**Response Paper: Week 2, Political Economic Readings**

Smith’s notion of scales is an interesting one and offers a complementary approach to Lefebvre’s triad from Week 1. By focusing on one scale, there is potential to show the production of space through spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces within one scale. Mathews goes some way towards achieving this, giving a dynamic account of the Chungking Mansions building. He draws out the dialectical interaction between owners’, residents’ and employees’ patterned practices of use in the building, alongside perceptions of the Mansions in the public imaginary and media, whilst also highlighting its implications for those who pass through it in terms of their own sense of personhood, community, and experience of Hong Kong. In this way, Mathews is particularly successful at highlighting the interactive nature of these forces and possibility of change at each level. He also collapses the analytical distinction between absolute, relative, and relational space, as the three are seen to be inextricable. This ethnography therefore attests to the iterative processes of production of a particular space – although Mathews doesn’t explicitly theorize it in this way.

Scale is also a helpful concept in foregrounding the political aspects of contests over space. All of the readings speak to the salience of scale in terms of framing political contests, claiming ownership of issues, and establishing appropriate levels around which to organize. Political discourses around the body, for example, may jump between scales in claiming public responsibility for wellbeing, or individual rights to self-determination. We can think of the differing responses to the material changes made in Chungking Mansions by Mrs Lam, chairperson of Incorporated Owners of Chungking Mansions, in this way. Whilst some residents are pleased with her improvements to public areas, others feel her work to be an incursion into their space. In this case, we can understand Mrs Lam’s actions as an assertion of her power and ownership (reflecting both her moneyed position and her Chinese Hong Kong status) within their community space, which is a material challenge to the residents’ political claim to define the boundaries of that scale.

Such contests are tied up with political economic forces, lending support to Harvey’s claim that ‘Everyone who moves to establish difference in the contemporary world has to do so through social practices that necessarily engage with the mediating power of money’, since money is the ‘universal social power that can be appropriated’ (1993: 20). Mathews’ account is full of examples of the close relationship between money, power, difference, and space. This is particularly visible in the various forms of official policing that impact the Mansions: liberal visa entry processes, high financial requirements for legal Hong Kong residency, guards policing sex workers at the one open door after midnight, mobile phone communication by residents during immigration raids, international institutions determining asylum status, negotiations over customs fees with officials, and the congregation of illegal workers from less-conspicuous ethnicities on the lower floors. These all point to the mutual constitution of political economic forces and the space of Chungking Mansions as lived, perceived, and conceived. It is perhaps unsurprising how well this case lends itself to Harvey’s claim, given that the very focus of Mathews’ study is ‘low-end globalization’ in a highly neoliberal, capitalist society. We should therefore be cautious when treating Harvey’s claim as a universal truth, and instead conceive of it as a framework of relations that characterizes the contemporary dominant global political economic order – one that is certainly important in the context of the Chungking Mansions.

This degree of critical reflexivity is somewhat lacking in the way that Smith applies the concept of scale within his own schema. Defining scale as an ultimately social product, one that is politically contested and negotiated, he nonetheless offers a categorization of scales that he perceives to be important – without referencing an explicit context. His typology, moving from the body, to the home, community, urban, region, nation, and global levels, presents the classic Western epistemological approach to spatial differentiation. There is nothing inevitable in beginning with the body as the smallest scale; nor in his definition of body as ‘physiological space’ and as ‘mark[ing] the boundary between self and other’, reflecting the specific biomedical view of body as a discrete, skin-bounded, mechanistic entity. Whilst he discusses the social processes *around* the body that deal with bodily access and ownership, he overlooks the production of the body as a scale. Such is the case for each scale he explores, beginning with a concrete definition (‘The site of personal and familial reproduction, the home is a physical location’ 1993: 104), which sits incongruously alongside his aim to show scale to be a product. His use of the term is therefore more descriptive than analytical, and he doesn’t quite achieve his goal of recovering space. This is not to disregard the concept of scale. By reflecting on scale and the political contests around it, there is potential to draw together processes of perception, conception, and practice in order to think through the process of production of both subjects and structure.