

On the problem of scale: Hayek, Kohr, Jacobs and the reinvention of the political state

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Published online: 8 November 2012
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Abstract There is no shortage of crises in the ecological (e.g. climate change), economic (e.g. the Global Financial Crisis), and socio-political spheres (e.g. the Arab Spring). While such crises are not new to the human saga, both the magnitude and frequency of these crises seem to be intensifying. The usual prognosis follows the public/private dichotomy, suggesting more or less government intervention (and the closely related variants of more integration and regime change). However, there are ‘islands’ of alternative analyses where crises result from scale distortion (organisational structures of states, markets and firms that are too large or too small) and scale entanglement (strong rather than weak ties between different scales such as the local, national and global). This paper attempts to synthesise this scale problematisation into one coherent school of thought. To this end, we introduce the complexity ansatz, which links complexity to symmetry (breaking), scale and collapse. To illustrate, the paper traces this ansatz in the writings of Friedrich Hayek, Léopold Kohr and Jane Jacobs (HKJ). The thesis is that the moribund nation state needs to be relegated to a subsidiary role to evade collapse. Loosely coupled (fiscally and monetarily) autonomous city-regions should be the ‘eyes’ of socio-economic action.

Keywords Complexity · Symmetry · Scale · Collapse · Hayek · Kohr · Jacobs · Sovereignty · City-regions

JEL Classification A12 · B25 · H77 · P16 · Z13

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