the current lack of attention to social reproduction and consumption that Marston originally identified. This effect is intensified, as I argue above, because, while Brenner acknowledges Marston's critique, he then fails to engage it, preferring to use her article as a jumping-off point for a different agenda about the theoretical properties of scale.

### III Conclusion: islands of practice and collaborative research

As the Marston/Brenner debate illustrates, islands of practice lead to a range of problems. They produce nonengagements, such as those among Marston, Brenner and Smith. They close down analysis so that scholars have difficulty seeing past their particular focus. In Brenner's case, the emphasis is topical. Like many other political economists he focuses on capitalist production and the state to the exclusion of other forms of domination. Marston's island of practice is scalar. Her paper focuses on the household to the exclusion of other scales. Both are very quick to acknowledge the importance of other topics beyond their particular focus. However, both fail to take explicit steps to move their analysis beyond the limits of their particular island. Perhaps more importantly, islands of practice limit the ability of scholars to fully understand their own object of inquiry. Brenner's work (and the work of many other political economists) does not fully capture capitalism because it does not explicitly examine other forms of domination that are intimately bound up with and help define capitalism. Marston does not fully capture household because she does not explicitly examine how it relates to other scales.

What is required is a more synthetic critical human geography. This synthesis will require a sustained and self-conscious effort to transcend the pervasive limits imposed by islands of practice. No longer is it sufficient to hand wave at the importance of other factors and then retreat back into the comfort of one's expertise while claiming 'you can't do everything'. What is needed is a specific methodological agenda on the part of all critical human geographers that broadens the scope of their analysis beyond its traditional bounds. As Marston suggests, the current research on scale must actively integrate the rescaling of reproduction, consumption and gender, among other factors, into its current focus on the rescaling of capitalist accumulation and the state. As Brenner would add, such analyses cannot be limited to one scale but must understand how the relationships among various scales are produced through political struggle. Similarly, geographical political economy must actively investigate the inter-relationships among capitalism and the many other forms of domination, all of which are closely bound up with capitalism but not reducible to it. As I suggest above, these imperatives extend to a range of other splits as well, such as economy/environment, North/South, qualitative/quantitative, etc.

I would welcome all strategies for expanding the scope of analysis in critical geography. Individuals who are able to fuse, for example, a feminist analysis with a Marxist one, or who are able to integrate a detailed understanding of local politics with a comprehensive account of global political restructuring can help break down the various islands of practice. However, I am inclined more toward a collaborative solution whereby multiple scholars bridge the divides among islands through joint research. Most critical geographers specialize, for example, in a particular form of domination – capitalism, racism, etc. – and understandably so. This focus allows for expertise that would not otherwise be possible, and the argument for the benefits of academic specialization remains valid. One does not become an expert in Marxist or feminist or anti-racist analyses without extensive time and effort. A scholar of women's activism at the household or neighborhood scale cannot necessarily step easily into national-scale or global-scale traditions of analysis. An expert in capitalist restructuring does not easily add a robust postcolonial critique to his or her research project. Both for

practical and ethical reasons, then, it may not be ideal to suggest that each individual integrate many scales or many forms of domination, or many data-collection methods, in the research she carries out. While there may be a few extraordinary people who are able to do this well, there are probably not many.

More practical and probably more productive would be a conscious imperative on collaboration, and specifically collaboration across research traditions. Those who specialize in capitalism, for example, must collaborate outside the bounds of their tradition to work with those who specialize in patriarchy, heteronormativity and racism to build an explicit theoretical analysis of the interconnections among the various forms of domination, as well as an understanding of how they are being transformed by the current global reorganization of social life. The solution to the scalar island of practice is similarly collaborative. Urbanists who explore intraurban questions, for example, must collaborate with interurban specialists to understand both aspects of the city. For those who feel 'at home' at a particular scale and are uncomfortable at larger or smaller ones, collaboration with others who have a different scalar focus can help them see the relationships between 'their' scale and others.

But to this pragmatic rationale I want to add a more theoretical imperative for collaboration. I have proposed that islands of practice are not constructed of theoretical differences so much as they are the result of methodological practice. Of course this dichotomy is not quite so simple. Theoretical commitments and methodological practices are not discrete entities. A theoretical commitment to the primacy of capitalism, for example, can generate a research program that focuses primarily on capitalist social relations. Nevertheless, it is also possible for narrow research foci to develop even when such theoretical commitments are absent. The question becomes to what extent an observed research emphasis is the result of an underlying theoretical reduction. My suggestion is that most islands of practice are not rooted in a theoretical reduction but persist due to established habits of practice. If I am right, then methodological collaboration is the key to dissolving them. If the islands are in fact *made up* of research habits, scholars who do not disagree theoretically are being held apart by methodological tradition. In this case, collaborative research would not just build bridges between the islands, allowing some exchange but leaving the islands in place. Rather it would actively dissolve the methodological substance of the islands, leading to a more synthetic critical tradition.

Of course, this hypothesis is speculative, and this paper by itself cannot establish its validity incontrovertibly. However, that problem provides another impetus for cross-island collaboration. It is partly the unknown nature of these splits that makes collaboration important, because it offers a way to better understand what divides critical geographers. If the islands are unattached to a theoretical reduction, then research that involves scholars from more than one tradition should be successful, opening each to other traditions and other arguments. If various discourses, research foci and methodological practices can be reconciled productively in the collaborative project, then the differences were most likely primarily differences of habit. If the collaborations are unsuccessful, if they encounter more intractable theoretical disagreements, then the differences may be more fully rooted in theoretical incompatibility. Either way, whether it dissolves the islands or can only help better delineate their theoretical bases, cross-island collaboration is one important and necessary step toward a more synthetic approach to critical human geography.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Sallie Marston and Neil Brenner for their suggestions and encouragement, and Nayna Jhaveri, Michael Brown and Erik Swyngedouw for their helpful insights.

## Notes

1. The idea of islands of practice draws on and includes both Gibson-Graham's (1996) notion of 'discursive emphasis' and the more general idea of 'discourse communities' (Burroughs *et al.*, 2000; Cutting, 2000; Forman, 2000). However, I want to capture a wider range of academic labor. Islands of practice refers not just to the way scholars write and talk about their findings, but also to the research agendas that condition what information they seek and how they gather it.

2. My critique of Marston's piece will be similarly unfair, yet nevertheless necessary.

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