

# Scalar Narratives in Bilbao: A Cultural Politics of Scales Approach to the Study of Urban Policy

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## Abstract

*In this article I explore how theoretical metaphors about the contemporary rescaling of the capitalist economy are used by local policy actors to justify an entrepreneurial urban policy. I develop a new theoretical concept (scalar narrative), suggest an analytical approach (cultural politics of scales) and give evidence of a particular case (Bilbao). The article is structured in the following way. First, I briefly review the literature on politics of scales and contribute to the debate with an approach that incorporates elements from cultural political economy and interpretative policy analysis. Within this approach I mobilize the concept of 'scalar narrative' that has already been suggested in the literature but not fully explored. I then put this approach into practice with a particular case study, Bilbao, a city in the north of Spain, which has recently gone through extensive urban regeneration, where I describe the appropriation of three scalar narratives by the policymakers. To show this I draw from empirical work done in Bilbao that looks at statutory and strategic planning documents as well as urban marketing literature and interviews with key informants.*

## Introduction

In this article I examine how theoretical metaphors about the contemporary rescaling of the capitalist economy are used by local policy actors to justify an entrepreneurial urban policy. I contend that policymakers use debates originally coming from the academic research as a basis to legitimate and justify a particular approach to urban policy that focuses on economic competitiveness.

There has recently been a very rich discussion on the fuzziness and rigour of concepts emerging from urban and regional studies literature (Markusen, 1999; Hudson, 2003; Lagendijk, 2003; Moulaert and Sekia, 2003; Peck, 2003; Rossi, 2004). Lagendijk (2003) notes that the production of these concepts takes place through discursive practices performed at various levels and in diverse networks. In this article, I want to extend the analysis of the social production of these concepts to the policy community and look at how and why concepts within urban and regional studies debates are used in the policy realm.

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To do this I first briefly review the literature on politics of scales and contribute to the debate with an approach that incorporates elements from cultural political economy and interpretative policy analysis. Within this approach I mobilize the concept of 'scalar narrative' that has already been suggested in the literature but not fully explored. I then put this approach into practice with a particular case study, Bilbao, a city in the north of Spain that has recently gone through extensive urban regeneration, and I explore how policymakers have appropriated three scalar narratives. To show this I draw from empirical work undertaken in Bilbao that looks at statutory and strategic planning documents as well as urban marketing literature and interviews with key informants.

## The 'scale-scaling-politics of scales' conversation

The 'scaling' debate has escalated in the last few years. There is a growing interest in 'scale issues' in the forms of theoretical and methodological contributions and, to a lesser extent, empirical ones. At this point, I suggest, the debate should now be concerned with deepening new theoretical tools, developing the methodology and providing evidence in support of its main contentions.

In this article, I propose a new theoretical concept (scalar narrative), suggest an analytical approach (cultural politics of scales) and give evidence of a particular case (Bilbao). I am not intending to offer a coherent and exhaustive review of the recent literature that has dealt with scale, scaling and the politics of scales (see, for example, Howitt, 1998; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999; Marston, 2000; Uitermark, 2002; Paasi, 2004; González, 2005a). Recently Swyngedouw (2004) has presented the nine central themes that for him define the 'scalar' perspective and which are also shared in this article. Below, I briefly sketch this background.

Perhaps the sequence 'scale-scaling-politics of scales' summarizes the gist of this long academic 'conversation' because it suggests a move from a 'fixed' conception of scales as self-enclosed levels to a relational understanding of scales (Paasi, 2004) that incorporates the role of power and politics in the scaling process. The concept of scale helped to spatialize Marxist and post-Marxist research and sought to tackle one of capitalism's main contradictions: its tendency, on the one hand, to constantly flow to and expand in locations that provide the best returns and, on the other, its inability to escape a concrete space. In other words, capitalism 'cannot do without its "spatial fixes"' and as a partial solution to its crises it builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image which eventually always becomes a barrier to further accumulation (Harvey, 2000: 54).

Once the importance of 'spatial fix' had been established as a key concept to understand the geographical development of capital, the academic discussion turned to its 'scaling'. Along these lines, Jessop (2002: 49) argues that Harvey's 'spatial fix' is not sufficiently dynamic and complex and suggests thinking of capitalism as incorporating 'specific accumulation strategies at various economic and political scales in specific spatio-temporal contexts'. This 'spatio-temporal fix' works as a complex and always contingent scaffolding 'through which the circulation of capital has been continually territorialised, deterritorialised and reterritorialised' (Brenner, 1999). Studies from the regulation approach have stressed that during Fordism, the nation-state was the primary scale within this scaffolding at which the regulation of the economy took place. Other scales such as local and regional 'served primarily as transmission belts for national economic and social politics' and key supranational institutions were designed to promote cooperation among national states (Jessop, 2002: 71).

However, in the last few decades, according to the literature, with the growing internationalization of the economy, we are witnessing a geographical reorganization of capitalism; the territorial scaffolding that was formed during Fordism is being dismantled, giving way to a new territorial form. This process has been called 'rescaling'

and has sparked a vivid discussion about the possibility or not of the formation of a new territorial fix and its social, political and economic connotations. This debate has definitely evidenced that there is nothing 'natural' or 'essential' about the geographical organization of capitalism but that 'the nature, substance, and configuration of the new scales and their nesting attest to the changing relative power positions of social groups and classes' (Swyngedouw, 1997: 156). The scalar localization of socio-political functions is not something predetermined but on the contrary is something historically and geographically contingent (Peck, 2002). In other words, scales do not pre-exist our interaction but are actively reproduced through our everyday life, institutional arrangements, values, norms and habits. This argument was already present in Smith's (1984) work when he argued that the vital point in the analysis of the spatial scales of capital was not to take these scales as given, no matter how self-evident they might appear. But, it was later when the scaling debate met the 'cultural turn' that the 'social and political construction of scale' became a basic tenet in the 'scale conversation' (see Marston, 2000 and Paasi, 2004 for comprehensive reviews).

But if scales are socially constructed and therefore not fixed but 'perpetually redefined, contested and restructured' (Swyngedouw, 1997: 141) and yet capitalism needs a partial spatial fix, the main issue turns to the question of *how* and *who* is able to limit, constrain and eventually fix the circulation of capital around *what* scale? Or, how are scales actually set or fixed amidst the flux of social interaction (Smith, 2003: 228)? This, I believe, is the question that the *politics of scales* approach tries to answer.

## Cultural politics of scales

Politics of scales are, therefore, those strategies used by actors to explain, justify, defend and even try to impose the link between a particular scale or scalar configuration and a political project. Logically, not all actors will necessarily agree about the scale at which a particular political project should take place and therefore a process of collaboration, negotiation, exchange, contestation or struggle might happen. In this process, actors engage in a discursive strategy to make their scalar political project seem as natural, normal and legitimate as possible. This is, in fact, the focus of this article: the discursive strategies mobilized by actors to give coherence to their scalar political practices.

This process is certainly not merely discursive but perpetually coevolves with the material side of production and consumption. For example, as Pike (2005) has shown, the closure of a factory is not just explainable through economic factors such as business profit but needs to be contextualized within a complex set of extra-economic factors such as regional institutional capacity or community politics. My contribution resides in showing how actors make use of discursive resources to select specific material practices as relevant and significant above others. To justify their particular interests actors will seek to link them to wider accepted claims. In particular, my interest is in how certain policy choices, which have material consequences, are constructed as univocal.

This is precisely what cultural political economy, as recently developed by Jessop (2004) and Sum and Jessop (2001), seeks to understand by acknowledging the importance of 'extra-economic' factors, such as meanings, practices and language in the study of the political economy of places (Hudson, 2000; Jessop, 2002). So-called third-generation regulationists have also contributed in the last few years to the development of a more culturally minded regulationist research, placing more emphasis on the analysis of the 'mode of regulation' (an ensemble of cultural norms, habits, institutionalized process, etc.) rather than on the 'regime of accumulation' (Jenson, 1991; Painter and Goodwin, 1995; Jessop, 1997a; 1997b; MacLeod, 1997; Painter, 1997; Soja, 1999).

However, when it comes to carrying out detailed and fine-grain analysis of the construction of the 'economic imaginaries', the regulation approach does not provide the necessary methodological tools to critically analyse the intricate process of policy making or what Gale (2003: 54) calls the 'politics of the policy process'. This is where interpretative policy analysis is useful. This approach derives mainly from American pragmatism and directs our attention to the discursive dimension of politics, power, informal settings, actor's conceptions and perceptions (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). These ideas have had very interesting resonances amongst urban and regional planning theorists (Healey, 1997; 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2002; Hillier, 2002; Watson, 2002; Throgmorton, 2003). Within this approach, Jensen and Richardson (2004: 43) have put together what they call a 'cultural sociology of space' approach that deals with the 'dialectical relations between socio-spatial practices and the symbolic and cultural meanings that social agents attach to their environment'. Consequently, they are interested, as I am, in how actors construct ideas about space and how these ideas are then fought over and embedded in particular institutional settings. For them, policy is constructed on a field of power struggles between different interests where knowledge and truth are contested (*ibid.*). Finally, they use a discourse analytical framework to understand 'the ways in which spaces, places and mobilities are represented strategically in policy discourses in order to bring about certain changes of socio-spatial relations and prevent others' (*ibid.*: 58).

Taking on board Jensen and Richardson's approach, my proposal is to look at the language, practices and rationalities that actors always unfold within the struggle to discursively fix scalar political projects. This perspective could be called 'cultural politics of scales' as a way to express the conjunction between cultural political economy, cultural sociology of space and politics of scales. This approach will pay more attention to processes of 'scaling from below' and will draw 'other dimensions' of social life such as culture and everyday life practices into the scaling debate, as proposed by Nielsen and Simonsen (2003).

## Scalar narratives

Having described the 'antecedent action' of the scaling debate and the cultural turn in political economy and planning theory, I want to propose the concept of 'scalar narrative' as a useful tool to analyse the strategies that actors unfold in the politics of scales.

The term itself has only been mentioned or hinted at in the scale literature (Kelly, 1997; Swyngedouw, 1997: 140; 2004; Brenner, 2001; Peck, 2002; 2005; Deckha, 2003; Nielsen and Simonsen, 2003) but its potentiality has not been fully explored. It addresses a series of themes raised by several authors including issues of power, discourse, and agency (Nielsen and Simonsen, 2003). I begin by offering a preliminary definition of scalar narratives as those stories that actors tell about the changes in the scalar localization of socio-political processes.

The use of the term narrative or story refers to the discursive aspect of the politics of scales and hints at the importance of rhetoric, communication and language. Indeed, narratives are one of the most basic ways of communication that humans use from childhood to exchange information and to transmit values. Onega and García Landa (1996: 3) define a narrative as a 'semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and casual way' and it generally comprises the following elements: a collection of events, connected in a sequential or temporal fashion through an explicatory and coherent argument. What is significant for my argument is that narratives do not merely describe a series of events but also connect them in a coherent thread beneath which there is a causal explanation. This causal explanation is what White (1985) calls the plot and which, for him, crucially turns a chronicle into a

narrative. To illustrate this significant distinction Forster (1974) gives an example. In 'The king died and then the queen died', two events are presented as linked through a temporal sequence. However, in 'The king died and then the queen died of sadness', we still have the temporal sequence but this is shadowed by the causal explanation. Thus, a plot is the element which unifies in a complete action what in a random fashion is constituted by the circumstances (Ricoeur, 1984, cited in Kaplan, 1993: 172). A plot gives coherence and closure to the chain of events connected together by a temporal sequence. The plot, then, becomes the argument that explains the fact that those events are connected and which eventually would explain how ulterior events would unfold. It carries certain normativity about how things are organized and should be organized. Indeed as White (1987, cited in Callinicos, 1995: 50) notes, 'narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case might be, already possesses a content prior to any actualization of it in speech or writing'. 'Modes of emplotment', White continues, involve 'ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and specifically political implications'. The political implication of narratives is the main theme of this article.

Another characteristic of narratives is that they are able to present complex situations as relatively simple chains of events easily understandable by everyone. This is in fact one of a narrative's most powerful elements as it becomes a very effective tool for communicating simple ideas. Furthermore, following Finnegan (1998), narratives have a potential for generalization, and are useful communicative tools to transmit easily recognizable general conventions. Narratives therefore, provide a general context wherein we locate ourselves, where to situate our ideas, values and actions and eventually predict the future. Or, as argued by McGuirk (2004: 1024), discursive formations (such as narratives) 'provide the dominant social imaginery (context) — the universe of political discourse — in which policy issues are framed, political subjectivities mobilized and judged to be legitimate, rational'. The simplicity and the potential for generalization make such narratives relatively transferable across different cultures and adaptable to different situations. Along with their simplicity and transferability, narratives also provide a sense of coherence, totality and closure. In White's (1975, quoted in Callinicos, 1995: 50–51) words, narrative 'reveals to us a world that is putatively finished . . . In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience', certainly, narratives are able to 'give to reality the odour of the ideal'. Obviously, it is only a particular reality and a particular ideal that are suggested in a narrative, which brings into the discussion the importance of who is telling the narrative. The author of the narrative implicitly imposes a normative view of the reality so it is crucial to understand the authorship of a narrative.

For the purpose of this article, therefore, I understand narratives as a basic mode of communication able to transform complex situations into an easily understandable chain of events, linked by a causal explanation, which imply a possibility for generalization, contextualization, transferability and closure, and which, most importantly, have ulterior political implications.

Returning to the scaling debate and bearing in mind the previous points, I define 'scalar narratives' as stories about changes in the spatial patterns of socio-political processes that are uttered by actors or groups embedded in specific historic and political contexts and which reduce the universe of political choices. Let us consider a particular example to start to put things together. The following piece of text appears in the Plan Territorial del Bilbao Metropolitano or Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao, which is the legally binding planning instrument for the entire metropolitan area of Bilbao.

Analysing this global context, we can observe an increasing advance of what can be called a model of globalization–localization. This is, in fact, not only the phenomenon of the disappearance of borders of so-called globalization, but the increasing protagonism of the

regional spaces and, above all, their local specific characteristics. Globalization advances and is unquestionable, but increasingly, regions and countries perceive that the way of competing in this new context does not involve so much homogenization and imitation of the global but taking advantage of the local strengths of each area (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia [Basque Provincial Government], 2003: appendix 2: 7).<sup>1</sup>

This text represents a good example of a scalar narrative. We are told about a 'new context', a process of transformation from the prominence of the global scale, characterized by the disappearance of borders and homogenization towards a new environment where the regional and the local scale are gaining power. The plot is not clearly spelled out but the reference to 'competition', 'taking advantage' and 'local strengths' suggests that the market and economic forces determine this scalar transformation. The narrative presents a relatively simple scene, easy to grasp and most of all, indisputable and already defined. Globalization as well as 'globalization-localization' are determinant forces. The text does not give any references to particular places or situations but describes a sweeping trend that affects everyone. The political implications of the narrative are clear: in order to compete, take advantage and defend ourselves from standardization, the regional and the local scale must be promoted as the primary scale. Given that this is an official document written by a provincial authority it can be assumed that the narrative is suggesting more investment in competitive regional policy. A final note on the authorship of the text can clarify the underlying plot of the narrative. The Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao was commissioned by the province, to a consultancy team that was experienced in working with the administration. In particular, the 'Economic Framework' appendix, from which the text is extracted, was written by a company called 'Bearing Point'. The managing director of 'Public Service Europe Bearing Point', is a former vice-president of the Basque Country and well known Basque entrepreneur and nationalist politician, called Jon Azua. Bearing Point, formerly known as KPMG, is an international business consultancy, which recently gained a three year economic restructuring contract for Iraq 'aimed at improving economic governance in Iraq and developing a policy-enabling environment for private sector-led growth in the country' (USAID Press Office, 2004). The consultancy has also been involved, amongst others, in the economic and financial 'reconstruction' of Afghanistan and Kosovo. Although I am not looking to draw a direct link between war in Iraq and territorial planning in Bilbao, it is useful to think about the ideological framework of the authors of the narratives and reflect on the consequences of planning documents that tend to be commissioned from transnational consultancy companies that typically propose generalized and (too) readily transferable arguments.

## Hegemonic scalar narratives

Scalar narratives are mobilized to give discourse closure to territorial political projects. Scalar narratives are an attempt to partially and discursively resolve capitalism's tendency to sway between mobility and fixity. Capitalism, we know, is porous, fluid and 'spatial scales are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested and restructured' (Swyngedouw, 2004: 33). Actors such as policymakers, politicians, or business communities, however, fight both to keep the capitalism liquid and mobile and to arrest its flow at the particular scalar configuration around which they hold their interests. In this struggle, 'scalar narratives' perform the function of a partial 'discursive fix' able to present the fluid, porous and viscous capitalism as a relatively static and self-enclosed entity as in the text I presented above.

This takes us into the realm of hegemony, or the 'central system of practices and values which we can properly call dominant and effective' (Williams, 2005 [1980]:

1 My translation. All quotes related to the empirical case study are originally in Spanish and translated by myself unless already stated.

38). What is required here is a subtle grasp of hegemonic practice which eschews the separation of the material from the cultural or practice from discourse, and instead analyses the ways in which economic and extra-economic objects are perpetually co-constructed. However, the space for co-construction is limited as not all material and cultural elements are immediately available or do not serve the purpose of elites. This requires a process of *selection*; selection of only particular discourses, their *retention* by repeating these discourses in as many institutional sites as possible and their *reinforcement* by embedding them in procedural mechanisms, governance structures and rules and regulations (Jessop, 2004). This process eventually involves the naturalization of these choices so that future practices, meanings and values that fall outside this hegemonic system will struggle to be incorporated. However, this process is not total but contingent and leaves spaces for alternative views to challenge the dominant ones. In this article I limit the analysis to the construction of hegemonic scalar narratives, although I am aware that they do not saturate the universe of alternatives.

A process of selection, retention and reinforcement takes place in the construction of hegemonic scalar narratives. In the last few years, a series of scalar narratives have become hegemonic among academic and policymaker communities. With the end of the Fordist consensus and the questioning of the nation-state as the primary scale of accumulation and legitimation, a plethora of scalar narratives have emerged to try to explain the rescaling of economic, cultural and political functions. A number of scalar narratives, mostly originating within the academic community, have now reached a status of common sense and are used indiscriminately by policymakers and politicians to give legitimacy and credibility to their arguments. Amongst these almost overused scalar narratives are 'the resurgent city', 'creative city', 'hollowing out of the state', 'time-space compression', 'new localism/regionalism', 'think global act local' or 'glocalization'.

In relation to cities and localities, Jessop and Sum (2000) have analysed how 'entrepreneurial cities' — that is, those cities governed in a business-like fashion (Hall and Hubbard, 1998) — have successfully managed to emplot themselves in a plausible way, connecting with other wider geopolitical and geo-economic narratives and becoming the dominant response to urban problems. Peck (2002) has added that these scalar narratives typically reinforce a neoliberal ideology. Scalar narratives such as 'end of the nation-state' or 'new regionalism' are providing the necessary explanatory discourse to justify entrepreneurial and risk-taking styles in urban policy. Many local policymakers and politicians are arguing that in order to capture ever more footloose capital in a borderless world, they need to make big investments in grand projects or gentrify historic centres. Swyngedouw *et al.* (2002) show how large urban regeneration projects in Europe, including in Bilbao, reflect a 'neoliberal urbanism' that is now widespread. This type of policy allocates public finance for capital accumulation in the face of 'imagined, assumed, or real requirements of a deregulated international economic system' (Swyngedouw *et al.*, 2002: 545).

## The Bilbao story

In the last decade, several Spanish cities have engaged in urban marketing and flagship regeneration, mainly promoted by central or regional governments. Obvious examples are Barcelona, Valencia or Madrid, which have carried out major regeneration and marketing projects. Recent research has questioned the long term effects of these projects (Balibrea, 2001; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2001; González, 2003; Luna-García, 2003; Prytherch, 2003; Vicario and Martínez Monje, 2003; Zusman, 2004).

In Bilbao, the impulse to regenerate the economy of an old industrial declined city took place in a very particular political and social environment. In 1986, with an

**Table 1** Governance actors with responsibilities in urban regeneration in Bilbao

Name of Institution	Who Are They?	What Do They Do in Relation to Urban Regeneration in Bilbao?
BM30	A public-private partnership born in 1991 that integrates all the municipalities, main public bodies (universities, etc.) and companies of the metropolitan area (metropolitan area population 896,000, 80% of Biskayan population)	Research and promotion activities for the strategic plan for the revitalization of the metropolitan plan (a non-statutory plan)
Bilbao Ría 2000 (BR 2000)	A limited company with public capital formed in 1992 in equal parts by the central Spanish authorities (through the real estate, port and train authorities in Bilbao) and the Basque authorities (Basque government, provincial council of Bizkaia, Bilbao city council and Barakaldo city council)	Design, implement and carry out major urban regeneration projects. Public authorities contribute with their resources (mainly brownfield sites), city councils re-zone the land, BR 2000 urbanizes it and sells it to private developers
Bilbao City Council (Ayuntamiento de Bilbao)	The biggest municipality in the metropolitan area with 349,972 inhabitants	Responsible for preparing and implementing comprehensive municipal master plans (Plan General de Ordenación Urbana, approved in 1994) and other inner-area special plans
Barakaldo City Council (Ayuntamiento de Barakaldo)	The second biggest municipality of the metropolitan area with 94,478 inhabitants	Responsible for preparing and implementing comprehensive municipal master plans (Plan General de Ordenación Urbana, approved in 1999) and other inner-area special plans
Biskayan Provincial Government (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia)	The government of the Biskayan Province (population 1,137,469)	Main financial institution in charge of infrastructures and supra-municipal spatial planning (Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Area of Bilbao approved in 2003)
Basque Regional Government (Gobierno Vasco)	The government of the Basque country autonomous community (population 2,116,469)	Main legislative and policy making institution. Town and country planning competencies are devolved to the Basque autonomous community. Responsible for regional spatial planning (Regional Spatial Strategy, approved in 1997)
Spanish Central Government	The government of the Spanish state	Responsible for large-scale infrastructures and environmental issues, national transport systems, coastal land regulation (in Bilbao airport, port and old railway and state-owned companies with derelict brownfield sites)
Planning Consultancies	A relatively reduced group of planning consultants and consultancies locally or nationally based	They have been contracted to do preliminary studies and write large parts of the spatial planning documents in the last 15 years

unemployment rate of 25.8, the metropolitan area of Bilbao was experiencing a deep industrial restructuring process as well as important institutional changes. After over 35 years of dictatorship, at the end of the 1970s Spain experienced the restoration of democracy, which included a very strong decentralization policy towards the regions (called autonomous communities). The Basque country had the first democratic regional

elections in 1979 and the subsequent years were dedicated to building a regional institutional capacity that could tackle the deep economic and industrial crisis of the area (González, 2005b). Bilbao, as the biggest and the most industrialized Basque city, witnessed a series of strategies to restore the city to its past role as a major economic centre (Gobierno Vasco [Basque government], 1989) (see Table 1 for a summary of the main players in the urban regeneration in Bilbao).

We can identify two phases in the urban regeneration process in Bilbao. First, in the early 1990s there was a strong emphasis on physical regeneration and some of the most important projects were carried out, such as the clean up of the estuary, the move of the port towards the sea, freeing up key central inner-city areas, and the construction of the underground system. A very strong metaphor at the time was the need to 'renew the obsolete chassis of the metropolitan area' to prepare for the next century. This was also a period when the governance tools and institutional infrastructure to undertake the big regeneration projects were built. In 1991 Bilbao Metr poli 30 (BM30) was created. This was a public-private association that was charged with city marketing and monitoring the progress of the Strategic Plan for the Revitalization of Metropolitan Bilbao. In 1992 an urban regeneration company was established, Bilbao R a 2000. This was a public multi-level partnership of the main institutional bodies, from central to local government, responsible for the main regeneration projects. In this first phase, there were also attempts to draft a comprehensive planning tool for the entire metropolitan area of Bilbao, at the same time as a Basque spatial planning document was being drafted by the Basque government.

During a second phase, from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, this relatively coherent and integrated collective strategy for the regeneration of Bilbao gave way to a much more fragmented and market-driven orientation, with more emphasis being placed on symbolic resources such as city marketing or attracting world-renowned architects. Starting from the Guggenheim Museum,<sup>2</sup> which was inaugurated in 1997, large-scale urban regeneration schemes have been promoted by public administrations: the restoration of a former shipyard area in a central inner-city area, residential towers, a new airport and a new Exhibition Fair amongst others (see Table 2). The Strategic Plan never acquired a legally binding status and the statutory planning exercises have failed to create a comprehensive, socially inclusive or participatory strategy (Esteban, 2000; Rodr guez and Mart nez, 2001; 2003; Rodr guez *et al.*, 2001; Vicario and Mart nez Monje, 2003; Gonz lez, 2003). Moreover, Bilbao R a 2000, a limited company funded with public resources, has increasingly adopted a property-led regeneration approach. Although it has recently started a regeneration project in a very deprived neighbourhood, the funding for this scheme has been made dependent on land revenues from an inner-city flagship development (Rodr guez and Mart nez, 2001).

My focus here is on this second phase of regeneration policy where a more entrepreneurial approach has been taken to governance and urban regeneration by the public local and regional authorities. One of the main characteristics of this new approach is the discursive emphasis that it puts on the rescaling of Bilbao from a regional city to become an international player.

In order to investigate the usage of these scalar narratives from an interpretative policy approach, I have looked at the recent planning documents of the metropolitan area of Bilbao as well as regional spatial planning policy documents, and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with around 30 key actors in the urban regeneration of Bilbao.<sup>3</sup> From this empirical analysis, I have identified three particular scalar narratives

2 There has been much discussion about the so-called 'Guggenheim effect'. In this journal Plaza (2006) has recently proved the positive returns of the museum in terms of job creation and economic activity. This is a necessary economic analysis that complements other researchers' focus on the wider social and political 'effects' of the Guggenheim that need to be contextualized in more general trends of entrepreneurial and neoliberal urbanism, as I discuss in this article.

3 This empirical work is part of a PhD thesis funded by the Basque government.

**Table 2** Phases of the regeneration process in Bilbao

	Physical Regeneration	Entrepreneurial Urbanism
Planning efforts	1989: Strategic Plan for the Revitalization of Metropolitan Bilbao	1999: revision of the Strategic Plan (a move towards 'soft' regeneration)
	1995: approval of Bilbao's Municipal Comprehensive Plan	2003: final approval of the Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao (but a relatively empty document)
	1995: EU-funded URBAN program in Barakaldo	
	1999: approval of Barakaldo's Municipal Comprehensive Plan	
Regeneration projects	From 1980s: cleaning up of the estuary	1997: inauguration of the Guggenheim designed by Gerhy
	From the beginning of the 1990s: clearing up of port infrastructures from the city centre	1999: inauguration of the Euskalduna Palace for music and congresses
	1995: inauguration of the first line of the metro	2000: inauguration of the new airport designed by Santiago Calatrava
		2003: inauguration of the tram system
		2003: flagship regeneration project in former inner city shipyard (Abandoibarra project) commissioned to Cesar Pelli
		2004: inauguration of the new Exhibition Fair
		2006: residential towers designed by Isozaki
	2007+: regeneration of a derelict river peninsula (Zorrozaurre project) by Zaha Hadid	
Governance episodes	1991: establishment of BM 30	
	1992: establishment of Bilbao Ría 2000	

that have been selected, retained and reinforced in planning documents, city marketing literature, speeches and personal interviews in Bilbao, but that are used as frames of reference in other cities as well.

These narratives are uttered by a whole range of actors at different governance sites and they have clearly become a frame of reference on where to locate discussions over urban policy in Bilbao. The most important advocates for these narratives are the local city council, the provincial and regional authorities and the public-private association BM30. These are the actors engaged in spatial and strategic planning, whereas the central Spanish government is key to investment in infrastructure and therefore does not engage heavily in discursive practices. Bilbao Ría 2000 developed a symbolic discourse in the early years, promoting Bilbao as a postindustrial, competitive and service metropolis, but has retreated in the last few years to a technical and descriptive discourse as if to depoliticize the urban regeneration process.

The Bilbao city council, the province and the region are all dominated by the Basque Nationalist Party. However, a significant part of the municipalities that form part of the non-institutionalized metropolitan area are governed by the Spanish Socialist party and these city councils have traditionally held more integrated views of urban planning that consider social and environmental elements. These views, however, have not been

selected as part of the hegemonic scalar narratives, as the city council of Bilbao is the most important economic centre in the metropolitan area.

I have not focused on other scalar narratives that have been used in Bilbao such as 'cultural city' or 'learning city' because they do not emphasize the scalar reconstitution of the city and they have not particularly influenced territorial planning policy.

### The global Basque city region

The new regionalism scalar narrative forms the confluence of various theoretical strands that could be simplified as post-Fordism, evolutionary economics, new institutionalism, embeddedness of the economy, proximity, regional industrial systems and industrial district theory, all supported by particular case studies which suggest that in a time of increasing globalization, regions and localities are 'central rather than merely derivative of nonspatial processes' (Agnew, 2000: 101). The 'new localism/new regionalism' scalar narrative is characterized, according to Lovering (1999) by the claim that the region is becoming the crucible arena of economic development and, therefore, that the region should be the prime focus of economic policy. This 'vulgar' scalar narrative, argues Lovering, is instrumentally attractive to powerful interests, especially those located in the regional service class, because it gives them legitimacy to bypass the central state.

General scalar narratives, are not static but actively transformed and redefined according to local conditions. In Bilbao, the claim that localities and regions are emerging as crucial economic subjects has been used instrumentally as a policy frame. In fact, the simplified new regionalism and new localism narrative is particularly suited for the justification of investments and political strategies in the case of Bilbao because it links with the existing well-established nationalist ideology. Since the first democratic regional elections in Spain after the Francoist dictatorship in 1981, the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) (Basque Nationalist Party) has ruled the region and Basque nationalism provides the hegemonic framework wherein the regional institutions, projects and strategies are framed. In the last four years, this nationalist project has promoted the idea of the Basque region becoming a 'free state associated with Spain', echoing similar arguments to the discussions over the 'Nou Estatut' for Catalonia. The 'new regionalist' scalar narrative has been used to support the economic case for the Basque and Catalan political projects. Thus, according to one important Basque government document:

Globalization and the decline of nation-states coincide with the revitalization of interest in the geography and the local territory. The very same proposals of Michael Porter, widely recognized in the world of industrial strategy, are also tightly linked with a wide doctrinal approach that confirms the Territory as inseparable from economic development (Gobierno Vasco/Basque Government, 2004: 33–4).

Supported by academic references from Porter, Krugmann, Piore, Allen Scott and international consultancy reports that list cities in relation to their economic assets, the document clearly identifies that the objective for the Basque region is to become a 'global city region' with Bilbao at the forefront. Moreover, a Basque government minister recently argued that 'regions are the engines of the global economy' (Alberdi, 2004: 5).

The scalar political project of the 'global Basque city-region' is being pushed strongly by the Basque Government in an attempt to marry the claims for both increased self-government and international competition. Urban policy options in Bilbao, as the most important city in the region and with a nationalist city council for the last 20 years, are obviously constrained by this policy frame, in which Bilbao is portrayed as the economic engine of this potential global city-region (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2003: appendix 2: 72–3), which has raised concerns from environmentalists.

The 'new regionalist' scalar narrative, widely spread within economic geography, is providing scientific rigueur to the territorial claims of the Basque nationalist governing class. This narrative is used to partially neutralize the constitutional agreement on Spanish national unity by arguing that the nation is not the privileged economic scale anymore. However, as del Cerro Santamaría (2005: 4) has shown, 'Basque internationalization has occurred within the context of an increasing internationalization of the Spanish economy as a whole'.

The emergence of regions and localities as new economic actors in a post-industrial society is discursively linked to the strategy to turn Bilbao into a 'global city' or a 'world class' city. The concept of global or world city in Bilbao does not necessarily refer directly to Sassen's (2001) or Hall's (1984) concepts. Bilbao does not host any national or regional government, big professional organizations, the headquarters of major industrial concerns, nor does it have a great international airport or financial centre (Hall, 1984). The scalar narrative of a global city is reinterpreted within the local context to mean that Bilbao has to compete economically at an international level. The urban regeneration process of recent years is explained as a strategy to connect Bilbao to the world and make it internationally visible.

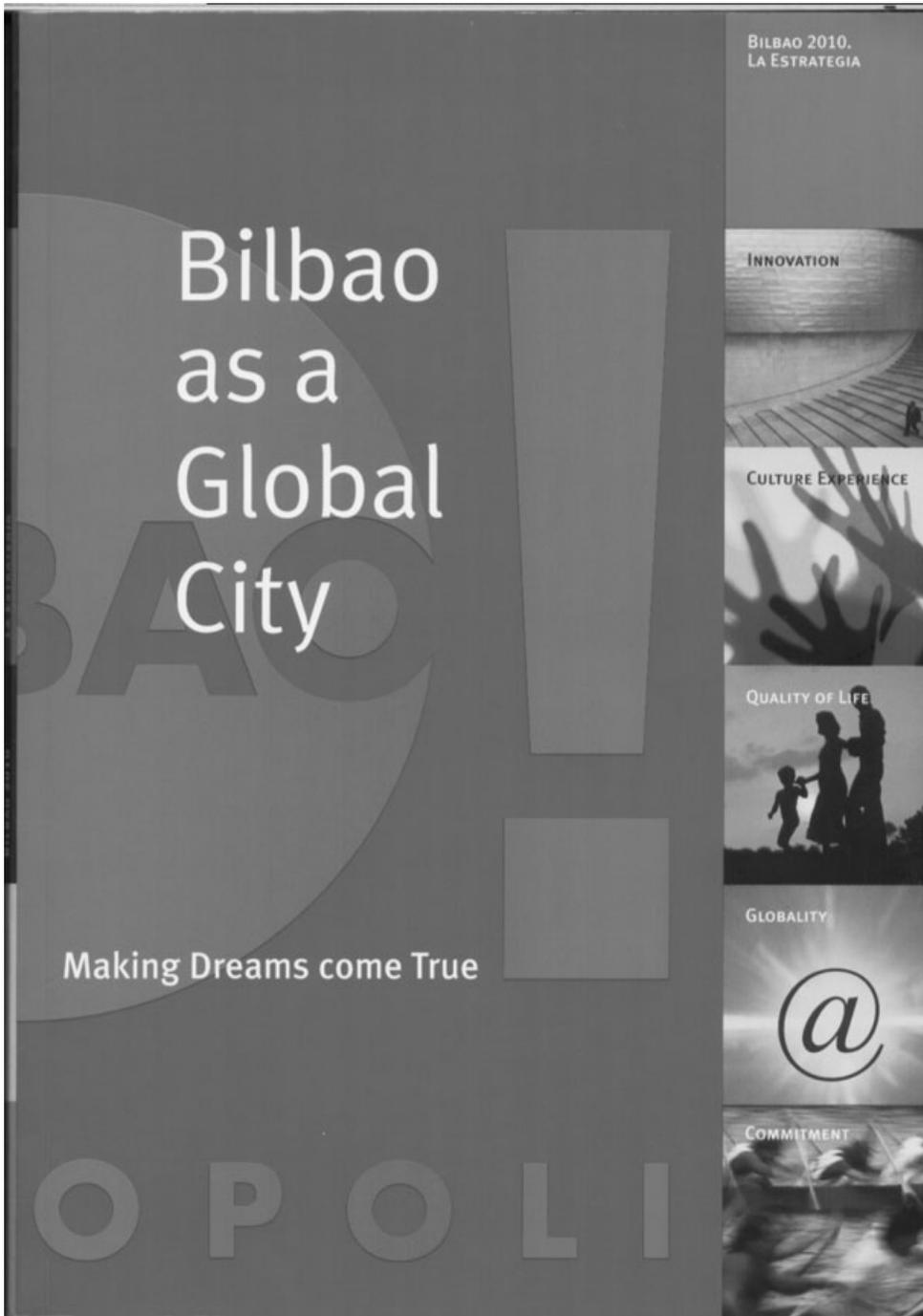
BM30 was the first to link the urban regeneration strategy with the aim of internationalization. In 1999, this partnership reviewed the Strategic Plan for the Metropolitan Area of Bilbao originally approved in 1992, which had a strong focus on physical urban regeneration. The new Strategic Plan has shifted towards a qualitative approach to regeneration and the need to invest in knowledge and values as a more effective long-term strategy 'to promote Bilbao internationally as a world-class city' (BM30, 2005: 5). The revision of the strategy involved the collaboration of over 300 local and regional actors, mainly politicians, managers, academics or consultants. The resulting documents are all written in the rhetoric of the scalar narratives of globalization, new regionalism and the global city. We read statements like 'with globalisation, cities are undergoing a surprising process of revitalisation as centres for decision-making and for the establishment, articulation and implementation of competitive edges' (BM30, 2001b: 4) or 'in the world of the 21st century, traditional regional jurisdictions within countries are too small for the guidelines of a global economy to apply, yet too big to represent the diversity of social, economic and cultural interests of the people living in them' (BM30, 1999: 2). Within this framework, the overall vision for the new Strategic Plan is 'Bilbao as a global city' (BM30, 2001a, original in English) (see Figure 1).

The municipality of Bilbao also supports the strategy to link urban regeneration to turning Bilbao into a global city. The international competition, however, is no longer based on industrial production (as in the city's industrial past) but on elements such as culture, tourism or knowledge. The municipality of Bilbao, has strongly promoted a policy to attract internationally renowned architects. According to the Deputy Mayor of Bilbao 'good architecture is not enough anymore: to seduce we need names' (Areso, 2001: 110). Design and architect brands have been used as urban marketing elements to reimagine the city of Bilbao as we read this text produced by the municipality of Bilbao (Lan Ekintza, n/d):

The basis of the urban renovation in Bilbao is unique in the world; few cities had such a big area to regenerate in what could be considered the city centre and in few cities has there been an encounter of a constellation of such internationally renowned architects as Gehry, Foster, Pelli, Legorreta, Isozaki, Calatrava, Sterling, Soriano, etc. As such, today, Bilbao stands out internationally as one of the key references in art and modern architecture and processes of urban revitalization.

## Glocalizing Bilbao

Glocalization is another scalar narrative to have emerged from academic work that tries to capture the complexity and multifaceted nature of globalization. Popularized in the academic field by Swyngedouw (1992; 1997) and Robertson (1994), it has travelled



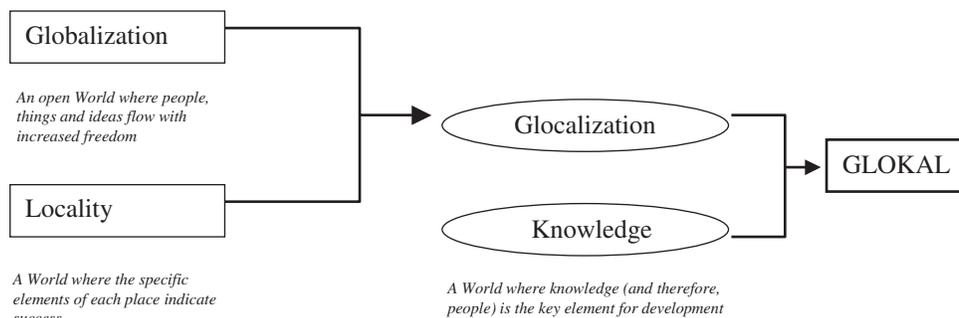
**Figure 1** Bilbao Metr opoli's strategic objective (source: BM, 2001a, Spanish edition, courtesy of BM30)

quickly and widely influenced both urban and development policies. The World Bank, Oxfam or the 'Glocal Forum' (an international meeting of Mayors across the world) have all evoked glocalization as the need to contextualize globalization and shape it to local requirements. Glocalization is also increasingly used by anti-global social movements to express the need to 'think global act local' or 'globalization from below'.

For Bilbao's urban entrepreneurial discourse, 'glocalization' means the 'acceptance of globalization as an inevitable reality, beneficial in terms of the synergic exchanges that it facilitates and catalyst of a competitive environment on an international scale, but compatible with the importance of the local existing elements of each of the areas as key resources to compete in that global world' (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2003: appendix 5: 8). Glocalization, then, is about creating the appropriate environment and possibilities *locally* to attract and fix the benefits of globalization, i.e. inward investment. It is about 'exploiting more areas and projects that will improve the competitiveness of the city' (Ayuntamiento de Bilbao [Bilbao city council], n/d). It functions as an answer to the worries of citizens and local politicians and policymakers who may fear that globalization may constrain the margin of manoeuvre of cities and it encourages a proactive and entrepreneurial urban policy. The globalization scalar narrative provides the justification for policy-based territorial competition.

The Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao, approved in 2003, emphasizes the need to 'talk about competing because, in fact, regions and cities compete between themselves for the attraction of the same flows: people, firms, talent, capital, etc. To this scenario we need to add another evident tendency that is the increasing protagonism of cities as spaces able to draw these flows' (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2003: appendix 2: 7). The text epitomizes a view of the city as an actor able to shape its place in the 'global' economy and typifies the glocalization narrative. In terms of a cultural politics of scales it is interesting for the way it reduces the complex relationship between economy and territory to a simple binary and because it exemplifies the rhetorical strategies that actors engage in to build the framework in which their political choices are presented as the only possibilities.

In line with recent calls for investment in knowledge and intangible assets to promote European (European Council, 2000), regional (Morgan, 1997) and national economies, the Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao links the process of glocalization with the promotion of a 'knowledge society'. In this planning document, the 'k' for knowledge is broken up into eight key words (see Figure 2) (all containing the 'k' sound in Spanish): 'coopetition', genetic code, attractiveness, connectivity and networking, strategic thinking, social contract, knowledge spaces and key spaces. All these elements are summarized in the 'glocalization' strategy presented below in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** The glocalization narrative (source: Departamento de Urbanismo, Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2003, Documento Temático 5:8)

Knowledge is also the keyword for the regeneration strategy proposed by BM30. For this association, glocalization and knowledge are also linked, since glocalization functions as a metaphor to symbolize the 'human face' of globalization. As explained above, BM30 has turned to a much softer approach towards regeneration, based on knowledge, innovation and values. The partnership has identified a series of actions in the next few years that would work towards its vision of Bilbao as a global city. These include the celebration of a Values World Forum, the creation of an Institute for the Development of Cities, and training activities for 150 leaders. All these activities aim to promote Bilbao in its international sphere but also include a set of distinctive 'local' values.

The glocalization narrative is particularly interesting for the entrepreneurial discourse in Bilbao because it allows space to combine competition at an international level with cooperation within the Basque country. It combines an aggressive externally oriented economic competitive policy with respect for the strong cultural identity of the Basque country. The term 'coopetition' coined by Jon Azua and developed in his book *Coopetitive alliances for the new economy* (Azua, 2000) captures this strategy, which has been proposed in the Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao. Following Azua, in the planning document we read that 'the greater the synergetic relations between the internal metropolitan agents, the greater the competitiveness of the metropolis will be' (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2003: appendix 5: 9). What the metropolitan planning strategy suggests, then, is to promote a cooperative relationship between the more than 30 municipalities that constitute the metropolitan area of Bilbao in order to achieve the necessary 'critical mass' to compete with other European and international metropolises. This collaborative strategy, however, has so far not been reflected in any integrative planning attempt.

The municipalities outside central Bilbao support this strategy most enthusiastically, because it gives them a role to play in the scalar politics of the metropolis. Indeed, the Barakaldo municipality, the second biggest in the metropolitan area, in collaboration with the provincial, regional and central national governments, has carried out a profound transformation of the city involving the connection of the city to the metropolitan underground system, new housing, and environmental improvement through reorganization of traffic and pedestrianization. However, the biggest project has been the reconversion of a mixture of old industrial ruins and a wetland into a commercial megapark involving international companies such as Ikea, Leroy Merlin, Media Markt, Decathlon, Kiabi, Toys R Us and PC City and the construction of the Bilbao Exhibition Centre, previously known as the Bilbao Fair and situated in Bilbao's city centre. This project, which occupies 118,000 m<sup>2</sup> and is financed by Basque public institutions, has been justified using the concept of glocalization. The Mayor of Barakaldo stresses the role of the Exhibition Fair in building 'the idea of the Metropolitan Bilbao, to build a modern Metropolis, able to become a reference point in the Europe of the 21st century' (Pera, 2003: 12). The project is held as the showcase of the Basque Country in Europe and as the most advanced Exhibition Fair in Europe. The risk of such grandiose investments that care more about the external image than the local demand is that they can be quickly overthrown by similar projects elsewhere. The recently inaugurated Milan Exhibition Fair is equally said to be the best exhibition space in Europe.

The glocalization scalar narrative is being actively used by the entrepreneurial discourse in Bilbao to create a framework of the policy options that they are taking. The theme that emerges from a cultural politics of scales analysis is that the use of the glocalization narratives by local politicians presents globalization as an inevitable but beneficial process as long as 'we' are able to engage in it. It also presents a situation where if 'our' city does not engage in it, because of the way cities are interconnected through flows, other cities will take advantage of our mistake. BM30 (2001b: 1) could not put it more clearly in its renewed strategic plan:

The new era has its demands. Either we are capable of creating knowledge or we must depend on the knowledge developed by others. Either we become part of the global community or we are left on the sidelines. To secure our place among the world-class metropolitan centres must be the first objective. Then comes the challenge of making Bilbao what is already called the best in the world.

### Bilbao in the space of flows

BM30's objective to turn Bilbao into a member of the club of world cities and avoid being sidelined is in line with the third scalar narrative used by the urban entrepreneurial discourse in Bilbao. This is the scalar narrative of the 'spaces of flows' and the 'network society' initially proposed by Manuel Castells but one which has strongly influenced policymaking over the last few years.

Castells was invited in April 2004 to the presentation of a report by the Department of Industry of the Basque government in Bilbao, as well as to the closing acts of the 20th Anniversary of the Basque Municipality's Association in February 2003 where he talked about 'local management in a global world'. In 2001, he was again asked to talk about technological clusters, a policy tool strongly supported by the Basque government. On all these occasions, as well as in his writings, Castells (2000b) explained his theory that we have entered a new technological paradigm characterized by an economy that is increasingly informational, global and networked, where the capitalist space economy is formed by flows of capital, information, technology, organizational technology, images and symbols. The 'space of flows', which still maintains a territorial dimension, emerges as one of the forms of social organization that gives the 'technological and organizational possibility of organizing the simultaneity of social practices without geographical contiguity' (Castells, 2000a: 14).

This society of flows incorporates, according to Castells, a combination of three layers including their material infrastructures. The circuit of electrical impulses such as telephone networks, optic fibres, communication systems and so on forms the first layer; the nodes and hubs between these circuits constitute the second layer; and the mobile transnational elite makes up the third layer.

In Bilbao and in the Basque Country, economic development and urban regeneration have been strongly guided by a strategy known locally as 'being in the axes'. Axes are the links that connect the hubs and nodes together, the connecting elements within the spaces of flows. Axes are those physical and human infrastructures that take us from one scale to another 'bypassing or avoiding the neighbouring scales' (Jessop and Sum, 2000). The concept of the axis, in Bilbao, has been emphatically proposed by the well-known Spanish planner Eduardo Leira, who has been involved in the regeneration of Bilbao since the late 1980s and has coordinated many of the key planning documents. His, as well as Castells' influence is noticeable in the Territorial Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao when we read that the city needs to 'maintain and reinforce the relationship with the outside, a strategy that could be referred to as *positioning [ourselves] in the world*, and particularly, *to be in the Axes*, positioning ourselves in the growing flows of goods and people' (Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2003: memoria: 6, emphases in the original).

This strategy responds to the fear that the hegemony of the European blue banana and the Mediterranean arc, in combination with the enlargement of Europe, will leave a regional capital like Bilbao far from the main future economic spaces. The public authorities in Bilbao have been particularly interested in positioning Bilbao in the international knowledge exchanges axes and in the Atlantic economic and transport Arc.

The strategy to 'talk Bilbao up' in international forums is also one of BM30's main activities. A particular focus has been to link Bilbao to the existing international networks of cities (European but also Latin American) and propose Bilbao as a regeneration model. Members of the local or regional administration in Bilbao are often

invited to international conferences or by localities to tell the story of Bilbao. During 2003 the exposition 'Bilbao, the transformation of a city' sponsored by the provincial government was shown in Boston, Cannes, Tokyo, Sao Paulo and Genova. Also in 2003, BM30 took part in conferences at which it presented the case of Bilbao in Dortmund, Cardiff, Valencia, Barcelona, Pontevedra (Spain), San Francisco and Trondheim (Norway). The main purpose of this exhibition was to market publicly owned real estate in Bilbao.

In 2003, BM30 received 24 delegations of policy tourists from Japan, France, the UK, Colombia and Australia who wanted to know more about the regeneration process in Bilbao (BM30, 2004). BM30 and Bilbao Ría 2000 are often hired as external consultants to advise Latin-American cities on planning strategies, despite the clear limitations in de-contextualizing a complex process of regeneration and turning Bilbao into a repeatable 'best practice' (González, 2003).

Another point of reference for planning strategies and policymaking in Bilbao is the 'imagined economy' of the 'Atlantic Arc'. The massive investment by the Basque government in the new Exhibition Fair has been justified as a means to 'consolidate Bilbao as the Fair of the Atlantic Arc' (Greaves, 2003: 5), for example. Bilbao's port, which has been extended in the last 10 years towards the sea and out from the city, is also considered to be a key infrastructure in the Atlantic space, functioning as a link between Europe and America. Bilbao is portrayed as playing a key role in the economic development of the Atlantic Arc due to its alleged strategic geographic position. A document produced by the municipality of Bilbao and entitled 'Bilbao. A city to invest in' seeks to establish Bilbao's leadership in this space: 'Bilbao constitutes one of the central nodes of the European System of Cities. Its strategic location on the Atlantic seaboard and its economic potential confers it a leadership role in the European space of the Atlantic Arc' (Lan Ekintza, n/d).

The third layer in Castells' spaces of flows has to do with the spatial organization of the managing and dominant elites. In line with this argument, BM30 proposes that 'it is necessary that the different agents like individuals, firms and institutions, are connected to the sources of information and to the most advanced groups, who establish the standards of the international sphere' (BM30, 2001b: 27). Thus, Bilbao must become a 'city of professionals' in recognition of 'their leadership potential and, more especially, for their skills and know-how to adapt and exploit new technologies, which set the evolution of the new socio-economic frame in tune with the trends coming from the most advanced countries' (BM30, 1999: 15).

## Concluding remarks

In this article I have shown how policymakers in Bilbao, in order to frame and justify an entrepreneurial and competitive urban policy, are using several narratives about the rescaling of the economy discussed in the academic literature.

On the one hand, the Basque global-city region, the glocalization and the spaces of flows narratives have framed, promoted and justified a regeneration centred on external investors, tourism and symbolic architecture. Central areas with potential for high returns and middle-class neighbourhoods have been the focus of investment while only later in the process have other areas with serious socio-economic problems or neglected urban environment been tackled. Reducing the historical socio-spatial segregation in metropolitan Bilbao between working-class cities and neighbourhoods and middle-class areas has certainly not been the main driver of urban regeneration. On the other hand, the 'new regionalist' narrative has been actively mobilized by the Basque authorities to support the economic case for a politically more autonomous Basque Country within the context of global capitalism.

The analysis of the three scalar narratives suggests that policymakers present these policy options as univocal and self-explanatory. In a context of an unstoppable globalization of the economy, it appears cities and regions can only prosper if they follow

aggressive measures to compete economically with each other. Rather than present them as a political choice, policymakers in Bilbao declare, aided by the scalar narratives, that these policies are the only possible way forward. Indeed, what I have emphasized is that scalar narratives cut down the range of possibilities available and offer a selective range of alternatives. Scalar narratives such as glocalization, new regionalism or the global city impose a 'discursive selectivity, selecting for and selecting against particular ideas' (Hay, 2002: 212); they act as cognitive shortcuts, and by appearing as self-evident, in fact, are disempowering (Swyngedouw, 2000). In the case of Bilbao, but in many other cities, the choices are reduced to a kind of policy that presents local and regional development in a narrow fashion, focusing on economic growth and making social inclusion and the environment dependent on economic returns.

The main contribution of this article is the concept of scalar narrative and a cultural politics of scales approach, which fruitfully brings together elements from the political economy and rescaling debate, discourse theory and policy analysis. The approach adopted in this article draws attention to the re-scaling process involving actors actively engaged in politics of scales to fix discursively a particular space. The discursive fix, i.e. the ability to build a coherent and self-explanatory scalar political project, is an integral part of the spatial fix. Therefore, language and rhetoric are not mere accessories but need to be at the centre of the research.

It is illuminating to consider planning documents and strategies as crafted processes in which particular actors may have a very strong influence. In the case of Bilbao, influential planners have been decisive in the translation of general scalar narratives into particular policy strategies. These actors possess intellectual resources and are more aware of academic debates which they then readapt. Such professionals are often already part of the political elite and their involvement in the discursive fixing strategies tends to perpetuate their interests and those of the political elites.

The scalar narratives are not passively received by policymakers but are actively readapted and reintroduced within the existing discourses. As scalar narratives are generally stripped of any context, they become general common sense and are easily knitted into the particularity of the local institutional environment.

Policymakers find it useful to refer to generally accepted scalar narratives because it provides them with the legitimacy to justify their policy choices. Moreover, the legitimacy given by these common sense narratives may be used to replace a thorough analysis of the positive effects of these urban regeneration investments and may also be used to replace proper consultation and participation of the local population.

Finally, I believe that by emphasizing a cultural politics of scale we can deconstruct and politicize assumptions such as those analysed in this article and show that rather than being natural and self-evident policy choices, they are political options taken by actors that have particular consequences. By politicizing these scalar narratives, we move away from obfuscated binary thinking and we may enter a more democratic discursive field where more alternatives can be discussed.

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## Résumé

*Pour justifier une politique urbaine de type entrepreneurial, les acteurs politiques locaux se servent de métaphores théoriques sur le redimensionnement contemporain de l'économie capitaliste. L'analyse de cette situation a conduit à développer un nouveau concept théorique (récit d'échelle), à proposer une démarche analytique (politique culturelle des échelles) et à témoigner d'un cas particulier (Bilbao). D'abord, l'article passe rapidement en revue les publications sur la politique des échelles, ajoutant au débat par une approche intégrant des éléments tirés de l'économie politique culturelle et de l'analyse interprétative de la politique. Cette démarche édifie le concept de 'récit d'échelle', déjà proposé dans d'autres travaux (scalar narrative) sans toutefois avoir été totalement exploré. L'approche est ensuite appliquée à une étude de cas sur Bilbao, ville du nord de l'Espagne qui vient de passer par une rénovation urbaine complète. Elle permet de décrire l'appropriation de trois récits d'échelle par les décideurs politiques; la démonstration s'appuie sur des travaux empiriques réalisés à Bilbao à partir de documents d'aménagement officiel et stratégique ainsi que de textes de marketing urbain.*