

# The Multi-Scalar Geographies of Place Naming: The Case of Cyprus

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## Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

*Purpose*—Toponymy has long been marginalized within human geography despite the obvious salience of place names to the study of places themselves. This has been attributed to a lack of toponymic theory but new theoretical efforts (the so-called “critical” turn in toponymy) have explicitly drawn on notions of place in human geography and emphasized the processes behind place naming rather than on cataloguing names themselves. This paper builds on these efforts to introduce the utility of the concept of spatial scale for place naming studies through the example of the political divided island of Cyprus.

*Design, Methodology, Approach*—The literature documenting place name changes in Cyprus after independence (1960) and partition (1974) was reviewed to assess if different naming processes could be identified.

*Findings*—Different processes in name changes are found in the north and south after partition. Scale is used to highlight these differences which, in turn, is used to introduce the notion of top-down and bottom-up place naming processes.

*Practical Implications*—The concepts of spatial scale and top-down/bottom-up naming have utility for new insights for many other toponymic issues and conflicts.

*Originality, Value*—The paper concludes with a discussion of the value of this approach to other place naming issues, including maritime and territorial disputes.

Keywords: Cyprus, place names, place naming, scale

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## Introduction

Toponymy, or the study of place names, deals with what should be geographic subject matter. For example, the field of human geography focuses on how people make places and how human interaction occurs both within and between places.<sup>1</sup> Despite the obvious salience between place names and place making, toponymy has long been a marginalized topic within human geography.<sup>2</sup> This may be a consequence of the fact that human geography has been a theory-driven field since the early 1970s<sup>3</sup> while toponymy has been critiqued as having a lack of theory, largely focused on cataloguing lists of place name changes rather than emphasizing the causes of such changes.<sup>4</sup> Whether entirely fair or not, such a perception has kept toponymy on the margins of human geography. For example, since 2010 roughly only 4 percent of all articles (10 in total) published in *Political Geography* (the most important journal for issues of politics in human geography) deal directly with toponymy.

With these circumstances in mind, this paper advocates for a new direction in toponymy in a twofold way. The first move involves embracing recent efforts that attempt to shift the emphasis in toponymy studies from place names *per se* to the processes behind place name changes. This is a welcome shift as it creates opportunities to develop theories of the processes themselves. The second move leverages key geographic concepts, like the idea of spatial scale, which can stimulate more interest in toponymy within contemporary human geography. In this paper, I apply this twofold approach to the case of the politically divided island of Cyprus to explore how spatial scale adds to the understanding of two different types of place name changes occurring there. Using spatial scale to reflect on these changes leads to the introduction of a new theoretical perspective on place naming, which I call either *top-down* or *bottom-up* naming.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First is a review of new directions in the toponymy literature followed by a presentation of the geographic concept of spatial scale. These ideas are then applied to the case of Cyprus followed by a discussion of the top-down and bottom-up typologies. The paper concludes with a discussion about the utility of this overall approach to other cases of place name changes.

### Place Names or Place Naming?

The study of toponymy has been something of a scattershot field and the scholarship that forms the core literature has originated across a handful of academic disciplines, including anthropology, legal studies, political science, linguistics, and human geography.<sup>5</sup> This diversity of approaches has not lent itself to a clear or consistent theoretical framework from which to approach the subject matter. The result has been a long-standing discontent captured by Wilber Zelinsky's observation that "the study of names leaves much to be desired."<sup>6</sup> Zelinsky's discontent has been echoed by many others and a persistent theme among these critiques is the atheo-

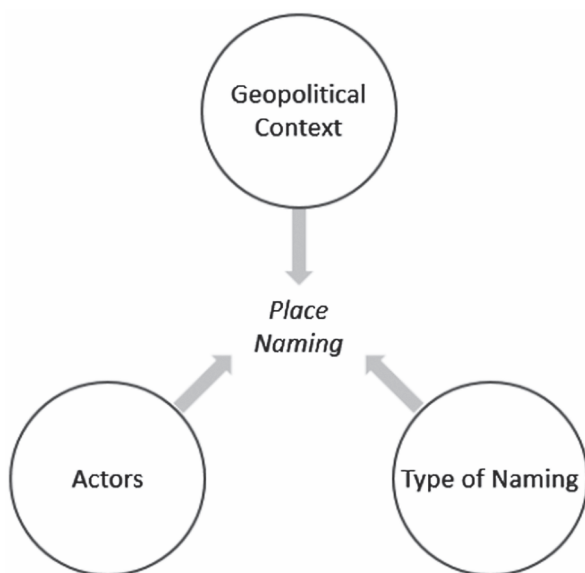
retical nature of the field. For example, Berg and Vuolteenaho argued that “toponymic research have typically adopted [a] theoretically (and politically) naïve empiricist foci on the nomenclatures of specific localities” and that researchers have avoided “theoretically grounded approaches.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the field has been quite disconnected with trends in social science toward critical engagements with social theory and in dealing with issues of power.

This disconnect is telling when considering the content of the typical place name study, which Berg and Vuolteenaho assert is little more than a cataloguing of existing, historic, or disputed place names for whatever location is being considered. They advocate for a different approach, one that draws on the literature in place within human geography to understand place naming practices as part of the way in which places are made or constructed by human activity.<sup>8</sup> Their argument drew heavily on writings on place by theorists in geography like Doreen Massey, whose emphasis on the social construction of place provided an inspiration to see place names as part of the way in which places are socially constructed and given social meaning.<sup>9</sup>

The argument about drawing on geographical theory to reimagine toponymy studies has been reflected in recent calls to shift studies away from name cataloging and toward investigating the processes that lead to place name changes. For example, Rose-Redwood et al. detect a “critical turn” in toponymy leading to a new wave of scholarship on the “critical interrogation of the politics of place naming” that is

grounded in “an explicit engagement with critical theories of space, place, and landscape” in geography.<sup>10</sup> Most recently, Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch (2016, 2) have taken this a step further by proposing a new framework for toponymy that emphasizes *place naming* processes in order to better grasp the “variegated ways in which places are named.”<sup>11</sup>

Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch argue that attention to place naming necessarily involves a set of three different elements at the center of which reside what they call the place naming process (Figure 1).<sup>12</sup> The first element is the geopolitical context within which places are situ-



**Figure 1. Diagram of the place naming process which occurs in particular geopolitical contexts, involves the actions of specific actors, and strives for certain types of changes (adapted from Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch [2016]).**

ated which broadly refers to concerns over the politics of control of a particular place. The second element is concerned with the specific actors that are involved in the naming process. The third element is concerned with what they call the “technologies of naming,” which has to do with the type of naming that is occurring (whether names are being restored, replaced, or created altogether new). This is an interesting start towards a new theory of place naming as it makes at least two important moves. First, it recognizes that place naming is an act of politics which offers opportunities to consider whose agendas are being advanced with respect to pressing for or resisting against place name changes. Second, it is aligned with much of critical social theory in human geography in that it expressly gives attention to the agency involved in the process and to the context in which human activity occurs.

However, this framework is also incomplete from the perspective of human geography. Any interest in the processes of place naming must also consider the spatial complexity of the processes in question. For example, place naming may reflect the dominance of a group of actors or the salience of a specific issue within a particular place but also may involve actors or issues that are external to the place where the name is to be assigned or changed. The idea that the social relations that help to make places what they are may not be simply contained by or present within the place or locality itself is an important window on this theoretical deficiency. As Massey puts it, when considering why a particular place is the way it is, one must recognize that important constitutive social relations may be “contained within the place [itself]; others will stretch beyond it, trying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too.”<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, it is not sufficient to simply consider just a place where naming occurs in isolation but to consider how those places are connected to (or not) wider spatial contexts. This need lends itself to consideration of yet another geographical concept, that of spatial scale.

## Spatial Scale

Scale is treated as a foundational concept in human geography and yet is also the subject of a great deal of contemporary debate. For example, in introducing scale in a volume dedicated to the concept alone, Sheppard and McMaster wrote that “conceptions of geographic scale range across a spectrum of almost intimidating diversity.”<sup>14</sup> As scale primarily concerns space in geography, this discussion will specifically focus on spatial scale even though there are other interrelated meanings of scale in social science, such as temporal or thematic scales.<sup>15</sup>

At its most basic, scale in human geography is a referent to the spatial size or extent, either relative or absolute, of some phenomenon or process.<sup>16</sup> Most often, the conceptualization of scale in human geography refers to a “nested hierarchy of differentially sized and bounded spaces.”<sup>17</sup> With this in mind, a typical classification of human geographical scales includes (but is not limited to) “the body; the household; the neighborhood; the city; the metropolitan area; the province or state; the

nation-state; the continent; and the earth as a whole.”<sup>18</sup> This perspective can lead to an understanding of scale as simply a list of analytic or observational levels with an implied spatial hierarchy. However, as Sayre points out, much of the contemporary literature on scale in human geography involves questioning the “stability of these categories ... how they are produced, reproduced, or transformed ... or [if] multiple levels interact.”<sup>19</sup>

The idea of scale as a spatial hierarchy undoubtedly rests on the work of Peter Taylor, who introduced a three-tiered (urban, nation-state, global) scalar hierarchy onto Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of a single economic world system. Important to note is the primacy given to the global scale in Taylor’s framework—he called it the scale that “really matters” reflecting the notion of a single global economic system that produced effects and phenomena observed at other scales.<sup>20</sup> Since Taylor’s foundational work, human geographers in general (but mostly economic and political geographers in specific) have worked to expand and diversify the concept. For instance Neil Smith’s work on the geography of capitalist production emphasized how particular scales are made by observing that scale is “produced in and through social activity.”<sup>21</sup> Smith notes that the patterns of daily commuting from home to work and back helps constitute the urban scale while capital circulation within an interconnected international economy helps constitutes the global scale. This has led geographers to pay closer attention to the processes behind the creations of particular scales rather than to take any one scale for granted.

Building from Taylor and Smith, contemporary debates about scale have attempted to break away from the notion of spatial hierarchy, particularly from the implication that larger spatial scales are somehow more important than smaller spatial scales. For example, Marston follows Smith by pointing out that what seems to be a large scale phenomena, such as a capitalist consumptive economy, is really an aggregation of individual activity focused through the “small” scale setting of a household.<sup>22</sup> This constructivist notion of scale is also reflected in the growing literature on the “politics of scale” which draws on the idea that scales and scalar relations are shaped by the interactions between powerful actors and those that seek to resist them. As described by MacKinnon, powerful actors “seek to command ‘higher’ scales such as the global and national and strive to disempower the [less powerful] by confining them to ‘lower’ scales like the neighbourhood or locality, something which may be resisted by subaltern groups.”<sup>23</sup> This then leads to efforts at “scale jumping” or attempts by certain social groups and organizations to move to higher levels of activity (such as from the neighborhood to the urban) in pursuit of their political interests.

Spatial scale is an evolving concept in geography and the debates are too voluminous to be adequately captured here. However, the current dominant conceptualization (though not uncontested) of scale rests on the following principles which I have adapted following Sayre.<sup>24</sup> First, scales are made by human activity (as well as by biological and geophysical processes). Second, scales are relational in the sense that they are produced by people working in relation with and to each other and that scales simultaneously exists and can interact with each other. Third, there is no

proper or correct scale to understand a given human activity or process; however, there may be certain scales with more relevance than others. Fourth and last, research on scale should reflect on the processes that make scales rather than by taking any given scale for granted.

From these principles, scale is a meaningful lens on the issue of place naming, especially given the recognition that place naming is a human *process*. Therefore, each case of place naming will have spatial scales associated with it that reflect the full set of activities that constitute the specific processes behind any place naming or name changes. Furthermore, each case of naming will likely involve different scales; if this is not the case, it is a significant clue that multiple cases are caused or shaped by the same process that is operating at a large(r) scale. Consequently, tracing the scale of the processes behind a specific case should provide some clues as to the key actors that constitute the process and that are making the scale what it is. Lastly, the presence of scale jumping by any of the actors involved in the naming process is likely a result of power differentials within a given setting. I use these ideas together to reflect on the contentious politics of place naming and place names changes in the politically divided island of Cyprus.

## **Name Changes in Cyprus**

The island of Cyprus is located in the eastern Mediterranean off the southern coast of Turkey (Figure 2) and is among the largest and most populated islands in the entire region. Cyprus has also been an arena for communal strife between peoples of Greek descent (roughly 80 percent of the population) and Turkish descent (20 percent) since the late 1950s. As a political entity, Cyprus has had a long history of external political domination. For example, despite the predominately Greek heritage of its people, from the mid-1500s until the late 1800s Cyprus was part of the Ottoman Empire which introduced Turkic people onto the island. Greek Cypriots were politically restive under the Ottomans in the early 1800s as they closely identified with the efforts at the time of Greece to wrest itself free of Ottoman control. Although Greece achieved independence from the Ottomans in the 1830s, Cyprus traded one external dominion for another as the Ottomans ceded control of Cyprus to the British in 1878 in exchange for British support for the Ottomans against Russia. Cyprus would remain part of the British Empire until formal independence was granted in 1960.<sup>25</sup>

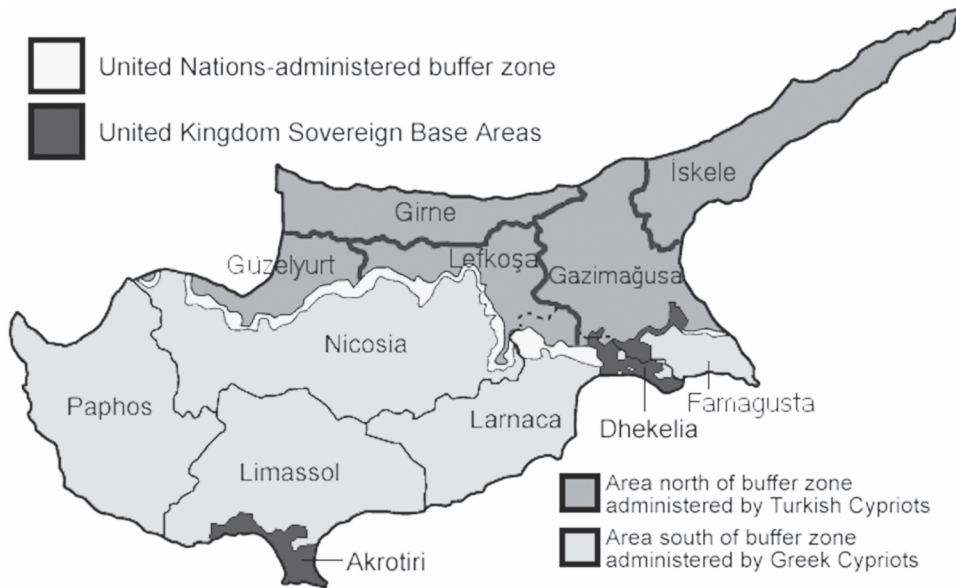
At the time of Cypriot independence from Britain, the dual ethnic nature of the population was formalized into a constitution that shared power between the two groups. This ethnic power sharing arrangement was short-lived and undone in a series of constitutional amendments in 1963 that reserved political power for Greek Cypriots alone. This was accompanied by waves of intercommunal violence between the majority Greek and the minority Turkish Cypriots. These patterns of violence continued into the early 1970s and culminated in an attempted overthrow of the Cypriot government in 1974 by Greek Cypriots acting in conjunction with support



from a military-led government in Greece. In response to the violence against Turkish Cypriots and the aggressive move by the Greek government just off the coast of Turkey, the Turkish military invaded the island and occupied the northeastern part of Cyprus. During this period, most Turkish Cypriots fled north to the Turkish military controlled areas; similarly, most Greek Cypriots fled south. The result was a de facto spatial split in the ethnic patterns of residency on the island which persists to this day (see Figure 3).

In response to the attempted Greek-led coup and the counter-invasion by Turkey, the United Nations established a buffer zone between the two sides which remains in place today. The United Kingdom also maintains two large military bases on the island, part of the deal struck in the process of independence in 1960. In 1983 the Turkish-occupied northern part of Cyprus proclaimed its formal independence from the rest of the island, calling itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Only Turkey has formally recognized Northern Cyprus and remains its only political and economic patron. The rest of the island is constituted as the Greek Cypriot-dominated Republic of Cyprus and was granted membership into the European Union in 2004. The status of Northern Cyprus and Turkey’s role in continued Cypriot political disunity remains an enduring obstacle to Turkey’s interest in joining the EU.<sup>26</sup>

As should be expected in a politically and ethnically partitioned landscape, place



**Figure 3.** Map of the current political and ethnic geographies of Cyprus. The UN buffer zones and UK military bases are enduring features of the post-civil war political landscapes (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4810067>).

*Opposite:* Figure 2. Located in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus is near the coastlines of Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon (Google Maps).



names have become the source of friction between the two Cypriot polities and within specific communities. But place names themselves have long been the source of confusion and political effort on the island long before the civil war.<sup>27</sup> For example, traditional place names were the subject of several British-led “standardization” projects beginning in the 1870s and continuing through independence. This involved transliteration or Anglicization of Greek names into English equivalents which introduced alternative spellings and pronunciations for nearly every town and village on the island. Such standardization efforts resumed again in the late 1960s, this time under UN-led cartographic efforts.<sup>28</sup> These cumulative naming efforts created a complex toponymic landscape, with many populated places simultaneously carrying names recognized only by locals and those only recognized by national authorities or external organizations. This state of affairs culminated in local protests once UN-approved names started to appear on road signs in the 1990s. In at least two cases, leaders of municipalities used the protests as political leverage to change their city names into something different from those adopted by UN cartographic standards.<sup>29</sup>

Taken together, many of the place naming activities in southern Cyprus have constituted what Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch would call restoration<sup>30</sup>: efforts to return to traditional Greek place names and rejecting the Anglicization of place names imposed by the British beginning in the late 1800s and continued by the UN after Cypriot independence.<sup>31</sup> The politics involved appear at multiple scales (local, national, international) and demonstrate at least a few cases of scale jumping by local authorities in an attempt to resist the imposition of names from afar.

Place naming has also been present within Northern Cyprus following the partition of the island. Greek and Turkish were both officially recognized languages in the Cypriot constitution of 1960 and Turkish language place names were widely used. This was the case despite the fact that while a few place names had Turkish roots, most in Cyprus did not, including in Northern Cyprus. However, following the invasion and occupation, language usage became highly politicized<sup>32</sup> and Northern Turkish authorities have replaced most traditional Greek place names with new Turkish language names.<sup>33</sup>

The Turkish military occupation of the island in the 1970s quickly gave way to what Ram has described as a conventional colonial enterprise which involves “seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing a new set of social and spatial relations on the ground.”<sup>34</sup> Following this argument, place names can then be understood as an important signifier of political control and a crucial way in which new political realities, such as colonial control, are made into geographic realities. Predictably, Ladbury and King reported that nearly every town or village in Northern Cyprus was renamed by officials shortly after the creation of the *de facto* state there.<sup>35</sup> Navaro-Yashin describes this as a tightly controlled process, often led by Turkish military officers or government officials that were given important positions in the new Northern Cypriot government.<sup>36</sup>

The changing of traditional Greek names in Northern Cyprus remains a consistent grievance for Greek Cypriots. Following the admission of the Republic of Cyprus into the European Union in 2004, the issue has been periodically raised by Cypriot

MPs in the European Parliament and remains a key obstacle to the sporadic talks about reunification.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the name changes are now deeply embedded in the Northern Cypriot landscape given the relative lack of Greek speaking Cypriots living in the north and the elevation of Turkish as the only official language used there.<sup>38</sup>

Just as in the south, the toponymic landscape in Northern Cyprus is complex as many maps and atlases preserve the previous Greek place names. However, the process of place name changes in the north is quite different than in the south. The imposition of Turkish language place names by officials with more connection to Turkey than to Cyprus is a clear example of Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch's notion of a particular "technology" of name replacement instead of restoration.<sup>39</sup> The politics involved in this case are somewhat different as well as there is little recorded activity at the local scale. The national scale is most prominent (within both Northern Cyprus and Turkey) and the few mild attempts at scale jumping by Greek Cypriot officials through appeals to the EU have had little impact on Turkish policy within the occupied north.

## Top-Down and Bottom-Up Naming

These two different types of naming in Cyprus have some similarities in that they both reflect efforts to spatialize political authority in the landscape. However, some attention to scale suggests very different types of processes at work. For example, the place names changes in the (southern) Republic of Cyprus are connected to the processes of geopolitical hegemony by the British empire in the 1800s and 1900s which itself had an enormous geographical scope. As part of the provisions of political domination and control of distant lands and peoples came the logics of standardization.<sup>40</sup> Control entailed cataloging that connected not just to the needs of the British within Cyprus but to the needs of the empire more broadly. In other words, maps that displayed the Anglicized place names of Cyprus were of use to British efforts that moved people, goods, and capital all around the empire, particularly following the completion of the nearby Suez Canal.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the alternative names of Cypriot villages were connected to similar processes of standardization elsewhere in the empire.

The attempt to de-Anglicize place names in Cyprus also traces a much larger footprint than is suggested by a discussion of local or even national interpretations of such histories of external domination. In the same vein, the UN-led cartographic standards and membership in the EU create a particular set of scales at which place naming occurs. In such cases, the expression of Greek Cypriot identity is also shaped by the demands of international membership in larger political bodies. The agents involved in such outcomes are more than just those in the places directly affected by such changes. To fully understand how these changes work, we must also look beyond the island to places like New York and Brussels.

With regard to the examples in Northern Cyprus, scale is also present but in a very different way. The relative isolation of the north, its lack of connections to

other places and other polities, suggests a much smaller scale to the process of name changes and one that implicates largely only its neighboring Turkish patrons. Although the suggestion by some that the continued partition of Cyprus has stood in the way of Turkish integration into the EU, the politics of place naming in the north are largely the province of Turkish Cypriots and Turkey alone. That is not to say that the effects of these changes do not have a larger impact. For example, in 2013 the southern Greek Cypriot government passed legislation banning alternative place names in response to the continued retrenchment of Turkish identity in the north. And yet, this process has not yet been linked to the wider relationships that Turkey itself is engaged in, such as NATO. In this sense, the scale of the process in the north has been much more limited than that in the south and the agents less likely to be found elsewhere.

These scalar differences suggest very different politics of place naming in the two parts of the island. Further, by recognizing place naming as an expressly political activity it is also meaningful to use ideas about politics itself to consider these differences between north and south. For instance, the relatively constrained scale of naming in the north (both in terms of limited overall extent and interactions between scales) may be described as a *top-down* political process. Political theorist Michael Mann's work on nationalism has described a top-down process as one that is "controlled from above in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes."<sup>42</sup> The scalar implications of a top-down political process are that it will be dominated by "official" state actors at the national scale with little appeal or concern for actors at other scales (either above or below) and little opportunity for other actors to engage in "scale jumping." Conversely, a *bottom-up* political process is one in which other types of actors at different scales work to achieve their preferred outcomes and where scale jumping is possible as a political strategy to deal with opposition from national scale authorities.

These scale-sensitive top-down and bottom-up conceptualizations of political activity are reflected in the different place naming processes occurring on the island of Cyprus. The activities in the south have been, at times, top-down (British- and UN-standardization), but have given way to more bottom-up approaches with the attendant examples of scale jumping by some municipalities during the standardization debates of the 1990s or in the appeals to the EU regarding naming changes in the north. A bottom-up approach also necessarily involves multiple scales through the act of scale jumping and, therefore, more complexity in the types of actors and the geopolitical contexts involved in the issue. On the other hand, the place naming in Northern Cyprus have been solidly top-down, with fewer actors and a scalar simplicity not present in the example of the south.

## Conclusion

Interpretations like this that draw not just on the nascent critical theorization of place naming processes but on the specific ideas and concepts of contemporary

human geography can provide the foundation to revitalize scholarship in toponymy. For example, what are the key agents that are involved in the separate yet interconnected place naming processes in the divided island of Cyprus? Reflecting on scale helps to draw our attention to relationships and places outside and well beyond Cyprus on the one hand (British Empire, UN, EU) and to a much more limited set of relationships on the other (Turkey). It also suggests that some types of naming technologies might necessarily involve larger scale processes than others. For instance, restoring names implies a change in political control over the places being renamed; this itself implies the restoration of localized control rather than external domination. However, a place name replacement process may operate at different scales for the opposite reasons. Such approaches also open new avenues for scholars to more explicitly link toponymic studies to concerns about politics and power that animate much of contemporary social science. The top-down/bottom-up framework advanced here is but one possible way to do this but it is one that draws directly from the ideas of scale.

Although grounded in the unique case of the island of Cyprus, this overall approach seems fruitful for other cases as well. Contested place names in East Asia (East Sea–Sea of Japan, etc.) are not just localized or even regionalized affairs; they also navigate the politics of U.S. hegemony, the rising regional status of China, the historical geopolitics of empire, and so on. From this perspective, the optimism of many about the critical turn in toponymy studies seems warranted: there are a wealth of new questions and answers waiting for exploration. Doing so through the lens of concepts like spatial scale promise to provide a richer appreciation of how place naming works and in the ways in which place naming practices in one setting are just one part of a variable set of other political practices, histories, and agendas.

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## Notes

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