

Social worlds writ small and large: Thinking through matters of scale

Mundos sociais em pequenos e grandes registros: Pensando em questões de escala

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11085>

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Studying anthropology in Stockholm in the 1990s meant taking stock of the transnational turn within the discipline. I don't know whether this was ever coined as an actual turn in its own right or whether it became subsumed in the 'writing culture' debate, but, in any case, being a young student in an increasingly interconnected world, it seemed only obvious to look at social relations and the making of cultural meaning through the concepts of flux and flow, mobility and boundaries, complexity and hybridity. We read the works by our own teachers – of which Hannerz (1992, 1996) was probably the most prominent – and by other anthropologists around the world analysing the production and effects of global relations. Among these latter works was a book called *Transnational Capitalism and Hydropolitics in Argentina. The Yacyretá High Dam* by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (1994), which I read with great interest as a student of Latin American worlds. This was the first time I got to know his work. Little did I know then that his research would come to play a central role in my own studies many years later.

In the years 2015-2018, I conducted postdoctoral research as part of the project *New Forms of Andean Water Cooperation: Negotiating Water Values and Water Rights in Peru's Highlands* led by Karsten Paerregaard at the University of Gothenburg. This project set out to understand the processes of social and political conflict and collaboration between different social actors in Peruvian water management in light of increasing water scarcity due to climate change. My study focused on an irrigation and hydroelectric project in the Arequipa region and how the experts involved design, plan and operate this water infrastructure. By way of ethnographic fieldwork in the public agency in 2016 and 2017, I studied how expert knowledge was produced and socialized within the organizational domain and across social sectors. Inspired by Gustavo's work on the Yacyretá High Dam, my analysis of the Majes Siguas Special Project in Arequipa offers an anthropological understanding of the transnational social world of water experts and the role of water infrastructures in times of the Anthropocene (Ullberg 2019, Paerregaard *et al.* 2020). In 2019, together with my colleague Gabriella Körling at Stockholm University, we convened an international and interdisciplinary symposium *Ethnographies of Megaprojects: Social and Political Worlds of Large-Scale Infrastructures* to address the specificities of this particular form of infrastructural delivery. Having been a precursor in thinking about large-scale projects through his research on the Yacyretá and Brasília well before the so-called infrastructural turn in anthropology and adjacent disciplines,¹ we invited Gustavo as a keynote speaker at the symposium. He generously provided much food for thought with his long-term perspective. One of the insights from this meeting was the salience of scale when it comes to megaprojects. While this had gained some attention in the anthropology of infrastructure, we figured that, as a concept, scale had nevertheless remained under-theorized and called for further thinking (Ullberg *et al.* 2023). Gustavo's article 'Scales, Levels of Agency, and Condensation' is a timely invitation to continue this dialogue and debate around the notion and concept of scale.

I read his article as a programmatic approach to develop an anthropological scalar theory through the lens of megaprojects. He provides a meticulous over-

1 Anthropological research on infrastructure has been prolific in recent years. The following works, to mention just a few, provide useful overviews of this field: Harvey *et al.* 2017; Hetherington 2019; Larkin 2013; Venkatesan *et al.* 2018.

view of how scale has been conceptualized and thought in social theory from the fourteenth century onwards, which leads him to delve deep into anthropological and geographical debates about the concept throughout the twentieth century until the present. This is the kind of exhaustive outline that any scholar new to a subject will find extremely useful as a starting point.

When it comes to contemporary debates on scale, however, Gustavo takes a more critical stance, especially when engaging with the work of Anna Tsing. He questions her approach to the notion of scale, scalability and non-scalability, which, he argues, she uses as a substitute for power differences and subaltern agency, without acknowledging the legacy of critical theories in anthropology. I agree with Gustavo that Tsing's conceptual apparatus is sometimes unnecessarily vague (even if proposed jokingly, like the APHIDS acronym cited by Gustavo: see Tsing 2005, 76). But the way I read her work, the main thrust of her argument, and that which I find useful, is the focus on the cultural, ideological and political making of scale. While scale is, as Gustavo rightly points out, an 'empirical fact' that has 'major heuristic implications' for us as humans, it is not a given, but has to be devised and enacted (Callon, and Latour 1981). While, as he says, it may be a truism that scale is a social construct, I argue that paying attention to the ways in which different social actors – elites and subalterns alike – scale time, space and technologies in discourse and in practice should be analytically productive. Within the anthropology of infrastructure, Vonderau (2019) addresses scale in her research on the data centre industry in Northern Sweden. Studying the local infrastructure of the global cloud, she shows that this setup creates translocal geographies that 'are made real and relevant through diverse strategies of scaling' by involved stakeholders. Along similar lines, Cross and Street (2022) explore how humanitarian entrepreneurs strive to turn minimalist technologies, such as a portable diagnostic device and a solar-powered lantern, into universal devices in a global poverty alleviation infrastructure to 'maximise their effects at the level of the population and stimulate a market for more such goods' (p. 114). When these kinds of 'doing well by doing good' projects stall, it is not because of business management flaws, they argue, but because they fail to scale (up) to the humanitarian market. In my own research on the Majes Siguas Special Project in Peru (Ullberg 2023), I argue that the expectations generated by the prospect of this megaproject are upheld through practices of timescaling in its social, political and organizational dimensions by way of remembering the past, envisioning the future and projectifying the present in the long, medium and short terms. Conceptualizing scale as a verb rather than a noun may thus be one way forward. In this regard, Carr and Lempert's (2016) stance on the pragmatics of scale – that is, scaling – does not seem as far away from Tsing's approach as both they and Gustavo seem to claim.

After a critical discussion of the concept of scale, Gustavo nonetheless suggests replacing it with a notion that he designates 'levels of agency.' To do so, he draws on the concept of 'levels of integration' used in his analysis of the construction of the Yacretá Dam (1994) to 'sort out the different powers of structuration

the diverse levels had in the making of a transnational identity' (p. 16) and 'transnational capitalism in general' (p. 17) involved in the megaproject. These levels refer to the imbricated socio-spatial relations in and between local, regional, national, international and transnational loci, a conception that he at the time illustrated through a concentric circle diagram. Today, in his current understanding of megaprojects and in the article at hand, he argues that the 'levels of agency' concept should replace that of 'levels of integration' to avoid the amalgamating connotations of the latter and to emphasize the agentive aspects of such cross-cutting structural relations. Theorizing the different levels of agency through the ethnographic lens of transnational megaprojects, he makes the case for investigating the social processes taking place on and between all these levels. Finally, he introduces the Freudian concept of 'condensation' as a heuristic to complement the analytical scrutiny of each level of agency by rendering 'all these (inter)connected parts a sensory unity' (p. 27) and returning to the concrete and holistic experience of social phenomena.

Gustavo's article is a rich intellectual journey, not only as a thoughtful revision of his own past theorizing, but also because he takes his cues from many different disciplines and perspectives, providing plenty of food for thought to enhance our understanding of scale (and megaprojects). Yet, I wonder if a neologism is the way forward at this point. Gustavo's reasons for proposing to replace the notion of scale with that of levels of agency is to do away with what he qualifies as a 'reifying tendency' among theories of scale. I agree that certain strands of anthropology and adjacent disciplines have taken scale as a given by focusing on the logics of capital that provide the structures under which megaprojects unfold. Others, by contrast, focus on how scales are made and change over time, including the aforementioned examples. However, I am not convinced that the proposed notion of levels of agency would avoid reification, if this is the main problem to be solved, especially when combined with the method of condensation, which, if I have understood the idea correctly, strives to encompass multiple different units within a concrete comprehensible whole.

Investigating megaprojects and other complex social phenomena, I find that the heuristic of scale remains useful, not least to think across disciplinary boundaries since it is so well-established. The notion of levels of agency is equally compelling.

Before throwing any of the babies out with the bathwater, what if, instead of replacing scale as a concept, we defined it precisely as 'levels of agency'? Such a definition would encompass the classic dichotomy of structure and agency, and gains could be made by allowing different theoretical strands to meet in conversation. If so, I believe Gustavo has a yet another book to write on the topic.

Recebido em 31/07/2023.

Aceito para publicação em 01/08/2023 pela editora Kelly Silva (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3388-2655>).

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