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More than an article, this text is the result of past discussions with Luis Prieto, since marginality and centrality were one of our common concerns: marginality and centrality as a social and geographical process, as a symbolic process, as a mode of life, at certain geographic scales. Luis Prieto knew very well what intellectual exclusion meant as a pioneer: the sense of being marginalized outside one's own roots and culture, and how difficult it is to build an intellectual network at different levels.

Marginal and central man

Among our discussions was the notion of marginal consciousness, sometimes called 'of centered awareness' (James 1950 [1890]; Foulquié and Saint-Jean 1962). The topological metaphor of the ‘edge’ appeared in William James's great work, The Principles of Psychology. James uses the word 'fringe' — together with a musical metaphor, 'psychic overtones' — to express important parts of his theory of perception and thinking, which exerted a strong influence among psychologists and philosophers of his time. In chapter 8 ('The relations of minds to other things') of the Principles, James distinguishes between 'knowledge of acquaintance' and 'knowledge about things', or, as he says, between kennen and wissen or connaître and savoir (James 1950 [1890], 1: 221). 'Knowledge about' a person or an object is mediated by an awareness of the relations that link the person or object with his social and geographical environment.

Robert Park's (1928) concept of 'marginal man' was also central to our discussions. Most notably, as a result of migration, the marginal man straddles two cultures. A modern urban Janus, the immigrant is drawn towards two centers of attraction. Park's double-edged concept cuts through the complexity of urban life and cosmopolitanism. How to live at the same time the local and the global existence, with relevant proposals at both levels?


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The following lines and diagram show how Luis Prieto could feel marginal in Geneva, arriving and living in a closed society, after a life in the open spaces of the new world: as the emancipated Jew, he was typically a marginal man, a citizen of the world. He is the 'stranger' whom Simmel described with such profound insight and understanding in his Soziologie (1908). The autobiographies of all immigrants are different versions of the same story — the story of the marginal man; the man who, emerging from the ghetto in which he lived, is seeking to find a place in the freer, more complex and cosmopolitan life of another country or city. One may learn from the autobiographies how the process of assimilation actually takes place in the individual immigrant.

But at the same time the marginal man can be involved in world networks through a variety of personal contacts outside the local society. The 'stranger' becomes the center of a world creative process. Luis Prieto's works were quoted more at the world level than at the local one. The Geneva 'niche' was the base for the diffusion of new concepts throughout the world of semiotics. This double scale, marginality-centrality, has to be understood to explain the diffusion of Luis Prieto's ideas and their channel of propagation. A very simple diagram shows this process (see Fig. 1).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** From marginality to centrality (*LP = Luis Prieto marginality-centrality circle*)

**Geographical marginality**

None of the two meanings of ‘marginality-centrality’ mentioned so far explicitly evokes differences in power. However, the exclusion from local, social, and scientific circles — a consequence of local power — was well perceived by Luis Prieto in opposition to his world leadership. Park's image of marginality as a hesitation between two poles of cultural attraction, as a way-station in cultural evolution, shows a use of the term that builds on the 'geometrics' of social distance and differentiation. Although the German geographer Ratzel (1898 [1903]) did not use the word 'margin', his couplet of *Kernland* and *Nebenland* — core area and adjacent or peripheral lands — constitutes what is perhaps the earliest metaphor to speak of spatial differences in power. Ratzel's image of core and periphery was echoed strongly in our discussions — either through direct borrowing or through independent adoption of the image on world economic development.

The center as pivot and chief point within a circumscribed space is a metaphor from Euclidean geometry. A circle is defined by its center and a distance: it is the locus of points that are all equidistant from the center. The defining importance of 'center' in this geometric construction has ever after offered an image to express gradients of power, influence and attraction. Figuratively speaking, the 'center' of influence within a territory is that place — that City on a Hill — where power meets to prosper and spread. ‘Marginality’ evokes social, scientific, political, economic, or cultural weakness at a certain local level. Stratification and hierarchical asymmetries are among the oldest features of human society. Class societies (Paci 1973) have ever been ruled by minorities in firm control of the commanding heights.

Thus, the discussions on marginality must go beyond projecting social dimensions on specific locations. One must look within and without: inside and outside the social group and the local milieux, inside and outside the region. As always happens when space enters the picture, the geographical scale of analysis must be kept in mind, in order to avoid ecological fallacies of composition. La zone can disappear from view when we look at the Paris region 'as a whole' within France. Similar vanishing acts can occur when we look at the planet in terms of 'North-South relations' and forget the regional variety within those blocs. In fact, almost every center can be another center's periphery. As the song says, 'Everybody's somebody's fool'. The courthouse square in the county seat may look mighty fine from the boondocks, but up in the state capital it is just a country backwater. And so on up to Gotham City, where (with apologies to doggerel and Boston) the 'Lodges speak only to Cabots and the Cabots speak only to God'.
An open debate

Superficial integration can reinforce local marginality, and at the same time the need for a world network, a strong feeling of Luis Prieto. Superficial social integration does not allow solid ties for collective action in the neighborhood of residence. Marginality leads to an isolation from major political and social processes but gives more time to develop new ideas, new contacts. Most of the inhabitants of Geneva have little voice over the decisions that fix the future of the Canton, especially foreigners. But they can use their free time to deal with outside networks. Isn’t it the role of an international city? Control over local resource allocation lies in the hands of a powerful minority who decides on the hierarchies to be established. Throughout these processes, the pilots 'steering' the path of incomes, jobs, and technological changes follow stars that often reflect only dimly the wishes or the needs of most of the population. Local marginality and marginalization result from those decisions. Marginality is not an accident of history or an unfortunate ‘dysfunction’ of an otherwise benevolent system. It is a continuing by-product of the social mechanisms and ‘feedback relationships’ that drive societies today. Due to this marginalization, foreigners develop other paths of power in international networks. Marginality creates new places of territorial power.

The concept of marginality-centrality, a dual society, was one of our driving concerns, since it speaks of a daily reality, as old as our societies. From whatever point of view, it shows the sign of a local intellectual crisis leading to a social malaise that gives birth to new ideas. To speak of marginality in a city, in a region, or in a scientific field is to talk of inequalities driven by alienation, and to seek its driving factors. Marginality and marginalization challenge us to imagine institutions, policies at different geographical scales. It is what we thought we could do, until 1996.

References