

## On the Politics of Claiming Peripheral Space

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### Abstract

Il margine è frequentemente nominato negli studi urbani critici contemporanei come riferimento metaforico dello spazio non-pianificato, ancora da inserire nel contesto formale. Ma il termine è raramente concettualizzato. Questo contributo è un tentativo di proporre una teoria del margine in relazione alle geografie concrete della contestazione politica e del consolidamento del potere sovrano nei processi contemporanei di urbanizzazione planetaria. Confrontando il margine con due termini adiacenti – ghetto e campo – l'articolo sostiene che, mentre l'espansione del potere territoriale nei margini urbani oggi rimane in primo luogo un progetto ideologico, che cerca di catturare e rendere leggibile un immaginario 'spazio vuoto', questo processo deve essere anche pensato come un progetto che rimane sempre incompleto: un campo di battaglia dove si pone la questione di quali siano le forme legittime di governare la vita in questi luoghi. Prendendo l'esempio del ghetto migrante, l'autore ridefinisce il margine urbano come un sito di pratica in cui il confine tra potere legittimo e illegittimo viene effettivamente fondato e contestato.

The margin is frequently evoked in urban studies in reference to the presumed 'unplannable' space, yet to be incorporated in formal urban development. But the term remains rarely conceptualized. This paper constitutes an attempt to do so in relation to the concrete geographies of political contestation and consolidation of sovereign power in contemporary processes of planetary urbanization. Comparing the margin with two adjacent terms –of the ghetto and the camp– the paper argues that, while the expansion of territorial power in today's urban margins is first of all an ideological project, which tries to capture and make legible an imaginary 'uncivilized' or informal 'empty' space, this project also needs to be thought of as always incomplete, a battle ground over what constitutes and what does not constitute a legitimate way of governing life in contemporary 'not yet' urbanized spaces. Taking the example of the contemporary migrant ghetto, the author redefines the urban margin as a site of practice where the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate power is effectively grounded and contested.

**Parole chiave:** margine; governo; ghetto; campo; geografia; confini.

**Keywords:** margin; government; ghetto; camp; geography; boundaries.

### Introduction

In her famous essay, the Black American activist and writer bell hooks (pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins) describes her life while growing up during the 1950s. In the small Kentucky town of Hopkinsville, she remembers how the railroad tracks continued

to be a constant reminder of her marginality as a Black Afro-American citizen:

«To be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body [...]. Across these tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We always had to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town» (hooks, 1990: 341).

Bell hooks' autobiography enables us to visualize the tense geographies that underpin contentious peripheral spaces. She describes the margins as an explicitly exclusionary space, where the 'wretched of the earth' are confined to an existence outside modernity. From a modernizing, nation-state perspective, therefore, one could argue that the margins signify a (yet) unoccupied, peripheral space, which lays open, bare, to be colonized by a powerful and ostensibly more 'civilizing' force (Roy, 2005). From the railroad tracks bell hooks envisioned, margins are spaces that continue to remind us of the high price we constantly pay by upholding the innumerable lines and barriers that divide our world, and which – exactly because of we take them for granted as legitimate territorial borders – reinforce the violent underpinnings of state and corporate power. In this sense, hooks argues, marginal spaces represent the ratification of the persistent colonization of peoples and activities that are consciously situated outside the project of modernity – a project which entails not only an economic or a political, but also a cultural process. The politics of marginality hooks describes entails both this material occupation as well as the cultural legitimation in which the experiences and identities of colonised people are inherently shaped through discourses of difference, inferiority and superiority.

At the same time, though bell hooks describes her peripheral neighborhood as a resistive place, where she developed a particular way of 'seeing reality'. Looking at the world that lay on the other side of the tracks «from the outside in and from the inside out» stimulated her political consciousness about what it meant to be 'marginalized'. Observing the differences between what lay at the opposite sides of Hopkinsville's railway tracks – a prosperous white suburbia on one side and a miserable black

slum on the other – gradually raised hooks’ awareness about the vital part the margin continued to play in ‘sustaining’ the center. Considering this viewpoint, one could imagine margins to be places from where colonized subjects actively start to question and resist their material and cultural conditions through actively renegotiating their identity and cultural subordination by the center. In this perspective, margins can be described as sites of ambivalence, of hybridity, and mixture rather than clear-cut territories, because they act as split screens through which colonized subjects discursively delineate and narrate their world (Bhabha, 2004; see Taussig, 1984). Contemporary analysis of the American ghetto reinforces this perspective on margins as sites of simultaneous resistance and subordination to the cultural and technological hegemony of the metropolitan center. Hegemony can be interpreted as capitalist project, of encapsulating the workforce without paying for its reproduction, but it does not need be. Loïc Wacquant, for instance, emphasizes the institutional mechanisms through which North America’s urban ghettos are actively written into the nation-state space while at the same time remaining excluded from the benefits of bureaucratic legibility and social integration. In his book *Prisons of Poverty* he meticulously argues how in the current neoliberal order that characterizes the US’s government, black minorities are effectively excluded from political participation through systematic imprisonment and geographic segregation. Over the last fifty years, the constant ideological fortification of the American ghetto as a supposedly disorganized and dysfunctional social formation has served exactly this purpose, he writes: of subscribing marginalized populations into a «[...] spatially-based concatenation of mechanisms of ethnoracial closure and control» (Wacquant, 1997: 342; 2008). But Wacquant is also criticized for over-emphasizing the power of the neoliberal state (see e.g. Fassin, 2015). Fassin, Roy (2005), Das and Poole (2004), for instance, emphasize more prominently the political subjectivity of marginalized populations and their ability to manoeuvre and reclaim power over segregated spaces (see also Chatterjee, 2004; Hansen and Stepputat, 2005). What appears important, therefore, is to indicate more precisely where exactly the (neoliberal) state ends, in other words: how the practice of segregating marginalized from central spaces becomes constitutive of power relations at the heart of contemporary

processes of territorialization (see also Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013).

### **The ghetto and the camp**

It is worthwhile to concentrate for a moment on the definition of the urban ghetto as a specific marginal configuration. Described as a form of urban polarization, which both restricts and channels human movement, the ghetto gets often described as a form of advanced marginality, pushed forward by a politics of urban seclusion (from the Latin *secludere*, which means to shut out, to isolate, to confine: Wacquant, 2008). Since the 1950s in the US, ghettoization has become a determinate strategy sustained by various governments in their implementation of neoliberal and racial policies. Rather than segregating black and white communities along neat territorial boundaries, such policies have generated a kind of 'hyperghetto', Wacquant observes, which splinters the black community along class lines and offers none of the collective protections and resistive aspects of ghetto politics that bell hooks and other Black American activists present us. To some extent, therefore, one could argue that the American ghetto has become stabilized as a deep structure of political organization – and which only partly gets challenged by new waves of immigration.

A different story characterizes the European peripheral city, which Wacquant describes as an anti-ghetto: much more porous than their American counterparts, and characterized by high degrees of ethnic and class differentiation, their inhabitants continue to be excluded, not through any kind of direct enclosure, but more subtly through the spatial taint, or the «territorial stigma» they attract wherever they go on the basis of their residency, their language, their identity, and the colour of their skin (Wacquant et al., 2014; Dikec, 2007).

That said, however, the literature on urban marginality is not very clear on the relation between urban marginality and the territorialization of state power (for an exception see Roy and Crane, 2007). Historically, the term territory has been associated predominantly with the nation-state, or that bounded, geographic area belonging to a sovereign state in which it is presumed to exercise the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This definition does not do justice to an increasingly interconnected,

multilayered world in which local and global processes of political decision-making become associated more directly (Sassen, 2006). Political geographers have pointed to the necessity, not only of recognizing the making of territories on a more micro-scale; but also to the social production of such territories through diverse socio-technical practices that emerge in the interaction between individuals, groups and institutions (Brighenti, 2006; Delaney, 2008; Painter, 2010; Storey, 2017; Antonsisch, 2017). More concretely, attention needs to go to the territorialization of power in urban spaces, or the way in which actions and activities are both pro- and prescribed within a set of fixed territorial boundaries. This entails a double recognition: (i) that territories are not just there, but need to be actively made and maintained in order for state power to reproduce its legitimacy in the margins of what are deemed the state's territorial limits; and (ii) that territories are also important political technologies through which the «spatial order of things» comes to be normalized and perpetuated (Elden, 2013: 16; Roy and Crane, 2007: 3).

This focus on territorialization of (state) power acquires increasing relevance when considering the surging 'informal settlements' associated with today's migration flows. Considering for a minute the various 'temporal' infrastructures emerging on the border between Mexico and the US, Myanmar and Thailand, Tunisia and Libya, France and the United Kingdom, one observes a striking similarity between what are, in essence, described as mere migrant pathways but which increasingly acquire a permanent, stable form: from the 'Jungle' of Calais to the border settlements along in the Thai forest and the Arizona desert, a new type of migrant 'ghetto' appears to emerge on the fringes of official humanitarian and bureaucratic migration management: some managed by charity and cooperative associations, while others gather the backing of autonomous groups, and others appear as 'temporary' communities that occasionally receive the support of humanitarian emergency organizations. Since the Lybian crisis of 2011, for example, such migrant shantytowns became a frequent sight all across Europe and Africa, where migrant 'ghettos' continue to function both as a reliable stopover place and a way to relate to one's community networks. One may define this new urban forms a *liquid ghetto* – after Baumann, who continued to refer to the dualizing effect of mobility in post-

modern societies, and in direct proportion to walling states<sup>1</sup>. Different than the camp or the institutionalized ghetto, however, this new urban configuration is more difficult to pin down conceptually, because of its elusive, translocal infrastructure. On the one hand, it may appear as a new site of sociality, situated in the 'terrains vagues' of contemporary state deployment. This might be the reason why some activists celebrate migrant 'ghettos' as resistive places, open to consolidating opposition and to formulating alternatives to the oppressive politics of marginalization. On the other hand, however, today's liquid ghettos also become sites of heterogeneous deployments, where various agencies working both in parallel and in the shadows of official institutions actively fill the gaps left by withering states. The precarious status of these places – which face a constant risk of eviction and are effectively abandoned by state officialdom – make them predestined sites for the deployment of 'de facto' authorities: petty sovereigns who practically oppose state government but who rely on the materiality and imagery of the state to claim and sustain political legitimacy<sup>2</sup>.

### **The limits of the state**

Thinking once more about the original definition of the urban ghetto as a spatial concatenation of racial and ethnic closure and control, it remains to be said that this is never a conclusive process, which simply encapsulates ghettoized place and populations. Ghettos, as urban marginalized places, are not territorially fixed, but they remain above all «sites of practice», where the ambitions to territorial order-making are moulded

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1 Another scholar who foresaw this was Gilles Deleuze (1992), who predicted the exponential growth of "shantytowns and ghettos" in today's societies of control, because of the incessant postponement of categorical decisions, as well as the ever-more networked forms of capitalist production.

2 Concrete examples of such petty sovereigns are the "quasi-state structures" (such as 'street-level' bureaucrats, members of non-government organizations, but also less formalized bodies like volunteer groups, cultural associations and neighbourhood watches) who step in for substituting service provisions, which ideologically and in the wider public imaginary, remains closely associated with territorial state government (see f.i. Muehlebach 2012, Cabot 2013, Alpes and Spire 2013, Coutin, 2013).

and encroached upon by «other forms of regulation that emanate from the pressing needs of populations to secure political and economic survival» (Das and Poole, 2004: 8). Speaking more generally, this means two things in one. On the one hand, one should continue to imagine margins as liminal spaces, where power is effectuated through the multiple overlapping boundaries that emerge in the midst of various conflicting claims to exercise control and to govern populations. In the case of migrant ghettos, these claims are typically contested between different actors and institutions – which accordingly redefine the boundary between what is understood as belonging to the state and non-state, formal and informal sphere. At the same time (and different than prisons or camps), this liminality enhances the agency of marginalized populations to contest and mould their worlds. Contrarily to the dominant ideology that envisions colonized peoples as being always and inherently «trapped in place» (Sharp, 2013), a marginal perspective on state and corporate space highlights the formers' central agency in generating overlap, hybridity and resistance against the sovereign powers-that-be. This means effectively that the struggle over claiming peripheral, or marginal, spaces is often as much a matter of making one's power be felt 'from a distance', as it depends on everyday compromises and negotiations that emanate from people's pressing needs to organize and predict their lives. While navigating these complex webs, the various forces that claim a right to such spaces remains as much an outcome of contingencies and mediated agency, as it is confined by all sorts of competing norms and regulations. On the other hand, therefore, a marginal perspective tells us that claims to sovereign power are always and essentially tentative claims in the face of fragmented and unpredictable configurations of power. Organizations that express presumptions to a sovereign monopoly on violence in the putative margins – be they state bureaucracies, corporate entities, mafias or non-governmental agencies – need to constantly reconfirm a cultural intimacy with the margins and their inhabitants, while at the same time invoking the possibility of relentless violence against them (Hansen and Stepputat, 2011; Humphrey, 2004; Moran and Salzani, 2015). A theory of marginal urban space represents exactly this tension between the legitimizing and oppressive foundations of sovereign power, because it is here that the claims to absolute

and uncontested rule get maneuvered into a workable territorial order. In sum, it tells us that governance is as much about consolidating that order as it remains fundamentally an attempt, an assumption that is driven by performance and a way of 'acting out' what are inherently unstable arrangements.

Pausing for a moment, what relevance do such observations have for a critical theory of the city and of urban processes? In a world where urban marginality continues to be invariably associated with informality, with tactical agency and with the «unplannable» (Roy 2005), it is indeed extremely difficult to discern the more diffuse ways in which formal and informal, urban and rural, state and non-state dynamics connect and interact. In his oversimplifying ways, Hernando De Soto, through his influential work on urban informality, continues to argue with many others that the urban poor are separately involved in maintaining their own city, unrelated whatsoever to the official bureaucratic apparatus of planning and control (De Soto, 2000; Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000). Very much in line with modernizing state ideology, his solution to this «legal apartheid» is to formalize property relations, which will make urban poverty disappear like clouds for the sun. But this perspective on marginality is luckily waning rapidly as a result of sustained and robust critique. Contrasting his perspective, Nezar AlSayyad and Ananya Roy (2004; see also Roy, 2005) for instance, have argued fiercely that state power is very much reproduced through its capacity to construct and reconstruct categories of formality and informality, legitimacy and illegitimacy, a capacity that also serves the purpose of sustaining its mythical foundations as a supreme locus of political power in the margins (see also Bayat and Denis, 2000). Rather than positing the state – or any organization with pretenses to sovereign power – as the benevolent promoter of legalization, they make it clear that the territorialization of political order – for instance through the regulation of property, infrastructure and urban planning – is not simply a technical issue, but a complex political struggle. To assert territorial power over the urban margins, borders need to be drawn, separations maintained, and properties divided. This is, as we saw, not only a political and economic, but also a cultural project, which builds on ideologies of superiority, subalternity and civilization. Summarizing this vast scholarship, one could convincingly argue that the contemporary urban frontier «is not



a thin line marking the barrier between market and non-market, or formal and informal», but «it is a terrain of warfare (...) a scene of battle that seems to define every point at which the formal or the capitalist can be identified» (Mitchell, 2004: 10). That is why a marginal perspective on power in the urban realm remains such a dire analytical and political necessity.

### **Conclusion: the margin is the center**

To summarize, the politics of claiming peripheral space should not be seen as a linear occupation developing along a binary trajectory. But it rather involves a constant political struggle characterized by many bumps and unexpected deviations. In addition, there is yet another reason why we need to enhance our geographic creativity to study processes of urban marginality. Urban processes, we are told, have become much more diffuse now than they used to be: with financial flows crossing continents in a matter of seconds, and urban metropolises attracting and expelling migrant populations in function of fluctuating economic production, one should start considering more carefully the ways in which urban systems interrelate 'across' rather than within territorial borders (Sassen, 2006; Brenner and Katsikis, 2013). I will try to illustrate this through two contrasting examples. Until recently, my research concentrated on cross-border trade patterns in Central Africa, more specifically in the Great lakes region. Here, urban centers historically developed along caravan routes: since the 17th century, large groups of tradesmen exchanged East African commodities for animal skins and minerals from the tropical forest areas. Since colonial independence, a rapid transformation has taken place here: trade routes have not only expanded between the Atlantic and the Pacific, but commerce has increasingly become a specialized profession, which fosters a growing interconnection between state bureaucracies and the emerging urban bourgeoisie. In the region around Lake Chad, on the Ghana-Togo border, as well as Africa's Great lakes, for instance, informal commerce has generated expanding frontiers of capitalist expansion. Besides new trade routes, this expansion has gradually produced new relations between state and security personnel (including militias) and mobile entrepreneurs. While attracting a growing populace of ambulant traders, 'clandestine'

smugglers, brokers, street hawkers and displaced people, such mobile economies are rapidly expanding in the territorial border zones of the continent, between Rwanda, Uganda and Congo, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, where a series of booming border towns thrive on this intense informal exchange. In these *de facto* free trade zones, border traders continue to maintain an ambivalent relation with state officialdom, which tolerates, and in some cases even encourages fraudulent practices as well as a proliferation of para-official services (Raeymaekers, 2014; Roitman, 2005; Zeller, 2009; Dobler, 2009; Doevenspeck, 2011). Let me contrast this example shortly with that of the Mediterranean, where in the meantime, a different evolution has taken place. Here, relationships between urban and rural economies historically developed as a complex system of exchange, which thrived, amongst others, on different seasonalities and specializations. As recent research reveals, the key element of risk – related to unpredictable elements like the climate, seasonality, and piracy – has been central to maintaining these beneficial differences (Horden and Purcell, 2000). The different ways to confront such risks has sometimes produced radical alterations. Since the 1980s, for instance, a crisis in the sphere of industrial European agri-businesses has attracted a growing immigration of cheap West African labourers, who already sustained their own mobile systems of production between countries like Burkina Faso, Ghana and Ivory Coast (where cocoa, coffee and cotton plantations historically attract masses of migrant workers). Enhancing these differences, a transnational plantation economy slowly emerged between these places, sustained both by the hypermobility of this transnational workforce as well as the historical inequalities between different modes of agro-food production: West African 'seasonal' labourers now contribute to agricultural economies in the South of Italy, Greece and Spain, where decreasing industrialization and growing market competition is generating a demand for cheap and just-in-time production. Rather than border boom towns, this emerging plantation economy is producing a new form of metropolis: the migrant agro-workers' town, which continues to prosper thanks to the ambivalent and often purposively illegible relation between capitalist production and state administration. In turn, such towns continue to attract a new fluctuating population of ambulant workers (including

sex workers), traders, shop keepers and brokers of different kinds. In the region of Puglia for instance, a 'ghetto' of over 3000 workers has persisted during the tomato harvesting season since the 1990s, before it was torn down by regional authorities in 2017. In the South of Spain around Almeria, migrant workers continue to live in makeshift shacks under the plastic sheeting of the industrial hothouses that serve as Europe's all-year-round grocery garden. And in the region of Kalamata, African migrant workers are subletting the houses of emigrant Greek citizens, who left their homesteads six decades ago during Europe's big wave of internal migration.

In conclusion, the short examples I elaborated here are to show that urban marginality should not be analyzed in isolation of global mobility and migration. But they should be analyzed in pair with the processes of urban expansion and transformation that mould and sustain them. From the micro-level of the migrant 'ghetto' to the wider, multi-scalar transformations of production and trade I exemplified, I argue that the different ways in which relations between consuming (non-)citizens, bureaucratic systems and capitalist producers are being constantly negotiated and moulded in the so-called margins are not just reflexive, but actually 'constitutive' of power relations in the metropolitan center. In sum, the relation between center and margin is not an absolute but a contingent matter: a relation that remains dependent on the networks of associations that maintain this triangular dialectic between expanding and detracting state bureaucracies, mobile flows of capital, peoples and resources, and processes of capitalist production and exchange, as well as on the powerful imaginaries that underpin and challenge this dialectic across geographic scales. To summarize and conclude, I reassert, first, that the expansion of territorial power in today's urban margins is above all an ideological project, which associates the imagination of an uncivilized or informal 'empty' space with active strategies to make this space legible, profitable and assessable on the other. To quote once again Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004: 6), key to our theory of the margins is «the relationship between violence and the ordering functions of the state». Whether situated in the rural-urban frontier, on the territorial borderline, or in the midst of industrialized megacities, inherent to the consolidation of political order in these spaces is

the creation of boundaries between practices and spaces that are seen to form part of the state and those that are excluded from it. Secondly, therefore, marginal spaces represent a distinct power dynamic that converges in attempts from the part of expanding political organizations to tame and control the inherent friction, mixture and overlap that characterizes life in such spaces. This dynamic remains central to processes of state-driven capitalist expansion across the globe. For this reason, the expansion of sovereign power in the margins needs to be interpreted as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of and imagined through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness, and savagery that not only lies outside its jurisdiction but also threatens it from within. Third and finally, a critical theory of urban marginality should emphasize the ways in which so-called peripheral spaces – the global ghettos, ‘undeveloped’ expansion areas, ‘*terrains vagues*’ and de-industrialized zones of this world – continue to figure as important battle grounds over the terms of regulating what are and what are not worthwhile forms of life.

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