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### *Love thy neighbourhood - rethinking the politics of scale and Walsall's struggle for neighbourhood democracy*

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**Love thy neighbourhood – rethinking the politics of scale and Walsall's struggle for  
neighbourhood democracy**

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**Mark Whitehead**

**2003**

# Love thy neighbourhood – rethinking the politics of scale and Walsall's struggle for neighbourhood democracy

Mark Whitehead

## Abstract.

Despite its apparent irrelevance as a scale or space of sociocultural organisation, the neighbourhood is back on the political agenda. At an international level, the neighbourhood – or more specifically, the 'global neighbourhood' – is being promoted as a moral space through which to manage the complex economic, political, and ecological problems of the planet. Mirroring this process at a national level, in the United Kingdom the neighbourhood has been rediscovered and now provides the parameters through which a range of antipoverty, welfare, and local democracy programmes are being delivered. In light of its contemporary political popularity, this paper presents a critical reanalysis of the concept of the neighbourhood. In particular, the analysis explores the ideological and political uses of the ideal of neighbourhood, and how these processes relate to a particular 'politics of scale'. In order to unpack the various *politics of scales* associated with the neighbourhood, the analysis combines theories of scale with Lefebvre's work on the production of space. Drawing on these theoretical insights and the case of neighbourhood politics in the town of Walsall in the United Kingdom, I explore the political narratives and practices through which the neighbourhood scale is produced and contested, and question the ability of neighbourhoods, as they are currently being constructed in the United Kingdom, to offer locally empowering scales of political and social organisation.

The pervasive forces of early-21st-century globalisation make discussions of 'the neighbourhood' appear anachronistic. New patterns of social mobility, economic integration, and cultural interaction have challenged long-standing beliefs in the neighbourhood as a spatially distinct social unit or residential milieu (Amin and Thrift, 2002, page 4; Bauman, 1998, chapter 2; Forrest, 2000). Related to the purportedly declining spatial integrity of the neighbourhood, neighbourhoods, it is claimed, have become increasingly dislocated from many of their traditional sociocultural functions as sites for community support, expression, and identity formation (Davis, 1989, chapter 4; Jacobs, 1994, chapter 6; Sennett, 1996). Despite its apparent irrelevance as a scale or space of sociocultural organisation, the neighbourhood appears to be back on the political agenda. First, at an international level, the neighbourhood – or, more specifically, the 'global neighbourhood' – is being invoked as a moral space through which to manage the complex economic, political, and ecological problems of the planet (United Nations Commission on Global Governance, 1998). The return of the neighbourhood is also evident at a national level in the United Kingdom as part of a new vocabulary of *neighbourhood wardens*, *renewal programmes*, and management strategies.<sup>1</sup> In light of these seemingly paradoxical times, this paper presents a critical reanalysis of the concept of the neighbourhood. In particular, I explore the ideological and political uses of the idea of neighbourhood, and how these processes relate to a particular politics of scale.

Historically, the neighbourhood has provided an important unit of analysis for the geographer (Cox, 1981; Dear and Long, 1978; Harvey, 1973, pages 281-284; 1989, chapters 4-5; Ley, 1983). Traditionally interpreted as a particular *social area*, *communal living space*, or *natural unit* within a city, the word 'neighbourhood' is now more frequently used as a convenient synonym for 'place' or 'locality'. Combining

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent review of what the neighbourhood actually is and how it is being constructed in British urban policy see the special issue of *Urban Studies* (volume 38, issue 12, 2001). In particular see the papers by Kearns and Parkinson (2001) and Galster (2001) in this special issue.

recent theoretical developments in the 'politics of scale' debate (Brenner, 1999; Herod, 1991; Jonas, 1994; Jones, 1998; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; MacLeod and Jones, 2001; Smith, 1984; 1992; 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997a; 1997b), with a Lefebvrian reading of space (Lefebvre, 1991a; Soja, 1989; 1996), in this paper I claim that the re-emergence of the neighbourhood is less about reestablishing pre-existing static spatial phenomena (such as those described within traditional accounts of the neighbourhood), and more to do with the utilisation of a flexible and politically expedient scalar formation. Through an exploration of the potential links which exist between the politics of scale literature and Lefebvrian spatial philosophy, I attempt to develop a composite reading of the neighbourhood as a scale which is able to deal more subtly with its contemporary manifestations. Furthermore, by excavating the plurality of scalar politics— or, put another way, the multiple *politics of scales*— associated with the neighbourhood, I illustrate the different processes which are involved in the *production of scale* and how this production process is intimately tied to the associated production of a variety of different social and political spaces.

In order to understand the scalar politics of the neighbourhood, I draw upon the case of neighbourhood politics in the town of Walsall. Walsall is located in the heart of the West Midlands region of England, and over the past twenty– five years the town has become something of cause célèbre in the politics of the neighbourhood. Walsall's notoriety stems from a series of attempts which have been made by the local Labour group to implement radical forms of neighbourhood democracy. Beginning in the early 1980s with the implementation of neighbourhood offices, these reforms culminated in the mid– 1990s with an attempt to devolve the whole of the local authority into locally administered neighbourhood councils. The plans developed for neighbourhood democracy in Walsall, however, proved controversial and divisive at both a local and a national level. This paper reveals a distinctive scalar politics within the struggles over neighbourhood reform in Walsall, and explores the different ways in which the neighbourhood has been defined and used by different social groups in the town. Through the example of Walsall, analysis unpacks the different ways in which scale is used and mobilised politically within debates surrounding neighbourhoods, and illustrates how different facets of scale interrelate and combine to produce different forms of political struggle and spatial forms.

I begin by charting the reemergence of the neighbourhood as an object of political debate and policy at both a national and an international level. In light of these political developments, I proceed by exploring the meanings and understandings which are attached to the neighbourhood. In this context, analysis initially returns to a series of readings of the neighbourhood which emerged from the fields of geography, planning, and urban sociology. In light of the crude inflexibility of many traditional accounts of the neighbourhood, this paper recasts conventional conceptualisations of neighbourhood space through a Marxist reading of scale. I conclude by exploring the contested scalar politics of the neighbourhood as it has been expressed in the local politics of Walsall, and use this case to raise a series of concerns over the contemporary political mobilisation of neighbourhoods as a strategy for social, political, and ecological reform.

### **The return of the neighbourhood: from global networks to local spaces**

For many years it appeared that talk of neighbourhoods was nothing more than a wistful desire to rediscover a lost form of idyllic human existence (Jacobs, 1994, chapter 6). Caught between the interrelated forces of globalisation and mass culture, the neighbourhood had taken on the hue of ontological and epistemological irrelevance (Forrest, 2000). After this prolonged quiescence, the idea of the neighbourhood has recently been reinvigorated as a political object and discursive category. The return of the neighbourhood is perhaps expressed most clearly in the United Nations political vision for the 21st century— *Our Global Neighbourhood* — which was first published in 1995 (UN Commission on Global Governance, 1998). *Our Global Neighbourhood* was produced by the UN Commission on Global Governance. This Commission was created in order to establish a blueprint for international political

organisation in the 21st century, which recognised the growing interdependence of nation– states and the increasingly complex nature of socioecological problems and risks (UN Commission on Global Governance, 1998, page xiv). Significantly, in the context of this paper, the Commission on Global Governance claims that the *neighbourhood* provides an ideal paradigm for organising global living. In its report the Commission presents the idea of the neighbourhood as a framework which can be used to address traditional politico–ethical concerns, while also providing a new and innovative context in which to tackle the complex political and ecological problems of a global society.

The idea of the global neighbourhood is in some ways perplexing, juxtaposing as it does a planetary image with a more vernacular geographical entity. While reaffirming the neighbourhood as an important principle of socioethical organisation, the very concept of a global neighbourhood as presented by the United Nations challenges conventional understandings of the neighbourhood as a fixed geographical space. The changing geographical representations of the neighbourhood are captured well in this excerpt from the Global Neighbourhood Report:

“Neighbourhoods are defined by proximity. Geography rather than communal ties or shared values bring neighbours together. People may dislike their neighbours, they may distrust or fear them, and they may even try to ignore or avoid them. But they cannot escape the effects of sharing space with them. When the neighbourhood is the planet, moving to get away from bad neighbours is not an option” (UN Commission on Global Governance, 1998, pages 43-44).

Although the neighbourhood is being dislocated from its geographic coordinates, it is interesting that the discursive practices of the United Nations preserve many of the moral connotations associated with neighbourhood space (expressed here as an arena of mutual support and interdependence).

It appears that the idea of a morally ‘connected’ neighbourhood (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, page 2104) is being utilised by the United Nations to form an alternative vision of globalisation to that being defined within the dictates of capitalist social relations. Quoting once again from the Global Neighbourhood Report:

“Indeed, in the global neighbourhood, citizens have to co– operate for many purposes: to maintain peace and order, expand economic activity, tackle pollution, halt or minimise climate change, combat pandemic diseases, curb the spread of weapons, prevent desertification, preserve genetic and species diversity, deter terrorists, ward off famine, defeat economic recession, share scarce resources, arrest drug trafficking and so on. Matters requiring nation– states to pool their efforts– in other words calling for neighbourhood action– keep increasing” (UN Commission on Global Governance, 1998, page 42, emphasis added).

In this context, the idea of a global neighbourhood appears to represent a sanguine, almost utopian, blueprint for military transformation, economic restructuring, Rethinking the politics of scale 279 and civic change. The type of neighbourhood presented here is not a strictly geographical entity, but a set of practices– or neighbourhood actions– based upon a set of preconceived ethical norms and discursive utterances.

If the report of the UN Commission on Global Governance represents a seminal statement in the reintroduction of the neighbourhood into the global political lexicon, the ideal of the neighbourhood has concurrently become popular at a national level. In the United Kingdom for example, the neighbourhood is now a key sociospatial component within the New Labour government's programme of political and economic reform (see table 1) (DETR, 1998, pages 10 - 11; 2000; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001a; 2001b). Since

the early years of the New Labour movement, the Labour Party has utilised the idea of the neighbourhood in two main ways: (1) as a spatial scale through which to develop economic renewal, community cohesion, and social capital; and (2) as a way of identifying social injustice— particularly in the case of marginalised, or socially excluded communities (DETR, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). By mobilising the neighbourhood in these ways, the Labour government's use of the neighbourhood echoes many of the ethical sentiments and collaborative goals of the Commission on Global Governance (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998).

Where New Labour's use of the neighbourhood most obviously differs from that of the United Nations is the link which the Labour government makes between neighbourhood and the identification of social problems. Through schemes such as the New Deal for Communities, Sure Start, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, and the Neighbourhood Community Chest (see table 1), Labour claims it is addressing a new scalar manifestation of poverty.<sup>2</sup> As well as illustrating the quantity of neighbourhood initiatives which the New Labour government has implemented in the United Kingdom, table 1 also illustrates the diverse aspects of poverty and exploitation that neighbourhood strategies are being used to address. Whether it is in terms of social disadvantage, racial exploitation, crime, urban regeneration, or issues of democracy and participation (see table 1), the neighbourhood is providing the British government with a supple scale within which a flexible geography of state intervention can be legitimated and realised.

I do not wish to claim that the emphases which both the United Nations and the New Labour government in the United Kingdom have placed on the neighbourhood are necessarily related or part of the same set of sociopolitical processes. What both cases do illustrate, however, is the growing importance of the neighbourhood within political debate and organisation. Both examples also reveal the different ways in which the neighbourhood is being transformed from a static space to a fluid political scale. In the first instance, the United Nations has developed a particular scalar narrative of the neighbourhood within which the idea of the neighbourhood is being used to justify international political coalition building. In the second case, New Labour is using various neighbourhood scales as both a discursive and a material target for state intervention. Within the frantic restructuring of scale associated with the contemporary round of globalisation, it appears that the neighbourhood is being redefined and reemployed as a scalar and political tactic. In the remainder of this paper I problematise the contemporary political appropriation of the neighbourhood, by reconsidering what the neighbourhood actually is and by revealing the different ways in which the neighbourhood is being exploited as a strategy of political control and scalar domination.

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<sup>2</sup> Some question New Labour's focus on this new scale of poverty— what is now commonly termed 'postcode poverty'— claiming that rather than addressing new spatial expressions of social injustice, the focus on key deprived neighbourhoods simply makes poverty more manageable (Jones, 1997; 1998; Jones and Ward, 2002).

**Table 1.** The return of the neighbourhood. Recent neighbourhood initiatives in the United Kingdom and their authors (dates in italics indicate year of inception of project or organisation).

Regeneration and urban renewal	Democracy and community participation	Crime and community safety	Ethnic policy	Young people
<p>The Social Exclusion Unit's Report <i>Bringing Britain Together: A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal</i> (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998)</p> <p><i>New Deal for Communities</i> (DETR, 1998)</p> <p>Policy Action Teams - Social Exclusion Unit (1998)</p> <p><i>Delivering an Urban Renaissance: The Report of the Urban Task Force</i> (DETR, 1999, chapter 7)</p> <p><i>Our Towns and Cities: the Future: Delivering an Urban Renaissance</i> - DETR (2000)</p> <p><i>National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Policy: Action Team Audit</i> (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001a)</p> <p><i>A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal - National Strategy Action Plan</i> (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001b)</p> <p>The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (2001)</p> <p>Neighbourhood Renewal Teams in Government Offices (2001)</p> <p>Neighbourhood Renewal Fund - The</p>	<p>Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (2001)</p>	<p>National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal <i>Report of Policy Action Team 4: Neighbourhood Management</i> (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000)</p> <p>Neighbourhood Renewal Community Chest - Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001)</p>	<p>Neighbourhood and Street Wardens' Programme - Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (2001)</p> <p>Anti-Social Behaviour Report - Social Exclusion Unit (2000)</p>	<p>Minority Ethnic Issues in Social Exclusion and Neighbourhood Renewal - Social Exclusion Unit (2000)</p>

### Thinking about neighbourhoods: morphological landscapes or sociopolitical spaces?

In order to develop a critical account of contemporary neighbourhood discourses and policies it is important to establish a clear understanding of what neighbourhoods are. Many early accounts of the neighbourhood within geography and urban planning focused upon the physical attributes of neighbourhood space (Carter, 1972; Hall, 1992, pages 43-45; Ley, 1983, pages 67-68; Smailes, 1955). Within these accounts the neighbourhood was believed to exist as a physical entity of bricks and mortar, schools and parks. Within urban geography, the idea of physical neighbourhoods became a key feature of the morphological approach to urban land use (Carter, 1972; Smailes, 1955). Within this approach, urban neighbourhoods were identified and classified on the basis of their architectural and general material form. As differentiated fragments of physical space, neighbourhoods were believed to represent key morphological features of the urban landscape which could be accurately mapped, delimited, and described (Ley, 1983, page 68).

The classification of neighbourhood spaces on the basis of their physical attributes also has a long association with urban planning. In the context of urban planning, particular emphasis has been placed on the creation of physical neighbourhoods – or the reorganisation of urban society into demarcated neighbourhood blocs (Hall, 1992, pages 43-44). As a planning goal, the neighbourhood was conceived of as the catchment area for a primary school, containing 1000 families and providing a range of basic services, including shops, health care centres, and recreational facilities (Hall, 1992). Understood in these terms, the

neighbourhood represented an imposed space, conceived of for the collective consumption of urban services (Castells, 1977) and as a basis for urban social engineering (Hall, 1992, page 43).

In addition to work on urban morphology and planning, a series of alternative understandings of neighbourhoods have been developed in the fields of urban ecology, behavioural science, and humanistic geographical traditions. These approaches have focused upon the social fabric of neighbourhoods and the ways in which neighbourhoods are constituted through complex processes of spatial proximity and social interaction, perception, identification, and ethnography (Keller, 1968; Ley, 1983). Crucially, these approaches stress that neighbourhoods do not preexist as physical entities before they are constituted as social objects (Jacobs, 1994; Ley, 1983). Some of the earliest attempts to try and excavate the social geography of neighbourhoods came out of work on human ecology. Developed in the early part of the 20th century by the famous urban sociologists of the Chicago School, human ecology sought to understand human settlement patterns by utilising the principles of plant and animal ecology (Burgess, 1925; Park and Burgess, 1925). In this way the Chicago School actually combined a social analysis of the city with a concern for the physical city environment more typical of morphological approaches (Ley, 1983, page 68). Through their ecological approach, the Chicago School suggested that the city was divided into a series of subdistricts or natural areas (Park and Burgess, 1925, page 6). Although Park and Burgess (1925) described a range of different types and sizes of natural area, including large urban zones and sectors, they claimed that the neighbourhood represented a key ecological area within the city. Park (1925) suggested that as a natural area, the neighbourhood provided a space of organic unity, or accommodation, through which social communities survived and individuals received support (much like a community of plant species).

In reaction to the deterministic undertone evident in the work of human ecologists, other writers attempted to uncover the sociocultural dimensions of neighbourhood space (compare Jacobs, 1994; Keller, 1968). Crucially, these writers claimed that neighbourhoods cannot simply be understood as the product of structural economic or ecological forces, but instead need to be interpreted as spaces of sociocultural cognition, meaning, volition, and value (Ley, 1983, page 84). In this context, behavioural scientists have explored the social construction of neighbourhoods through the cognitive mapping of familiar spaces (Ley, 1983, page 87). Building upon these behavioural approaches, more recent research has revealed the role of the neighbourhood as a cultural resource used for social expression, identification, and performance (Jacobs, 1994; Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, page 2105; Keller, 1968). In this vein, the celebrated work of Jacobs (1994) described the neighbourhood as a “shared fragment of geography” (page 129). Jacobs claims that as a shared piece of social space, the neighbourhood represents a safe space for social expression, which acts to protect its inhabitants through systems of fraternity and surveillance (Jacobs, 1994, page 129). There are parallels between Jacobs's understanding of neighbourhood and Casey's (1997) depiction of neighbourhood as ‘dwelling in nearness’. Drawing on Heidegger's work on ‘nearness’, Casey suggests that it is the constant routines, face-to-face interactions and predictable encounters of neighbourhoods which create the sociocultural reciprocities of neighbourhood space (see also Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, page 2106; after Gornick, 1996).

As an expression of geographical sharing, however, the neighbourhood can act as the site both of inclusion (for those recognised with the neighbourhood fraternity) and of exclusion (expressed most poignantly in the examples of the gated community, gang turf, and ghetto). Sennett's (1974) reflections on the neighbourhood and its relationship to public space emphasise the exclusionary, darker, side of neighbourhood space. According to Sennett the neighbourhood is a territorial community of intimacy, or the spatial arena within which the face-to-face contact of a territorial community is realised and sustained (1974, pages 294 - 295). As a form of community territory, Sennett sees the neighbourhood as a very different entity from public space which he claims is more the arena of the crowd and the stranger than of family ties and intimacy (1974, page 3). Sennett consequently claims that the recourse or retreat



into neighbourhood space within the cosmopolitan city is dangerous for two reasons: (1) because it tends to create an ethos of local defence within a neighbourhood, through which individual neighbourhoods become barricaded off from the rest of the city and the cosmopolitan experiences of urban life; and (2) because the insular politics of neighbourhoods can deflect energies away from wider attempts to reform urban politics.

Related to Sennett's work on the defensive qualities of neighbourhoods are a series of geographical writings which describe and interpret the neighbourhood as a locus of political struggle waged in and over communal living space (Cox, 1981; Cox and Jonas, 1993; Dear and Long, 1978; Harvey, 1973, pages 281-284; 1989, chapters 4-5). These broadly Marxist writings understand neighbourhoods both as a spatial product of capitalist urbanisation and as an arena within which class and community consciousness are forged and contested. Marxist writings on the neighbourhood recognise, as fields of geographical conflict, how the communal living spaces associated with neighbourhoods provide key sites of political mobilisation through which welfare benefits (such as state funding, recreational facilities, and health care services) are pursued, and noxious developments (such as new roads, incineration facilities, or correction units) resisted (Cox, 1981; Dear and Long, 1978).

In addition to analysing the parochial conflicts associated with communal living spaces, writers such as Harvey (1973; 1989) and Cox (1981) have attempted to position and understand the politics of the neighbourhood within the wider context of capitalist urbanisation. According to Harvey (1974; 1989), the production of neighbourhood space is intimately tied to the logics of capitalist development. Rethinking the politics of scale 283 Harvey (1973, pages 281 - 284; 1974) claims that neighbourhoods reflect the patterns of residential differentiation and uneven development which are crucial to maintaining the circulation and accumulation of capital in urban space. Although it supports capitalist urbanisation, Harvey also recognises how, in the longer term, the production of neighbourhoods proves problematic to continued financial investment and speculation in the city. According to Harvey (1989, page 122), the communal interests, reciprocities, and shared social consciousness of working– class and ethnic neighbourhoods, tends to fragment the city into multiple sites of sociocultural and political resistance, which oppose the homogenising logics of capitalist urban development.

Discounting the more critical work of Marxist geographies of the politics of neighbourhood space, conventional understandings of neighbourhoods appear unable to deal with the increasingly complex political invocations of the neighbourhood ideal. These traditional accounts of neighbourhoods are characterised by key political and theoretical shortcomings. Politically they are anodyne, often serving only to reinforce the ideologies of neighbourhood through their romantic sentimentality. In a theoretical sense, these accounts lack explanatory power, understanding the formation of neighbourhoods – either as physical entities or social spaces – simply through reference to the internal dynamics of neighbourhoods themselves. In this paper I assert that a much more dynamic political and theoretical account of neighbourhood space is required if contemporary neighbourhood policies are to be effectively understood and challenged.

## **Rethinking the neighbourhood: the neighbourhood as scale and the production of neighbourhoods**

### **The neighbourhood and the politics of scale**

So far in this paper I have considered accounts of neighbourhoods which have been grounded predominantly in horizontal conceptualisations of space. However, the scale– or vertical spatiality of the neighbourhood (MacLeod and Jones, 2001) – has also provided an important framework through which neighbourhoods have been classified and identified (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, page 2103; Ley, 1983, page 87). Although in this paper I claim that a focus on the scalar constitution of the neighbourhood

provides a useful context within which to theorise the contemporary political utilisation of neighbourhoods, I am also critical of existing attempts to try to demarcate accurately the scale of the neighbourhood. I am critical of such attempts for two reasons. First, they fail to take into account the great diversity of scales at which different incarnations of the neighbourhood appear to be constituted (including the street, the city, the region, and now it would seem the planet) (Jacobs, 1994, page 129; Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, page 2104). Second, I am critical of conventional scale-based accounts of neighbourhoods because of the way in which they reify the scale of the neighbourhood, and suggest that it is neighbourhoods themselves which tend to produce certain social and cultural outcomes (local identity formation, fraternity, community regeneration, social reproduction), rather than understanding these processes in relation to the forms of political and economic power which flow through, energise, produce, and condition neighbourhoods.

In light of these problematics, I claim it is necessary to develop a new account of the neighbourhood scale, which focuses less on the bland, cartographic demarcation of neighbourhoods, and more on the politics of the neighbourhood scale (for review of contemporary work on the politics of scale see Brenner, 1999; Jones, 1998; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Marston, 2000; Smith, 1992; 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997a; 1997b). Such an approach has much in common with Marxist writings on the political construction of neighbourhood space, but focuses less on the horizontal movement of resources and commodities through horizontal space and more on the ideological and material processes which flow vertically through neighbourhoods. In these terms, scale is not understood as an inherent relativist quality of neighbourhoods which enables them to be positioned securely somewhere between the home and city within an eternal hierarchy of preordained scalar categories. Rather, the neighbourhood is understood here in terms of the relational qualities of scale within which scale is interpreted in relation to the processes which converge around particular scalar sites with varying degrees of fixity and flux.

So what does contemporary work on scale bring to analyses of neighbourhoods? Given the ever-shifting scales which are being associated with neighbourhoods, it is interesting that one of the central tenets of recent work on scale has been a desire to challenge conventional readings of scale as static platforms of social relations (Brenner, 1999, page 40) or natural spatial divisions (Herod, 1991, page 82), and to uncover the inherent fluidity of geographical scale. In this vein Swyngedouw recognises that:

“scale is neither an ontologically given and a priori geographical territory nor a politically neutral discursive strategy in the constructions of narratives. Scale, both in its metaphorical use and material construction, is highly fluid and dynamic, and both processes and effects can move from scale to scale and affect different people in different ways, depending on the scale at which the process operates” (1997a, page 140).

Through an appreciation of the relational fluidity of scale and the ways in which scalar discourses are being exploited to meet certain political and economic ends, writers such as Swyngedouw reveal the active role of scale within the geometries, choreographies, and constitution of social power. Within these new readings of geographical scale, scale is interpreted as a set of tangled hierarchies (Smith, 1992, page 74) or nested spaces (Swyngedouw, 1997a). Crucially, however, it is not the nested spaces which provide the object of enquiry to scalar theorists, but the social, economic, political, and ecological processes through which these scales are (re)produced (Swyngedouw, 1997a, page 141). Consequently I assert that recent developments in the way in which scale is theorised and understood have three primary benefits for work on the politics of neighbourhood: (1) they illustrate the metaphorical appropriation of the neighbourhood scale as a site of explanation and action; (2) they indicate the connections which exist between the scale of the neighbourhood and the wider political scales of urban, regional, national, and global political communities; and (3) they emphasise the relationship between scale, power, and political struggle.

First, in relation to the metaphorical appropriation of scale, it is significant that within contemporary political debates the scale of the neighbourhood is being invoked as a way of explaining certain social and political outcomes, and suggesting the best strategies for addressing and regulating these processes. In this way the neighbourhood appears to represent what Swyngedouw (1997a) calls a 'scalar narrative'. According to Swyngedouw, scalar narratives exist when:

“places and spaces at different geographical scales are invoked in attempts to account for dramatic events that have major local, national and international implications. These 'scalar narratives' provide the metaphors for the construction of 'explanatory discourses'. Of course it is not difficult to identify how scale-related explanations define and suggest different ideological and political positions” (Swyngedouw, 1997a, page 140).

The scalar narratives typical of contemporary neighbourhood discourses display two dominant characteristics. Within localised accounts of neighbourhood space— such as those evident in New Labour's policies for deprived areas— scalar narratives tend to focus upon the local logics of socioeconomic problems— sealing the cause and effects of neighbourhood decline firmly within the bounds of the community (Jones, 1998; Jones and Ward, 2002). Second, contemporary political narratives of the neighbourhood scale are also promulgating the ideologies of mutual interdependence and connectivity within national and international society. The motif of the 'connected' neighbourhood is consequently being used politically to unify community groups; urban coalitions, regional class alliances, and even it would seem the international political community. The crucial thing to recognise here, however, is the ways in which the ideals of the neighbourhood coalesce with certain allusions to scale, to suggest specific courses of action and modes of political intervention. What are of further interest are the ways in which the scalar narratives of the neighbourhood tend to prioritise sites of intervention where certain groups of actors, such as the United Nations or national governments are strategically well positioned (Swyngedouw, 1997a).

Second, by focusing upon the scalar constitution of the neighbourhood, we are sensitised to the multiple processes, originating from many different scales, which inform and mediate the production of neighbourhoods (Smith, 1992). For example, although there are many locally scaled processes which may give a neighbourhood a distinctive *sensu stricto* (local community traditions, architectural and general environmental aesthetics, political affiliations), many of the processes which shape a neighbourhood transcend the neighbourhood (rent structures, local government policies, planning laws, state interventions, employment patterns) (Harvey, 1974). An appreciation of the multiple scales through which neighbourhoods (whether local or global) are formed draws attention more to the processes that constitute neighbourhoods than to the reified fragments of scale at which different types of neighbourhoods are themselves constituted (Smith, 1992, page 73).

The third benefit which a revised account of scale brings to the study of neighbourhoods is a renewed sensitivity to the relationship which exists between scale and political power. In this context it is important to recognise that scale not only acts as a container for the socioeconomic processes which create neighbourhoods, but is a structuring factor in the establishment of political control over neighbourhoods. In this sense, Smith comments on how “the scale of struggle and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin” (1992, page 74). Smith's assertion is premised upon the idea that the scalar 'reach' of political struggle has a significant bearing on the relative success of different courses of political action (see also Harvey, 1996, chapter 1; 2000, pages 45 - 52). As different political processes operate at different spatial scales, the ability to shape and influence these processes is also dependent on the capacity to act at

different geographic levels. Consequently, in the context of the neighbourhood, it is important to recognise how the power to define, claim, and transform neighbourhoods is fought at a range of different local and supralocal scales (including the body, the home, the local community, the town hall, national parliaments, and even international political arenas). Crucially, it is not that any one of these scales somehow predominates above or subordinates the others, but that important forms of social power are realised through the ability to move between and gain political support at a range of different scales (Harvey, 2000, pages 45 - 52).

Although the recent work on the politics of scale has added a valuable dimension to geographical study, and offers important benefits to analyses of the neighbourhood, it has also been characterised by a degree of ambiguity. The notion that there is a 'politics of scale' is now an accepted principle within geographical writing (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Swyngedouw, 1997a). However, talk of the politics of scale is often marred by analytical imprecision and consequent confusion (see Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000; Marston and Smith, 2001; Sidorov, 2000; for a 286 M Whitehead recent critical review of scale literature, see also Amin, 2002). For example, when referring to the 'politics of scale' it is not always obvious what type of politics or what type of scale is actually being referred to. Is it, for example, the political motives inscribed within scalar discourses (Swyngedouw, 1997a), the strategies of political control exercised over different scales of social organisation (Brenner, 1999; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999), the political power which is realised through the ability to move between and mobilise support at different political scales (Smith, 1992), or the political power expressed in the architectural scale of state buildings and monuments (Sidorov, 2000)? In this paper I claim that each of these aspects of the 'politics of scale' represents a crucial consideration within critical geographical analysis. However, analysis claims that it is also important to understand clearly the differences, overlaps, contradictions, and relationships which exist between these multiple *politics of scales*.

One of the consequences of these confused and often beguiling accounts of the politics of scales is the conflation of scale with space. Brenner (1999; 2001) rightly argues against such conflations, and stresses the need to incorporate scale into social and economic theory as a category separate from space. Marston and Smith (2001), however, emphasise that, although epistemologically separate, "the production of scale is integral to the production of space, all the way down" (page 616, emphasis added). But the problem still remains that with the highly confused sets of understandings which surround the politics of scale, the slippage between scale and space becomes almost unavoidable. In this context, in this paper I claim that a clear understanding of the relationships which exist between the different manifestations of scale is crucial not only to the theorisation of scale itself, but also to developing a scale-sensitive theory of the production of space. Given these significant concerns, how is it possible to recast theories of scale through an analysis of neighbourhoods?

### **Lefebvre and the quartier: towards a theory of the production of neighbourhood scales.**

I would claim that, in order to understand the contemporary reinvention of the neighbourhood within national and international political life, it is useful to combine accounts of the politics of scale with Lefebvrian readings of space. During his time at the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine, Lefebvre conducted a contracted research project into urban neighbourhoods or *quartier* (Lefebvre, 1967; Kofman and Lebas, 1996, page 17). Following on from this project, Lefebvre's most concerted engagement with the neighbourhood or quartier is found in his classic volume on the city, *La Révolution Urbaine* (Lefebvre, 1970). In this volume, Lefebvre is highly critical of the ideological appropriation and colonisation of the neighbourhood within the normative principles of urban planning and design. In addition to these explicit engagements with the neighbourhood it is possible to discern an underlying concern for the neighbourhood as a central objective in Lefebvre's oeuvre. From his analysis of urban alienation and the

politics of everyday life (1971), to his analysis of the production of space in the city (1991), the politics of urban community space dominated Lefebvre's writings.

Lefebvre's work on the neighbourhood has much in common with conventional Marxist readings of neighbourhood conflict and politics (Harvey, 1973). Although sensitive to the social construction and economic production of neighbourhoods, the geohistorical milieu within which Lefebvre worked provided far less scope to conceive of neighbourhoods beyond their coordinates within the hierarchical spaces of the city. The question I ask, then, is how can Lefebvre's work be used to interpret the contemporary manifestations of the neighbourhood? Lefebvre developed a much more fluid and relational reading of neighbourhood space than the fetishised visions of his contemporaries in the fields of urban planning and sociology. In many ways the work of Lefebvre preempted the epochal geoeconomic changes which dissolved the 'relative' territorial fixity of Fordist -Keynesian capitalism (Brenner, 1999, pages 45 - 50), which had once made analyses of neighbourhoods as static urban units seem acceptable and adequate. It is these changes in the scales of social organisation which have provided both the political (UN Commission on Global Governance, 1998) and intellectual (Forrest, 2000) impetus to conceive of and use the neighbourhood as a fluid scalar category. The point is, having recognised the geohistorical changes which make traditional neighbourhood studies seem so anachronistic now, how can the work of Lefebvre be used to respond to the reality of the radically re- configured global, national, regional, and urban scales with which we are confronted today (Brenner, 1999, pages 50 - 53)?

I would claim that the relevance of Lefebvre's work to the emerging scalar geometries of the neighbourhood lies in his theory of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Harvey, 1989, chapter 13; Shields, 1999; Soja, 1989; 1996). The work of Lefebvre on the production of space provides contemporary neighbourhood research with two crucial insights. First, Lefebvre's work reveals why the neighbourhood is so important in the wider politics of urban life. Second, Lefebvre's writings on space disclose the processes by which competing representations of the neighbourhood combine and interact to produce neighbourhoods. According to Soja (1989), the work of Lefebvre provided a new epistemological framework through which space could be understood and interpreted within social theory. Lefebvre's epistemology of space is predicated upon the analysis of three aspects of space: (1) *spatial practice* (the multifarious processes, actions, and routines through which society secretes space); (2) *representations of space* (*conceptualised space*, spaces of ideological power, utopias and visions, the spaces of planners and architects); and (3) *representational space* (*lived space*, clandestine spaces of resistance, the spaces of inhabitants and users) (Lefebvre 1991, pages 38 - 40; Soja, 1996 pages 65 - 68). Lefebvre stated that these three aspects of social space are not isolated expressions of spatiality, but are embroiled in a constant state of dialectical interaction. It is through the dialectical interaction of these different manifestations of space that Lefebvre claimed space was realised or *produced* (Lefebvre, 1991, page 41).

Although Lefebvre's work on the production of (neighbourhood) space does not directly address issues of scale (Marston and Smith, 2001), I would assert that his work can help in the theorisation of neighbourhoods as scalar entities in two main ways. First, Lefebvre's triple dialectic of space provides a multifaceted and relational framework within which to integrate and organise work on the different manifestations of neighbourhood scale. Second, Lefebvre's analysis of space provides a heuristic device within which the links and associations between neighbourhoods, as simultaneously spaces and scales of social organisation, can be explored. In the first instance, Lefebvre's work on the production of space can be extended to understand the hybrid ideological and material form of the neighbourhood scale. In this context, Lefebvre's work draws attention to the ways in which representations of the neighbourhood scale (in politics, policy, planning, and the media) are informed and contested by the representational appropriation of neighbourhoods by inhabitants in the formation of the *oppositional political movements* of everyday life (Herod, 1991). In this way, a more explicit focus on the relationship between scalar

*practices* (the practices through which society secretes its scales of social organisation– the reterritorialisation of the state; labour– market transformations; bodily mobility); *representations* of scale (conceptualised scale– the scalar narratives of globalisation and regionalisation, for example); and representational scales (scales of living– the coordinates of everyday life, social reproduction, and political mobilisation), could be used to bring more conceptual precision to work on the politics of scale.

In the second instance, Lefebvre's insistence on the dialectical unity of the different moments of spatiality could be usefully deployed in work on scale. Crucially, however, the dialectical unity of different forms of scale could be extended to incorporate a dialectical reading of the spatial products of these scalar processes. Therefore, in the context of neighbourhood studies, such a Lefebvrian analysis of scale and space would not only be concerned with the ways in which particular representations of scale collide to produce new scales of social organisation; but also with how these representational appropriations of scale inform the production of new spaces– essentially providing a *scalar politics of space* (Jonas, 1994). Furthermore, attention would also be drawn to the ways in which the production of certain neighbourhood spaces spawns particular structures of scale around the neighbourhood– the *spatiality of scale* (Brenner, 2001, page 606; compare Marston and Smith, 2001, page 616). Put in the context of our earlier discussions of the emerging manifestations of the neighbourhood scale, such an approach would consider the types of subnational and supranational territories which are being produced through discourses of the global neighbourhood, and the forms of geopolitical practices which New Labour's focus on the neighbourhood scale are supporting in British cities.

### **The politics of the neighbourhood and the struggle for local democracy in Walsall**

In order to explore the politics of scales which surround and inform the construction and production of neighbourhoods, I now turn to consider the socialist struggles over neighbourhoods in the town of Walsall. Over the past thirty years political debate in Walsall has been underpinned by a continuous struggle to define and control neighbourhoods. Focusing upon the scalar narratives and practices associated with these debates, in this section I tell the story of Walsall's particular brand of neighbourhood politics and the ways in which these historical struggles have recently become entwined within New Labour's neighbourhood strategies. Through the case of Walsall my analysis explores the complex political processes through which the neighbourhood scale is produced and explores the applicability of the provisional Lefebvrian approach to the analysis of scale outlined above.

### **Community decline and socialist discontents: the emergence of the Tribunus**

Walsall's obsession with the neighbourhood first began in the early 1970s. At this time the collapse of the Fordist economies of the West Midlands region had created widespread social poverty and underinvestment in the physical infrastructure of Walsall. The social and physical decline of Walsall during the early 1970s was felt particularly strongly in the neighbourhood of Caldmore.<sup>3</sup> Caldmore was a strong Conservative enclave in Walsall, but the serious problems facing the area led some people to challenge the political ideals and beliefs held by many in the local community. A particularly vociferous socialist faction in the neighbourhood– who became known as the *Caldmore Group*– used the exploited space of Caldmore as a basis for bringing into question the systems of local government in Walsall which had nurtured such urban dereliction and disregard. According to the Caldmore Group the problems of the town were a product not only of a wider urban socioeconomic crisis but also of a political crisis of the national and local state.

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<sup>3</sup> The story of Caldmore during the 1970s which is presented in this section is derived from Seabrook's (1984) detailed account of neighbourhood politics in the area.

Significantly, in their early political activities the Caldmore Group developed a particular scalar narrative through which they attacked the machinery of local and national government. According to the Caldmore Group, the scaling of local and national government isolated politicians from the people that they were meant to serve and represent. The Caldmore Group promulgated a solution to this problem which was based upon the creation of a new scale of neighbourhood government in Walsall. Interestingly, the ideal of neighbourhood government (Seabrook, 1984) promoted by the Caldmore Group was strongly infused with many of the socialist doctrines to which the group adhered. Accordingly, it was assumed that neighbourhood government would provide an apposite scale through which to challenge the individualistic and alienated forces of capitalism, and to promote new forms of community solidarity and systems of collective support. In the context of this paper, it is also interesting to see how the neighbourhood *space* of Caldmore provided both the material conditions and the social context to forge a scale of political opposition in the town to dominant forms of political and economic organisation. Within this particularly socialist politics of scale we can discern a clear example of the dialectical coupling of space and scale, as a space of urban decline and representation is translated into a particular set of ideological beliefs surrounding the neighbourhood scale.

Despite the plight of Caldmore, and the Marxist protests offered by the Caldmore Group, Walsall's local council did little to address the political and social problems of the area. In response to the local council's inaction, the Caldmore Residents' Group was formed. The Caldmore Residents' Group, although inspired politically by the Caldmore Group, was a more proactive interventionist group devoted to the social and physical renewal of the area. Eventually, the work of the Caldmore Residents' Group became formalised within the Caldmore Housing Association and the Caldmore Advice Centre. The Caldmore Housing Association was devoted to building new houses and flats on disused sites in the area. The Caldmore Advice Centre had a much broader remit, concerning itself with advising and assisting local residents on a whole range of social issues. The critical thing about both the Caldmore Housing Association and the Caldmore Advice Centre was that they were based at a local, neighbourhood, scale— a scale at which the Caldmore Residents' Group felt they could best respond to the needs of local people and foster a sense of local community identity and belonging. Here again we see the ways in which the rescaling of particular social and political practices tends to define and materially consolidate particular urban spaces.

Following the successful implementation of these local political initiatives in Caldmore, Brian Powell, an original member of the Caldmore Group, was elected Labour councillor for Caldmore in 1972. The political developments in Caldmore were actually a prelude to the local Labour group in Walsall— many of whom were either influenced by or were sympathetic to the Caldmore initiative— gaining control of Walsall's council from 1973 to 1976. The Labour council of 1973 was, however, surprisingly anodyne in its politics, as many of the older Labour members continued to advocate the traditional social democratic values of 'locally' scaled government. Walsall's local Labour group's hold on power lasted only three years, and by 1976 they had relinquished control of Walsall's council. Significantly, many of the younger radicals involved in the local Labour government of that time— such as Brian Powell and Dave Church— used their experience of local government and their involvement in the Caldmore experiment to forge a new brand of local Labour movement. This initially revolved around the fledging Tribune Group, which was set up following the defeat of the local Labour group in 1976.<sup>4</sup> The Tribune Group met regularly in pubs, cafes, bars, and restaurants to discuss the potential for a radical set of local socialist initiatives in the town. Drawing broadly upon the relative success and inspiration of the Caldmore experience, the Tribune Group gradually became more and more popular within the Walsall Labour group (Seabrook, 1984). It was from within the Tribune Group that the ideas and principles of the local Labour movement in Walsall during the 1980s

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<sup>4</sup> The name Tribune was adopted by the group on the basis of its traditional Latin meaning, *Tribunus*— referring to the unofficial defender of the rights of the individual and wider plebeian society.

emerged. Significantly, as we will see, the neighbourhood was a central tenet and scalar motif of this political movement.

### **Making the Caldmore dream a reality: Dave Church and the 'Haul to Democracy' in Walsall**

Having gained support from the wider Labour Party in the town, the Tribune Group was instrumental in creating the 1980 *Haul to Democracy* local election manifesto (Walsall Labour Party, 1980). It was on the basis of this radical manifesto that the local Labour group regained control of Walsall's local council. The Haul to Democracy programme predicated the importance of restructuring government and local social relations around a series of neighbourhood districts in the town. The Haul to Democracy programme initially led to the creation of thirty– three *neighbourhood offices* (this has now been extended to thirty five). These offices were designed to do two things: (1) to rescale the delivery of local government housing and benefit services; and (2) to provide a community focus around which more wide– ranging forms of political power and identity could be forged. Significantly, Walsall's neighbourhood offices were modelled upon the *Caldmore Advice Centre*, and provided local centres through which residents could get advice on welfare benefits, check council house waiting lists, pay council rents, and lodge requests for housing repairs.

The formation of neighbourhood offices in Walsall was overseen and directed by Dave Church, a former member of the Tribune Group, who was at that time in charge of housing in the borough. During the formation of neighbourhood offices in Walsall, Dave Church presented the neighbourhood as an alternative, more humanly scaled, basis for local government:

“In the vastness of the civic centre, many of them [local politicians] had had little or no contact with the people they were supposed to serve; personal contact– on such rare occasions that it had been unavoidable– had nearly always meant some more or less frightening confrontation with a tenant driven to despair by neglect and indifference and who had somehow managed to evade the elaborate defences provided by the civic centre” (Seabrook, 1984, page 125).

Despite the scalar discourses and practices which the local Labour group promoted around neighbourhoods in the town, the Labour council was replaced in 1982 by an *antisocialist coalition* of Walsall's Conservative, Liberal, and Independent political groups. Whereas the relative success and local popularity of the neighbourhood offices ensured their continued existence under the new political regime, wider plans for neighbourhood reform in the town were abandoned.

### **Power to the people of Walsall! The resurrection of the neighbourhood and the fall of 'Citizen Dave'**

Having remained relatively dormant during much of the 1980s and early 1990s, the neighbourhood debate once again became a prominent political issue in Walsall in 1995. In 1995 Dave Church, by now leader of Walsall's local Labour group, launched the now infamous *Power to the People* local election manifesto (Walsall Labour Party, 1995), in which he set out a new vision for neighbourhood politics in the town which was based upon a radical Local Democracy Programme (*Walsall Observer* 1995a). Drawing inspiration from the ideas of the Tribune group and the neighbourhood offices experiment, the Labour group's *Local Democracy Programme* sought to take the principle of neighbourhood government and organisation to a new level. The election manifesto's central vision involved the disbanding and devolution of Walsall's local authority into fifty– five locally elected *neighbourhood councils*. Although ultimately inspired by the socialist democratic values of 1970s Walsall, Dave Church's scheme of neighbourhood government was also driven by the need to cut council spending on key social services. Consequently, although it was inspired by historical discourses of the neighbourhood in Walsall, the Local Democracy Programme contained a new narrative of the neighbourhood, in which the neighbourhood was presented not only as a



more democratic and socially inclusive political scale, but also one which was more financially efficient! In this way, the local Labour group sought to recast in part the neighbourhood as a neoliberal as well as neosocialist space, and to align their vision of the neighbourhood with the wider New Right restructuring of the British state.

Having won the local election of 1995, Dave Church's party began to implement its plans for neighbourhood government. The most controversial aspects of the Local Democracy Programme included: (1) the proposed sale of Walsall's Civic Centre— the centralised hub of local government in the town; (2) replacing the numerous departmental heads in Walsall's local government bureaucracy with a much smaller corporate board of decision-makers; (3) wide— ranging administrative job cuts in the town's local government; and (4) giving local neighbourhood councils the power to control mainstream local government budgets and spending. These plans, it was claimed, would streamline the bureaucracy and save around »300 000 in local government spending annually.

In light of these radical proposals, Walsall's Labour group was unsurprisingly attacked from a variety of political directions. First, there was an ideological assault on the Local Democracy Programme from the national Conservative government of the time. The Conservative government described Walsall's Local Democracy Programme as the “spectre of loony— leftism”, and the proposed fifty— five neighbourhood councils as “mini Kremlins” (*The Guardian* 1995a). Rather more surprising was the opposition the local Labour group's plans received from local unions and the national Labour Party. Local union groups came out in opposition to the local democracy plan because of the job cuts it threatened (*Walsall Observer* 1995b). Ultimately, union action resulted in a series of politically damaging strikes, which affected key services in the town (*Walsall Observer*, 1995b). National Labour Party criticism centred on the ways in which the scheme appeared to undermine the attempts which were being made by Tony Blair to recast and modernise Labour's traditional socialist image. In the context of the forthcoming general election and amid rumours of phone tapping, intimidation, and internecine struggles in Walsall's local Labour group, Dave Church was suspended by Labour's National Executive less than eight months after he had come to power (*Walsall Observer* 1995c). Walsall's local Labour group had essentially become trapped in that space where socialist values of community solidarity and devolution conflict with the desire to protect workers' rights and jobs, and where local socialist visions run counter to the modern party line.

### **The restructuring and recolonisation of neighbourhood space in Walsall**

In many ways, from the 1970s onwards, the neighbourhood came to represent the symbolic heart of local politics in Walsall. Thus, the neighbourhood became a site around which the wider political struggles of Walsall— including welfare service delivery, housing, political representation, and government spending— were articulated and contested. Despite the collapse of Walsall's Local Democracy Programme, and the dismissal of Dave Church as the leader of Walsall's Labour Party, it consequently came as little surprise that facets of the neighbourhood programme proposed by the group were allowed to continue in the town. In an attempt to pilot many of the ideals championed in the Local Democracy Programme, the local council had applied for urban regeneration money from central government (Institute of Local Government Studies, 1997, page i). The bid to the government's Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund was premised on the delivery of urban regeneration through a series of locally elected neighbourhood committees. During the period between when the Single Regeneration Budget bid was submitted and the successful bids were announced, the local Labour group lost power of Walsall's council. Despite the political turmoil in the town, the Single Regeneration bid was successful and provided an expedient surrogate to the more radical neighbourhood plans of the Labour group.

The Single Regeneration Budget programme, which was entitled *Empowering Local Communities*, was used by the new local government administration and the central state to re-colonise many of the most popular elements of neighbourhood reform which were championed by Walsall's local Labour group. The Empowering Local Communities scheme focused on four priority areas within the sub-districts of Brownhills, North Walsall, Moxley, and Willenhall. These target areas were served by local committees, which were presented as viable alternatives to the neighbourhood councils originally promoted in the Local Democracy Programme. Originally seven committees were created to support community empowerment in the four *target areas* as well as additional community groups in Goscote, Harden, and Ryecroft/Coalpool.<sup>5</sup> These local committees were made up of locally elected neighbourhood representatives. These representatives were elected from smaller scaled neighbourhood subareas or *patches*, of around one hundred households each.

Although it did not adopt the idea of neighbourhood councils, the new neighbourhood scheme did exploit many of the scalar narratives of the neighbourhood which had been promulgated under the previous Labour administration. Consequently, the scheme emphasised the role of the neighbourhood as a site of proximity and local knowledge and thus an empowering scale for political decision-making and participation:

"Each of the seven neighbourhoods has been divided, with the advice of local people, into smaller constituencies of around 100 households. The basis for this was that around 100 households was the maximum to reasonably expect a representative to deliver a newsletter or to call a meeting for. With an electorate of between 150 and 300, this will be coming close to a *humanly sustainable scale of local democracy*. These elected representatives are the voting members of the local committees, although it is clear they will be co-opting others with an interest in their neighbourhoods" (Walsall MBC, 2002, emphasis added).

In addition to providing a more humanly scaled form of local democracy, the Empowering Local Communities scheme also sought to emphasise the organic unity of neighbourhoods as spaces of collective recognition and identity. Rather than imposing neighbourhoods onto communities in an abstract way, local people were consequently involved in the identification and delimitation of neighbourhood territories. One local authority worker described the process to me:

"The people who wish to be involved in the design team leading up to the elections are typically groups of between eight and twenty people. We try and draw a neighbourhood map with them, we agree the map with them and we say yes this is the outer-boundary of your neighbourhood. We construct the internal electoral patches within the outer boundary. This is then officially agreed by the design team and the proposals are then advertised and promoted at fairs, general local meetings and local opinions on the boundaries and patches are taken on board" (associate policy officer, Walsall MBC, 1999).

By engaging local residents in the mapping out of neighbourhood territories, the local council has tried to build upon existing spaces of representation in the town as sites for more formal types of political action and participation. The system of local committees has subsequently provided the basis through which the New Labour government's New Deal for Local Communities programme and related neighbourhood schemes are now being delivered. Significantly, these new schemes have re-enforced many of the reformist ideals of neighbourhood which have become synonymous with the Labour government, and

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<sup>5</sup> In 1998 more local committees were created in the five areas of the town which had received City Challenge state funding. These have subsequently been joined by a further seven local committees which were created through another phase of Single Regeneration Budget spending in the town.

have been used by the state to impose official representations of the neighbourhood scale onto the existing political landscape of Walsall.

Despite the implementation of local neighbourhood democracy in Walsall, the system of local committees has been widely criticised. One of the main criticisms of the local committee structure has focused upon their territorial coverage. Unlike the proposed system of neighbourhood councils envisaged by the local Labour group, local committees serve only sixteen of the thirty– five districts of Walsall. Many feel that this has created an inherently uneven territorial distribution of democratic rights in the town and generated great divisions, jealousies, and antagonisms between different neighbourhoods (*Walsall Observer* 2002). These types of centrally imposed and regulated neighbourhood show facets of what Sennett (1974) described as 'barricaded community territories'.

In addition to their limited territorial scope, local neighbourhood committees in Walsall have also been attacked for lacking real power and influence. Although it was intended that neighbourhood councils should have control over mainstream delegated funding, the local committees have only been involved in the delivery of special– purpose grant funding. As I talked to one local committee representative, it became apparent that the issue of delegated funding was becoming increasingly contentious within the local committee structure:

“At the moment we haven't got delegated funds although the whole discussion is about should we have delegated funds, or should we have influence and I don't think that it is clear yet which way they are going to go, clearly there are problems with giving us delegated funding in the areas of education or housing or so forth, because of the network of law and responsibility that surrounds that” (local community worker and committee representative, 1999).

According to those working on local committees, the failure to delegate mainstream funding is undermining the ability of these committees to act as effective forms of neighbourhood government, as opposed to puppets of the local authority:

“[there is] a need to take this Committee away from being a Council run thing, it felt very much as if we were being spoon fed by the Council and I think it was a sense of the Committee growing up when we said we will decide what is our agenda not you, and we will decide when we meet. Because we were getting silly little things like people saying oh, you can't do that and we were saying well why?” (community worker, Walsall, 1999).

In light of these criticisms, the precise nature and value of neighbourhood– based politics is now being questioned in Walsall.

### **Reflections on the case of Walsall: the struggle through and over scale**

The complex struggles over neighbourhoods in Walsall raises important issues, both in terms of how neighbourhoods are defined and of how they are used politically. Despite the popular dissemination of the ideals of the neighbourhood within British and international political society, the case of Walsall illustrates that not all visions or principles of neighbourhood are as acceptable as others. Drawing on the politics of scale literature and Lefebvre's production of space thesis, in this paper I have shown how the struggle to define, control, and shape neighbourhoods is waged through different moments of scale (including scalar narratives, scalar reach, and scalar practices). I have also emphasised that the politics of the neighbourhood scale is intimately tied to a corresponding geography of neighbourhood spaces, in and through which the varied politics of neighbourhood scales are dialectically coupled to a corresponding geopolitics of neighbourhood space.

From the very outset of the Caldmore neighbourhood movement, the prioritisation of the neighbourhood was based upon a particular scalar narrative, which questioned the validity of local and national political institutions and called for a more humanly scaled brand of social organisation. At the same time, the ability of those working in Caldmore to create new forms of neighbourhood government were conditioned by their ability to command and control other political scales. Initially, for example, through the formation of the Tribune Group, the parochial concerns of the Caldmore Group were translated into a wider socialist movement which embraced other boroughs in the town (especially socialist South Walsall). Subsequently, and inspired by the Tribune Group, it was the success of the local Labour Party in the 1980 and 1995 elections which facilitated the creation of a more powerful, and effective neighbourhood movement in the town. It was through the control of local government that the local Labour group was able to finance, coordinate, and legislate for the formation of both neighbourhood offices and councils. In this way, it is not difficult to see how the command over particular scales equates to the control over other instruments of political power. The particular case of Caldmore also serves to illustrate how a particular space of representation – in this case a space for radical socialist politics – tends to define a particular scale of political representation, which in turn reinforces, through the location of various formal political organisations in the area, political space.

The ability of the Caldmore Group to translate their local neighbourhood struggle into a more broadly scaled political movement was crucial to the relative success of neighbourhood reform in Walsall. However, the ultimate collapse of more radical neighbourhood programmes was undoubtedly related to the inability of the local Labour group to make neighbourhood struggle not a just a local, but a regional, national, and even supranational issue. The failure of Walsall's Labour group to court the support of the national labour unions, other radical Labour councils who were following similar programmes of neighbourhood reform, or the national Labour Party as a whole, ultimately led to their loss of power over the local council and the collapse of the Local Democracy Programme. The inability of the local Labour group to gain formal political support for their programme of neighbourhood reform, and to sanction their actions within existing scalar constellations of control and authority, appears to have had more to do with the ideological history of the scheme than with the actual intentions of the programme. As one journalist pointed out at the time:

“The socialist group... has made an extraordinary collection of enemies ... But if Mr Church and his allies had had no previous association with the Labour Left, and had dressed in sharp suits and hired a public relations firm, they could have sold their policies as an act of ultra- Blairite modernisation" (*The Guardian* 1995b).

The inability of Walsall to transcend, or jump, scales in their struggle over neighbourhood life and government reflects the wider problems which various socialist and ecosocialist movements appear to have encountered when trying to operate at different spatial scales (Harvey, 2000, pages 47 - 52). As Harvey (2000) points out, although a number of different working- class movements have consistently proved successful at a local level, if they are to be ultimately successful such movements must always seek to engage at other scales of political activity and to forge new political alliances beyond the local. Harvey's assertions are premised on the fact that in the production of new scales of social or political life, scale is never produced anew and in complete isolation. Scale is always produced within preexisting systems of scalar organisation and hierarchy. As Herod (1991) points out, “scale is not only socially produced, but is also socially producing" (page 84). In the case of Walsall, the attempt to create new neighbourhood councils directly threatened existing systems of political hierarchy, particularly those of local government (which was to be dissolved) and the power of the national government (which had little influence on the design and implementation of the neighbourhood councils). This is why the struggle over neighbourhood space in Walsall became a struggle over and through scale. In these forms of struggle, the types of scalar practices and modes of representation adopted have a key influence on the ability of different groups to develop and enforce their own particular representations of the neighbourhood scale.

The continuation of neighbourhood reform in Walsall – albeit in a highly diluted way – through various state-sponsored urban regeneration initiatives is also significant in relation to our discussion of scale. By prioritising the neighbourhood in Walsall, the state has cleverly occupied a contentious arena of political struggle in the town. By giving Walsall a form of neighbourhood government, the central state has reduced the space, both literally and metaphorically, within which socialist struggle in the area can occur. Moreover, the state-sponsored neighbourhood programmes in Walsall differ from the proposals of the Local Democracy Programme in important ways. Prime among these is the fact that these neighbourhood programmes exist within and are managed through lines of command associated with existing scales of government hierarchy. Unlike the neighbourhood spaces envisioned by the local Labour group, which were a direct critique of existing scales of government, the neighbourhood spaces being produced by the state support and sustain the scales at which the state is strong. Consequently, although they are being delivered in the neighbourhoods of Walsall, state programmes like the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities are guaranteed by the local authority and monitored by the Government Office and Regional Development Agencies in the West Midlands region. Through these chains of local and regional command, the state is able to effectively control and monitor the neighbourhoods of Walsall. What is also clear is that through these carefully orchestrated scalar practices, the British state is able to mould the types of neighbourhood spaces which are now being produced and consolidated in Walsall.

Reflecting upon the Lefebvrian-inspired framework of scale analysis described above, it is possible to see how the story of Walsall's struggle over neighbourhood government reflects the complex processes which inform the production of political, social, and economic scale. But what implications does the story of neighbourhood government in Walsall have for the wider discussions of the neighbourhood as a context for future social and political organisation? Crucially, I feel that the story of Walsall illustrates that, although the production and regulation of neighbourhoods continue to occur within existing scalar hierarchies of political and economic power, the ability of neighbourhoods to act as effective arenas of social expression and cultural identification is undermined. Just as the politics of the neighbourhood is a battle fought in and over scale, if that battle is lost, so too are many of the most direct political benefits offered by alternative scales and spaces of social organisation and political life. It is important in this context to observe the relationship between the different politics of scales – including the representational appropriations of scale, scalar practices, and scales of representation – and between scalar processes and space – for example, centralised and competitive urban funding and fragmented neighbourhood spaces; regionally controlled urban policy and the production of uniform neighbourhood territories. In the case of Walsall, consequently, one can clearly see how particular types of state-sponsored scalar practice tend to produce certain types of politically docile space.

### **Conclusion: problematising the return of the neighbourhood**

In this paper I have considered the return of the neighbourhood as a political objective within both international and national government. In considering the reemergence of the neighbourhood, my analysis has sought to extend traditional geographical concerns with the spatial politics of the neighbourhood to incorporate an appreciation of the multiple politics of scale which surround neighbourhoods. Drawing on recent work on the politics of scale, and Lefebvre's analysis of the production of space, I have explored the political narratives and practices involved in the production of the neighbourhood scale, and tried to understand how the different aspects of the politics of scale come together in this production process. Drawing on the particular case of the neighbourhood politics of Walsall, the analysis has shown that neighbourhoods neither predate their political construction and appropriation, nor do they emerge within a world that is free of preexisting systems of scalar organisation or hierarchy. Consequently, although scales such as the neighbourhood, the city, the region, the nation, or even the planet offer the chance to create new political movements which resist dominant patterns of capitalist economics and state intervention, these scales, and the potentially 'progressive' political discourses associated with them, are equally open to colonisation and exploitation by preexisting political and economic powers and scales of authority.

In the case of Walsall it is interesting to see how the original socialist visions of neighbourhood challenged existing scales of political authority. Although the new system of neighbourhood government in the town has been carefully realigned within existing scalar hierarchies of the state, the neighbourhood scale has not been completely absorbed within this regularised system of political authority. Through the new ideals of neighbourhood being promoted by groups such as the Socialist Alliance in Walsall and the continuing role of neighbourhood offices in the area, the scalar politics of the town reflects what Brenner (2001, page 606) describes as a *mosaic of scales*. Within this mosaic of overlapping neighbourhood scales in Walsall, there remains the opportunity to contest and challenge the hegemonic scalar fixes of the state. A focus on the complex and overlapping nature of scale could provide an important focus for future work on the politics of scales more generally and challenge prevailing beliefs in the existence of rigid scalar hierarchies.

In addition to trying to articulate more clearly the different facets of the scalar politics which surround neighbourhoods, I have also emphasised that the contemporary penchant for scale analysis should not be at the expense of work on space. As with traditional geographical categories such as locality, community, region, and nation, the neighbourhood is simultaneously a space and scale of social organisation and praxis. I assert that future geographical work must develop towards a more careful integration of analyses of the production of space and scale which, although sensitive to the differences which exist between these categories, appreciates their mutual imbroglis. The work of Lefebvre, which has been outlined in this paper, provides a potentially rich perspective on the dialectical coupling of space and scale. Beyond work on neighbourhoods, such a perspective could usefully be deployed to consider the new scales of political organisation which are being produced within the spatial economies associated with global cities (Brenner, 1998); the relationship between the new regional spaces of economic development (Scott, 1988) and the rescaling of state institutions (Swyngedouw, 1996); and how the popular discourses of global citizenship are being incorporated into new spaces of gender, ecology, and ethnic expression and identity.

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