

Contemporary hunter-gatherers are frequently characterized as ‘small-scale societies’ when contrasted with the ‘large-scale’ modern world. However, in seeking insights from them on human cultural diversity or pressing challenges like climate change and childcare, their group size is often overlooked, even in prominent anthropological studies. This prompts a critical inquiry: What do both approaches — framing hunter-gatherers by scale or ignoring it — fail to capture, and what does this reveal about the concept of scale itself?

This talk will unpack the paradox inherent in using, or bypassing, the lens of ‘Scale’ in the study of hunter-gatherers. In anthropology, ‘Scale’ is often applied as an etic (outsider) framework, which can inadvertently obscure the emic (insider) perspective. This key modern construct presumes a world composed of discrete, separable entities, understandable through categorization, comparison, and quantifiable units. Such assumptions hinder our understanding of indigenous traditions, which often prioritize the interconnectedness of diverse humans and other-than-humans and often lack formal counting systems. If unchallenged, these assumptions obstruct our comprehension of fundamental hunter-gatherer practices, including housing, community, and kinship, not just their animistic beliefs. Yet, by ignoring indigenous small population size, we also lose sight of these peoples’ experience of direct, immediate connection with each other and their surroundings that is crucial to understanding their cultures and ontologies.

To escape the allure and trap of this modern conception of scale, we may better turn to digital-era concepts such as connectivity and flow. Unlike ‘scale’, which reduces complexity

to discrete individual and collective units, these concepts offer a dynamic framework uniquely suited to illuminate the inherently relational and interconnected nature of hunter-gatherer worlds. Drawing on forty years of ethnographic research with the Nayaka, a forest-dwelling people of South India, this presentation will illuminate their deeply interconnective world through an exploration of their everyday practices related to housing, communal life, kinship, and animism.

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Lecture Series Scale

Scales are used to quantify properties such as length and temperature, or also to measure popularity and affect. But as Alice discovers in *Wonderland*, a change of scale can also have dramatic qualitative consequences. It disrupts customary ways of perceiving, acting, and being — to the point of feeling as ‘queer’ to her as a caterpillar’s metamorphoses. Helped by the arguably inextricable intertwinement of different meanings and aspects of scale, Alice’s experiences continue to provide apt metaphors for the disorienting importance and effects of scale and scaling at a time of hyperglobalization and the so-called anthropocene.

Scale is indeed a highly ambiguous notion, even when one only considers the meanings deriving from the Latin or Italian *scala*, ladder. It simultaneously denotes the whole ladder, one of its steps, and the relation between two steps: The scale of a cartographic map is the ratio between a distance on the map and a distance on the ground, but any particular length also defines a scale, and the range of scales from the subatomic to the planetary scale is part of the spatial scale. Paradoxically recursive, scale combines and helps mediate quantity and quality, as well as subjective perception, objective material properties, and contingent construction.

If different disciplines, discourses, and dispositives each have their privileged scales to which they tend to reduce others, what may be gained by thinking them together, acknowledging both the relative autonomy of particular scales — each with their own affordances, limitations, rules, even laws and ontologies — and their interdependence — each affecting and being affected by other scales? What is the critical purchase of developing multiscale architectures or patchworks of scale-specific, mutually inconsistent and irreducible descriptions, theories, and models? How might the tensions be made productive where they overlap or come into contact? The ICI’s Lecture Series ‘Scale’ will address such questions by reflecting upon the critical role of scale within and across a wide range of different fields.

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The Scale Paradox: Hunter-Gatherer Connective Worlds

