

What trouble can come from straining to know a thing closely, ‘microscopically’? Since the mid-twentieth century, US social scientists studying face-to-face interaction have been by turns fascinated and frustrated by the ‘small’ scale of their object of knowledge and the scrutiny it seemed to demand. They often turned to mechanical recording and playback technologies — from dictation machines to 16mm film — in an effort to grasp human interpersonal life in all its subtlety. This talk returns to the 1970s, when the science of interaction got a new, if contested, politics. Along with social movement activists, some scholars of interaction came to argue that ‘the interpersonal’ was an important micropolitical domain in which otherwise diffuse formations — authoritarianism, heteropatriarchy, anti-Black racism — manifested themselves in practice. They hoped to pinpoint these pernicious formations with recordings and detailed transcripts of talk. But these scholars of the small were quickly forced to explain how this micropolitics related to a politics elsewhere and how interaction itself related to a proverbial wider world. Was interaction a microcosm, for instance — or even a paracosm, a little world of its own? How exactly did the ‘interpersonal’ relate to the ‘institutional’, ‘micropolitics’ to ‘mass’ politics? In this talk, Lempert argues that, while interaction has no intrinsic, ontological scale, this legacy of scalar contestation has shaped what one thinks interaction is and what studying it can — and cannot — deliver.

Michael Lempert is an interdisciplinary linguistic and cultural anthropologist who writes widely on the theme of social interaction. He is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and was formerly Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University. He has been a Richard and Lillian Ives Faculty Fellow at Michigan’s Institute for the Humanities, a Lenore Annenberg and Wallis Annenberg Fellow in Communication at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University (CASBS), and a visiting professor at l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris. He is the author of *Discipline and Debate: The Language of Violence in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery* (University of California Press, 2012; winner of the 2013 Clifford Geertz Prize), co-author (with Michael Silverstein) of *Creatures of Politics: Media, Message, and the American Presidency* (Indiana University Press, 2012), and co-editor (with E. Summerson Carr) of *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life* (University of California Press, 2016). His latest book, *From Small Talk to Microaggression: A History of Scale* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), traces how face-to-face interaction became a scaled object of knowledge in mid-twentieth century America.

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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Micropolitics Revisited:

The Trouble with the Scale of Interpersonal Life