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DISCUSSING MARGINALITY: A REFLECTION FROM THE URBAN  
AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY PERSPECTIVE

*Abstract* - The paper focuses on the term marginality and its use in social sciences and in human geography in particular. Quite surprisingly, geographical knowledge seems not very committed to define precisely the concept of marginality, probably because of the wider use of the concept of periphery or because of the sociological orientation usually given to the term. When used, the concept of marginality is affected by a negative connotation, due to the fact that it has always been opposed to the notion of centre. By means of examples, the paper explores the possible definitions of marginality and it stresses the importance to consider the geographical dimension of marginality. The paper also highlights the strategic role of considering the margins in the shaping of innovative and original perspectives and scenarios on the changing contemporary world.

*An introduction to the term.* – The notion of marginality can be examined from several perspectives and, like other key words relating to the urban dimension, such as exclusion, segregation, and isolation, the current crisis seems to have generated even further interest in such terms, even to the point of inflation in recent years. It is no coincidence that works by Henry Lefebvre (*Le Droit à la ville*), David Harvey (*Social Justice and City*), and Michel Foucault's courses at the Collège de France (published posthumously), are cited over and

over again, as if in an endless mantra. They are extremely multidisciplinary topics which can not be limited to the literature in the field of Geography.

The terms fall into a number of categories, and are subject to multiple interpretations, hence the need for a reflection that tries to avoid an a-critical adoption of categories which cannot exactly be superimposed and which are not direct equivalents. In this perspective, it may be of interest to look at the original definitions of entries in Italian, French and English dictionaries in a traditional, yet still beneficial exercise.

The *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* Devoto e Oli (ed. 2008) defines *marginalità* as follows:

“La posizione di individui o gruppi ai quali risulta di fatto precluso l’accesso sia alla produzione che al consumo di beni e servizi, nonché alla gestione del potere.”

The *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana Treccani* (ed. 2004) is not so explicit, and refers back to the adjective *marginale*: “Condizione di ciò, o di chi, è marginale, spec. in senso sociale.”

The adjective *marginale* (Treccani: “Del margine, che è al margine, che costituisce un margine:

zona, area, spazio marginale.”) takes on connotations referring to the margin of a page, to non-paraxial rays in optics, to frequency distribution in statistics and the construction of metal ships. The figurative meaning of the term is more relevant to our purposes: “Di cosa o fatto che, in un maggior complesso di cose o fatti, non ha peso o valore essenziale o determinante, ma accessorio, secondario”. (Vocabolario Treccani)

In economics, the adjective refers to infinitesimal variations, and originates from the marginalist principle. More generally, in the social sciences: “.....condizione m., quella di chi, vivendo in società industriali avanzate, specialmente nelle grandi aree urbane, e subendo gli

effetti di fenomeni (detti appunto di emarginazione o di marginalizzazione) dovuti a cause diverse ma in generale connessi con le modalità dello sviluppo economico e industriale, si trova escluso dal mercato del lavoro e, quindi, dai livelli generalizzati dei consumi, con conseguente impoverimento della sua vita culturale e sociale.” (Vocabolario Treccani, entry for “*marginalé*”)

French dictionaries seem to focus more on the social dimension: “Position marginale par rapport à une norme sociale.” (Dictionnaire Larousse, 2013); “Situation d’une personne marginale”. (Nouveau Petit Robert, 2002)

However, the additional information on the relative adjective (*marginale*), this too with its figurative meaning, seems to clearly point to a relationship with the norm and rules, and thus to a voluntary exclusion.

“Se dit de quelqu'un qui vit en marge de la société organisée, faute de pouvoir s'y intégrer ou par refus de se soumettre à ses normes.” (Dictionnaire Larousse)

“Personne vivant en marge de la société parce que elle en refuse les normes ou n y est pas adapté” (Nouveau Petit Robert)

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Hornby, 2000) does not include the entry *marginality*, despite its increasing use in academic English, while presenting the noun *marginalisation* to refer to: a\_“Person or group that becomes or feels less important, powerful etc.”.

The online *Collins English Dictionary* defines *marginality* as “the quality of being close to a limit, esp a lower limit; the quality of not being considered central or important; (politics) the quality of being a constituency or seat in which elections tend to be won by small margins (economics) the quality of constituting only a small change in something.”

In the same dictionary, the related adjective *marginal* is defined as: “of, in, on, or constituting a margin; close to a limit, esp a lower limit not considered central or important; insignificant, minor, small (economics) relating to goods or services produced and sold at the margin of profitability; (politics, mainly British & New Zealand) of or designating a constituency in which elections tend to be won by small margins designating; agricultural land on the margin of cultivated zones (economics) relating to a small change in something, such as total cost, revenue, or consumer satisfaction.”

This simple analysis of a few authoritative Dictionaries shows that there are several different ways of describing marginality, of which a number of examples are provided by the uncertainty that characterises our times.

Since the Bologna reform of the university system, for example, the criteria underlying the allocation of funds to research have caused a growing ‘marginalisation’ of the human and social sciences, where funds tend to be allocated increasingly in favour of useful, competent knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

In Italy and elsewhere, Geography is becoming an increasingly marginal discipline, having almost disappeared from secondary schools following the Gelmini reform and having gradually lost importance in higher education syllabuses.

In fact, every one of us is experiencing a deep re-shaping of the frameworks of meaning that relate to our personal and professional identities. In our private lives we often feel marginal and inadequate, so much so that we constantly seek new ways to say *I* or *we*, through virtual social bonds that, far from placing us at the centre of the network, leave us at the periphery in deep isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> As the Slovenian philosopher Žižek points out, one of the most radical expressions of this trend is the plan by the British government to gradually remove the funds for teaching humanities and social sciences in universities. The plan was announced in 2010, when the minister for University David Willets suggested that in the future all the subjects, with the exception of Science and Mathematics, shall be funded by university fees alone. (Žižek, 2012, 23-24).

The above examples of the polysemy of the word *marginality* and the idea of isolation it conveys, show that it is more interesting for (social and urban) geography to focus on the use of this word in its social, economic and cultural dimensions.

*Different dimensions, different scales.* – Moving to a different perspective, we are all aware of the pernicious effects of the dynamics of capitalist economy, creating a social pyramid with an ever finer point and an increasingly broad base. The marginal minority is growing numerically even to the point of becoming, in some cases, a majority. The condition of actual marginality and precariousness that affects, among other things, the psychological (and otherwise) dimension of our lives is becoming increasingly vast: investigations into (real or perceived) poverty multiply, confirming the presence of situations where the ‘means’ are inadequate to requirements or, in more general terms, there is an objective inability to meet basic needs. There is a social instability taking hold everywhere, generating new conflicts, which require transnational, multi-scale analytical instruments if they are to be understood. It is a situation which would seem to require a new investigation into the *Misère du Monde*, like that carried out by Pierre Bourdieu and his students twenty years ago (Bourdieu, 1993).

Yet in advanced societies, gaps were expected to disappear or to narrow remarkably for the lower social classes. However, such gaps are currently on the increase, taking into their numbers the better-protected socio-professional categories including the famous middle classes, the fetish of social stability.

Despite the interest in marginality that it has brought about, the present crisis risks oversimplifying the debate on this aspect of the issue, especially due to mediatisation: everyday communication rarely pays attention to the possible nuances of the word.

The societal interpretation of the term focuses on human dimensions such as demography, religion, culture, social structure, and above all the political and economic dimensions of access to material and immaterial resources. These simple definitions tell us that marginality is a process that emerges and evolves constantly in different ways and on multiple geographical scales. Therefore, to define marginality and the isolation that follows on from it means to deal with a multifaceted, ever changing subject.

Since the bourgeois revolutions, the greatest clash has been recorded in the ideal-typical view of a society pervaded with values of equality and tending towards freedom and welfare for all. In stark contrast with this idea, an actual increase in differences and inequalities has taken place, which translates into an organisation based on watertight compartments that divide instead of fostering the integration processes. Faced with such a vast and complex universe, we will try and provide a few definitions to help better outline the idea of marginality.

As the dictionary definitions show, this term is typically used to describe and analyse socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people try to gain (social and spatial) access to resources and full participation in society. In other words, marginalised people can be socially, politically, economically and legally ignored, excluded and left aside, and thus become highly vulnerable. In sociological terms, marginality becomes part of the normality/deviance pair, the margin being the edge over which one falls, even though – as in all dichotomies - this pair of opposites gradually blurs into multiple possible definitions.

The expression “marginal man” was introduced into urban sociology by Robert Park, a member of the Chicago School (1928), although with a slightly different meaning to the one that is most common today. Speaking of the history of the Jews, but also thinking of the condition of American mulattos, the author referred to those who, being immigrants in an ethnic context different from their own, maintained close links with their culture of origin and, while trying their best to be accepted in the host society, are rejected by it because of strong prejudice. The foreigner’s condition of otherness seems to evoke quite explicitly George Simmel’s earlier reflection on the condition of the foreigner who chooses to migrate to a society that is hostile to him or her (it is no coincidence, in this respect, that Park was Simmel’s student for some time in Germany) (Simmel, 1989).

We should stress, however, that the meaning of marginality as the exclusion of individuals and groups from the centre of power in a social system and as the exclusion from the distribution of the goods and opportunities it produces has older origins<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Power dynamics and marginalisation processes in the relations between dominating and dominated voices cannot but recall the reflections on power geography inspired by Foucault, on which Claude Raffestin (1983)

In the history of mankind, ever since a centre was identified, a marginal, weak area has been identified alongside it. Studies, however, have been carried out starting from the pernicious effects of industrialisation on marginal areas and on the conditions of the proletariat. One example is Manchester as Friedrich Engels described it (1972) or East London in doctor Charles Booth's words (1902), or again 19<sup>th</sup>-century stories and novels (Hugo, Zola, D.H. Lawrence). Alongside Robert Park, many other members of the Chicago School used the category of marginality in infra-urban investigations to describe the mechanisms of invasion and replacement of whole neighbourhoods in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Park et al., 1999).

Following the geopolitical changes that took place after World War II, growing attention has been given to decolonised countries and their limited access to, and participation in, the international political and economic system. In the 1950s, when cities were seen as dual spaces (colonial city vs. ancient city), quite a few descriptive investigations were carried out into the sprawling metropolises that began to appear in the so-called Third World. Since that time, the connection between poverty, marginality and periphery has been enriched by a number of research works, including geographical ones, in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Since the 1960s, the contradictions of Western cities have also been the subject of investigations, especially in the area of Marx-inspired social sciences, which aimed to analyse the deeper causes of the conditions of the proletariat in the most run-down neighbourhoods.

A relative lack of interest in marginality was recorded in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the study of cities in Southern Italy meant the study of residual, backward spaces, to such an extent that there seemed to be an obligation to improve following the recipes of international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The real turning point was the *UN Habitat II* conference, held in Istanbul in 1996, where the topic of slums and urban growth in marginal, run-down areas became extremely

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wrote a foundation text although, paradoxically, the thinking of the Poitiers-born philosopher became a reference mainly for the Anglo-Saxon Cultural Geography. Due to space constraints, it is not possible to provide a complete biography on the topic, so we will only refer to the reflection edited Jeremy Crampton and Stuart Elden (2007).

topical again as the new face of world urbanisation also in the most developed contexts (Un Habitat, 1996; Wacquant, 1996 and 1999).

As we mentioned above, the condition of ‘margin’ is not expressed in local contexts alone, but also at world level. At this opposite end of the scale, the concept of World System described by Wallerstein from the 1970s (2003) was long used to describe world inequalities. However, although this interpretation indicated a Centre-Periphery dichotomy as well as a semi-peripheral transition area, it seems no longer suitable to describe the complex, polycentric structures of power, which change constantly because of competition and clashes between spatial sub-units. What was once the periphery seems to be destined to become the centre, as shown by the economic success of the BRICS countries and of other sub-state entities such as global cities, which are, however, highly polarised, as is pointed out by Allen Scott (2001) and Saskia Sassen (2004).

*Marginality in geography.* – A traditional geographic definition which is not too distant from the ones quoted above relies on spatial and topographical criteria, considering physical location and distance from the centres of development and power, distance being a factor generating marginality. In strictly geographical terms, a margin is a limit or border and is therefore located at a certain distance from the centre. This distance can be either quantitative and measurable, or qualitative and definable with reference to a pole or a structuring space (Rioux, 1998). As Antoine Bailly (1983) and André Vant (1986) point out, geographical marginality is part of the centre/periphery pair and can be observed on different scales: the traditional geo-economic and geopolitical scale in which the States are leading actors, the inter-regional scale within single countries, the infra-regional scale, down to the scale of individual places.

Surprisingly enough, geographic studies have not shown much interest in reaching an exact definition of the concept of marginality, possibly because of the specific weight of the concept of periphery and of the sociological interpretation this word is usually given. The words of the historian interested in Geography, Lucien Lefebvre, recalled by Pierre George (1966), may have long influenced these reflections: «Peu importe la marge, c’est le coeur qui il

faut avant tout considérer», meaning that greater weight has to be given to what is important, what is visible and provides structure to geographical spaces.

In short, we use the term marginality to refer to a geographical location and a social status at the same time, in line with the many recent studies in “social and cultural Geography” conducted in the English-speaking world, on topics starting from the ‘cultural turn’, which focused on the key role of outsiders (Sibley et al, 2005).

In Italy and France, the positional and territorial character of ‘marginality’ has affected the choices of geographers in a major way: while France has produced a wealth of case studies on colonial cities first and then on the *banlieues*, in Italy great attention has been given to the area of study concerned with the enhancement of marginal areas, the latter area having produced the most significant outcomes in terms of field studies. It is a complex work that was started in the mid-1980s under the acronym GRAM (Gruppo Rivalorizzazione Aree Marginali of the Agei), coordinated by Giuseppe Dematteis. The results were collected in three volumes: the first providing an in-depth geo-demographic analysis of Italian regions (Cencini, Dematteis and Menegatti, 1983) with introductory methodological papers; the second one on case studies at the sub-regional scale (Leone, 1986); and the third one focusing on general methodological issues (Leone, 1988). The GRAM has become an important reference point for Italian Geography, with over 50 researchers from 21 different universities analysing a country in transition. It also provides excellent training ground for young geographers, and encourages and develops dialogue with several disciplines, namely Economics. Unfortunately, only little space is given to a reconstruction of the morphology of the logical-conceptual category of marginality, exception made for Franco Farinelli’s preliminary reflection (1983). According to this author, marginal spaces are in an unbalanced relationship with the dominant capital: the condition of marginality is therefore mainly economic, as well as social and cultural, so that it becomes crucial to be able to tell a marginal from a peripheral condition.

In France too, reflections on the term or research using the terms *marge* and *marginalisation* have only appeared in recent years. It is no coincidence that these words are not included in the *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l’espace des sociétés* edited by Lévy and Lussault. In the English-speaking world, the *Dictionary of Human Geography* edited by Gregory

and Johnston does not list this word either. In the twelve volumes of the *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* the term has a fuller definition in the entry concerning behavioural geography, electoral geography and vulnerability, as well as in the entries concerning ethnic conflicts and feminist geography, which are closer to the idea we have of the word but do not have a separate entry.

Surprisingly, in contrast with the lack of interest in the main dictionaries, a more exhaustive definition of marginality related to the idea of isolation is provided by the *International Geographical Union* in 2003. Marginality can be defined as

“the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic), ... in mind, when one excludes certain domains or phenomena from one’s thinking because they do not correspond to the mainstream philosophy”(quoted in Gurung, Kollmair, 2005).

The adjective “temporary” seems to point to a dynamic interpretation of the concept, a non-definitive condition which suggests a stadial interpretation which remains ambiguous in many respects.

*Examples of a geography of margins.* – While the review of definitions does not seem able to offer a single definition, it does suggest quite a clear idea of the condition of marginality. Present-day Italy can provide a wealth of examples, some of which are presented below.

The gradual decline of regulation in the “Keynesian national welfare state” (Jessop, 2002) affected the welfare state system, which has suffered growing financial cuts, directing the demand for social safeguards towards market regulations and multiplying the actors involved, in Italy and elsewhere (Brenner, 2004). This trend is combined with a change in the country’s socio-demographic profile (ageing population, pluralisation and standardisation of the labour market; increased role of women; the evolution of nuclear families; growing stable migration flows), producing similar effects to those recorded in other European economies and societies (Kazepov, Barberis, 2013).

Phenomena of marginality can be observed, in different ways and places, across all the strategic areas of social policies: social and health care, active labour policies, the fight against poverty and the minimum wage, care for the elderly and disabled, inclusion and integration policies for migrants.

The place where these phenomena are observed is important from the geographical perspective: the city is viewed as the laboratory of complex interactions that deserve the greatest attention (Balestrieri, 2011). Contemporary society expresses a new way of being a city, which can only be perceived if we are able to read the multiple elements making up the urban context. As Secchi (1999) stresses, the metaphor for defining this discontinuity is that of a fragment: at the various scales, the physical, social, economic, institutional, political and cultural spaces – all showing similar degrees of fragmentariness – are not the outcome of multiple rationalities, but simply the simultaneous presence of them all.

These co-presences generate fragmentation and borders that deserve to be investigated on the urban scale. Parts of cities remain at the margin of innovative processes, of knowledge and the labour market, preserving the idea of ‘urban’ only in terms of their spatial location.

The inner borders dividing urban settings multiply, creating identities and clusters whose two poles are *slums* and *gated communities* – both isolated, peripheral entities yet standing at different levels within the hierarchy of marginality. As mentioned above, this archipelago of poverty and unease grows constantly on the edges of the globalisation process, and there are a number of examples of *shantytowns* studied on the world scale, which no longer concern the Global South only, but situations as different as Argentina and Ghana, India and *barrios* in the US, the Cairo suburbs and the French *banlieues*. These are all marginal conditions where, notwithstanding the differences, even basic aspects of human dignity are often unaccounted for, as reported by Mike Davis (2006).

The presence of migrants in Italy is certainly the most effective element to look at when describing the change in the country’s socio-cultural profile, as well as when dealing with marginality issues.

Ever-spreading urban life is at the same time a cause and an effect of inward migration flows towards the areas where the local economy is most vibrant and those where

the economic system is most flexible, making it possible to find a place in the loose texture of the informal labour market and in the marginal niches of the housing market. These are areas where the number and percentage of migrants have sparked great interest: they are mostly located in the peripheral areas of cities, showing ever-changing relationships with the city itself, where informality and, often, organised crime have contributed to the concentration of migrants in the vicinity of work places, in conditions which are in most cases precarious if not emergency situations.

Moving to a different scale, the latest investigations conducted in Campania have brought to light a complex picture which deserves further analysis, especially on issues of housing. Significant socio-cultural transformations are recorded mainly in the provincial capitals (Naples, Salerno and Caserta), which would be the ideal laboratories for research aiming at exploring housing needs as the recent literature on the topic shows (Amato, Coppola, 2009; Ammaturo et alii, 2009). The presence of migrants concerns complex realities which are difficult to define: they often concern housing choices that foreign workers make for an early short-term period, with a view to settling in other areas of Central and Northern Italy in a more stable way. Those who choose to live in Campania, on the other hand, tend to look for housing in peripheral areas where property is less expensive.

A recent investigation that was promoted by the NGO Alisei<sup>3</sup> and led by myself attempted to gain an in-depth, direct knowledge of the ‘peripheral’ social spaces of Naples’ vast metropolitan area, which extends to the north and north-west towards Caserta and to the south-west towards Salerno. The field study aimed to gain an in-depth knowledge of the territory in order to prevent housing emergency situations, identifying the potentially riskiest situations so as to put the most suitable actions in place. The field study alone brought to light extremely run-down situations in the coastal hamlets of the town of Eboli south of Salerno (Santa Cecilia and Campolongo). Santa Cecilia, which is located farther inland than Campolongo, appeared to be a place of residence for migrants only (almost all from

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<sup>3</sup> The investigation to be carried out in the framework of the project “Sulla soglia” and funded by the FEI 2011 fund.

Maghreb), living in abandoned warehouses. The condition of these people is by far the most disadvantaged, since in most cases they have no running water, electricity or heating. Many of them hold a residence permit, which suggests they are people who were evacuated from San Nicola Varco (an old ghetto now cleared, also in the town of Eboli), where many were known to be regular migrants. The hamlet of Campolongo may be described as a small-sized Eboli, that is to say an area with a great concentration of migrant population, as can be remarked when travelling along this part of the coastal road, whose only users are foreigners cycling or walking or people somehow involved in prostitution activities. The vast majority of Eboli's migrants live in Campolongo, not far from the agricultural land scattered with ruined buildings, campers and all sorts of hovels, including roofless buildings where people live.

This is only one of the many examples highlighting the issue of housing for migrants, especially when looking at marginality issues, confirming that it is not possible to study the complex topic of migration without a constant observation of the places – that is, without a geographical outlook.

*Concluding to start again?* – Margins and conditions of discomfort have been the main focus of my studies, above all in the field investigations I have carried out over the years. However, notwithstanding my great interest in these issues, I must admit that in recent years I have started questioning the way in which such phenomena are approached.

The aspect I would like to stress as a conclusion is the very use of the word marginality. As all the language dictionaries and geographical collections quoted above show, there is no single definition for the word, and the wealth of nuances is remarkable, also in the shift from one language to the other. However, all the definitions emphasise an approach which always describes the subjects of marginality by comparison with social or psychosocial integration, sometimes even pointing to the voluntary nature of the condition (namely the English and French dictionaries). Much of the word's weakness is due to the frequent overlapping of images of exclusion and inequality with aspects that are closely related to the idea of margin, but which, as in social Geography, cannot cover the whole spectrum of possibilities.

The idea that seems to underlie a certain type of research is always that of marginal, peripheral places (another equivalence that should be rejected), which should aim for the integration of, and assimilation to, the parameters of a mythicized city centre, possibly through codified participatory practices. Such a city centre is, however, defined by the rules of urban marketing and is often transformed into a museum, deprived of its inhabitants and of its future (younger generations do not usually live in these areas) and subject to the logics of tourism which are of no interest to those living in peripheral or marginal places, regardless of where they are located. Peripheral places, for example, show new polarization trends in distant consumption and shopping places, through which the migrant communities build new private geographies that give fresh dignity and interest to the Hinterland, bringing new life to small towns that would otherwise risk desertification. As Rosario Sommella pointed out a few years ago, this has also stimulated the interest of criminal organisations: the most powerful Camorra is based outside the city of Naples (Sommella, 2006).

Differently from what we may think, these places are the setting for multiple dynamics and actors: they become realities which express tensions, conflicts, protests and different perspectives – a sort of *in corpore* denunciation of what the global city no longer says and attempts to hide under the carpet (Petrillo, 2013). With a little optimism, we may imagine that starting from the margins we can create a new perspective to look at the changing world, from the margins we may foster change, as the various Indignados movements for change have tried to show, with differing outcomes, over the past few years (Castells, 2013). This, however, is a hypothesis – geographical but not only – that is yet to be written.

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