The Space of the Periphery

In the conventional conceptualisations of political geography, the periphery is a region that is simultaneously included and excluded in the composition of an integral territory – be that of the nation, municipality or any other form of administration or polity. The periphery is included in that it fully falls under the jurisdiction of the local or national state – subject to its laws and policies, while also assigned a valuation where it counts for little in terms of its overall contribution to the substance of the polity itself. This double status renders the periphery as a space in need of the largesse and guidance of a centre – since by this logic, the periphery is a space imbued with a sense of insufficiency and incompletion.

Yet this (alleged) lack also means that the periphery is never really brought fully under the auspices of the logic and development trajectories that characterise a centre, and therefore embodies an instability that is always potentially destabilising of that centre. This negative potentiality then requires supplemental forms of engagement that would not be otherwise operative in parts of the territory not considered peripheral. The periphery demands and occasions a surfeit of attention; it forces the state to admit to the necessity of exceeding its own 'core' values and technologies in order to rein the periphery in, as perhaps the periphery's only concrete indication of its own relevance.

If the periphery poses a threat to the integrity of the polity and thus compels the centre to continuously enact its authority in relationship to it, then the periphery is constitutive of the centre, in that it provides the occasion for the centre to perform itself, which also means to exceed itself – i.e., to go beyond what the prevailing norms, rules or policies would authorise. To set in motion the values and practices at the heart of what the centre (and thus the polity) is, requires something else: namely, a way of acting that is peripheral to those values and practices.

Such excessiveness thus implicitly identifies the periphery as a signification that must be denied, Yet always reiterated. However, the periphery never then offers anything of substance on its own; its own status as supplement never directly contributes to a transformation of the normative.
At the same time, the periphery is also a buffer. As it is never fully incorporated into the polity even as it provides the polity its constituent moment, the periphery can also act as a sacrificial object. The periphery does this by acting as a buffer, a space in between the nation or city and something else that is formally more foreign, more divergent, than the city or nation for which it acts as a periphery. In other words, the periphery can exist as a frontier, in that it has a border with another city, nation, rural area or outlying territory. When this is the case, the practices, values, meanings and important symbolic capital of the centre, and thus the polity, do not necessarily have to face directly, compete with, or risk modification or dissolution, in a proximate contact with other cities or nations. Thus the periphery is implicitly conceded as a space available to a certain métissage (mixing), where more direct forms of confrontation among entities – cities, regions, nations and so forth – are dispersed through a space that is positioned to absorb the tensions inherent in any intersection of distinct ‘regimes’.

Theoretically, this would render the periphery as a potentially generative space – a source of innovation and adaptation. Yet it is precisely this generative role that must be foreclosed or made abject.

In a concomitant manoeuvre, the practice of making something peripheral then becomes a particular instrument for reducing the importance and value of a particular territory – one whose people and associations may have concretely established a basis for the recognition of the efficacy of their own self-identification. Therefore the periphery is not a fixed space in an unyielding relationship with a more powerful centre, but a means of altering the significance and position of a specific space through the shifting terms of association with other spaces.

In more strictly urban terms, the periphery may shift, as under-utilised spaces are increasingly filled in and subject to a broader series of the city’s economic activities and residential densities.

Here the urban periphery is simultaneously pushed further out in a wider circumference as the city grows exponentially, as territories once external to the city are drawn into its orbit, experiencing its extended footprints. While these changing demarcations of the periphery may simply reflect administrative contrivance, as dynamic entities always will have their peripheries, the periphery is nevertheless suffused with varied imaginaries and anticipations. Populations and business may move toward the periphery in search of more advantageous living conditions – e.g., cheaper land, less congestion, lower tax rates, less crime or great social homogeneity. Likewise, the periphery may be enjoined to the urban system as a means of inflating land values, absorbing the displacements of devalued populations, tying down inputs for the urban economy, or acting as zones whose operations are exempt from prevailing policies so as to ‘work out’ specific problems or possibilities for the city as a whole.

In the latter case, the periphery is the site for economic or social operations that cannot be absorbed by the city itself – given its laws, economic policies, or cultural conventions –
but prove necessary in order to attract investment or generate other needed resources for the city as a whole. Such has been the case of Joha for Singapore or Santos for São Paulo. The metropolitan system can thus sometimes be characterised by a patchwork of varying jurisdictions, competencies, and procedures. This multiplicity of ‘orders’ can then be used by certain projects or interest groups to do things in one place that cannot be done ‘next door’. Additionally, the problems of particular spaces can be exported onto others. Various ‘localities’ may be nominally articulated through their geographical proximity and situated within perfunctory metropolitan frameworks which formally provide little or loosely structured coordination, and as such, seemingly act in a highly peripheral way to each other. Yet, ironically, they may actually have more to do with each other in terms of concrete transactions and through specific complementary arrangements than if they were part of the same regime of policies and procedures.

When these various connotations and positions of the periphery are then coincided, what we have is space that is simultaneously always ‘coming and going’, with an incessant volatility that is permitted to go nowhere and a completion always yet to come, always unable to act in and of itself, yet ready to be whatever it needs to be at a moment’s notice.

**Reframing the Urban Periphery in Light of Metropolitanisation**

Within the process of metropolitanisation, the heterogeneity of socio-territorial mosaics, once the predominant feature of core cities, are pushed out into the regional periphery. The periphery increasingly becomes an arena to accommodate a discrepant multiplicity of urban challenges – from housing poor populations displaced from the city, providing premium living spaces for middle-class families, developing campus-like spaces for research and development sectors, to exporting environmentally precarious industry to the fringes of the urban system. As these challenges are usually not viewed as connected to each other, it is increasingly difficult to bring the periphery into some functional domain of administrative coherence.

Given the increasingly heterogeneous composition of the periphery, there are frequent conflicts and competition over resource allocation, fiscal exploitation, and the claims of residents engaged in different forms of livelihood and with different historical relationships to a given territory. Additionally, complicated negotiations between the core city and the periphery in terms of calculating the costs of services provided by the core further fragment relationships among diverse communes in the periphery. Although recent French legislation does aim for inter-communal fiscal equalisation, there remains limited infrastructure to facilitate lateral articulation. Rather, the economy of spatial distribution still accedes to pockets of sector specialisation – e.g., in the metropolitan region of Paris: a university research centre in Marnes la Vallée, research and development centre in Saint-Quentin en Yvelines and Plateau de Scalay; administrative centres in Saint Denis, with little sense of potential complementarities or conflicts.\(^2\)
Although the elaboration of metropolitan frameworks emphasises the polycentric, particularly as a way to manage urban sprawl, minimise environmental hazards and define regional complementarity, there is much ambiguity as to what it actually means in practice. Throughout Europe, job creation has not attained the levels anticipated, as volumes of commuter flows to core areas remain unabated, and the bulk of economic development attaches itself to already established urban areas, leaving large swathes of territory to remain as uncertain interstices. There is also the trend to recentralisation in the core city occasioned by the density of linkages across various sectors of the service, information, and media economies occasioned by globalisation.

All of these trajectories tend to leave the immediate peripheries, most usually the domain of those who cannot afford to live in the core cities, in a more tenuous position, particularly as poorer residents are pushed into former industrial areas. Rather than being more fully incorporated into development scenarios that extend themselves from the core city, development, rather, 'leapfrogs' over these near- peripheries. These areas no longer constitute a physically spatial periphery to the city, but enter into a new system of proximities where they become the problematic interstices between differentiated growth poles.

The characteristics of extended urban regions in Southeast Asia make an interesting contrast to Greater Paris. Here, regionalisation processes instantiated across the periphery refer to a largely indeterminate process under way. The peripheries of Bangkok, Jakarta, Ho Chi Minh City and a range of Chinese cities are sites of accelerated social and economic change, and rapid population growth. Large-scale infrastructural investments coupled with tariff and tax incentives, inexpensive labour and prime residential developments for professional workers constitute a gravitational pull for foreign direct investments. Any resultant economic vitality is thus largely attributed to strong outward linkages and cluster dynamics facilitated by locally based collaborative governance processes. Small farmers, informal settlers, industrial entrepreneurs and urban middle-class commuters can all live in intense physical proximity. Again, these peripheries experience intense conflicts – struggles by large casual workforces over job security and benefits; rural producers attempting to hold on to agricultural land; struggles against the predominant role that irregular actors often attain in these areas, and their proclivities to corruption.

What is perhaps a more incisive conceptualisation of the peri-urban concerns its mélange of temporalities. Across almost all major cities, architecture, infrastructure and land development are being used as instruments to compel, some might say extort, new urban institutional and social relations, from how decisions get made, what is viewed as possible or useful to do in cities, how financial responsibilities are to be defined, and risks assessed. In most instances, low-income as well as many middle-income residents are pushed to the peripheries of the city which, once they are serviced and then connected to major transportation grids, themselves become objects of speculation as cheap land is acquired by those with the aspirations to build big in ways that are prohibited in more centralised locations. The presence of heterogeneous residents within the central city areas
enabled a kind of mutual witnessing of how they were implanted and operated in the city, even if it did not always elaborate various complementarities among them. The push to the periphery, however, while not necessarily stopping an inflow of low-income residents at least in their pursuit of work, renders it an often opaque place.

This opacity is the result of the inability to clearly identify just what is ‘coming and going’. Surrounding the core of the city, the periphery, with its intersection of the scattered remains of old projects and those of the new in various states of completion – from factories, shopping centre, housing developments, persistent rural economies, informal and formal low-income settlements – poses an uncertain future for this core. Old golf courses are contiguous to new lakeside theme parks that are next to old factories next to mega-family restaurants next to warehouses and chemical dumps. Material sediments are overlaid with discrepant zoning and land use policies, and the periphery can remain a literal archive, dependent as much upon what is subtracted and destroyed as what is added to it.

In some peripheries – between these comings and goings, ups and downs – one finds the elaboration of translocal economies that appropriate deteriorating yet functional infrastructure, forge flexible relationships with lower tiers of municipal bureaucracies, straddle legal and illegal regulatory systems of commerce, piece together hybrid articulations of transport, machinery, storage and finance, and network under-utilised and undervalued spaces of the built environment.

Reciting the Postcolony
Cities throughout the world have highly variegated histories. They are constituted and composed at the intersection of diverse influences and conditions. While such is the case for cities of the global South, trajectories of urbanisation are marked by the colonial difference. Spaces, resources and bodies were rendered available to the instantiation of an externally configured modernity, and enrolled into the circuits of accumulation where a net loss of things in their flows northwards necessitated unruly and always insufficient compensations. Colonialism engineered various instabilities. For example, labour was frequently displaced and urban residence incessantly temporary. Cities were domains of a particular kind of emplacement – i.e., where distinctions between citizen and subject could be marked, where the mobility of ‘native’ ideas, bodies, and economies could be controlled, and where the signs of modernity could be inscribed.

Yet what have those that were emplaced endured? Despite the frequent assumption on the part of the coloniser that the spaces of colonisation were empty, up for grabs, undeveloped or radically antagonistic, arrivals from beyond were always shaped by what had transpired in these places before, dependent upon the tracings of past efforts by others. As articulations among cities everywhere become more extensive, and as cities in the South are more intensely incorporated into global circuits of accumulation and exchange, arrivals become more numerous: more persons from the outside come to operate in these cities in various capacities.
What have those, emplaced under circumstances where the colonial difference represents constraints on mobility, experienced while being in place? Here, like the nomad of Deleuze and Guattari, points and places are relays, always already left behind on arrival, always referring to movements yet to come. Staying in place entails what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “riding out the earth’s movements on the spot”\(^3\). While the geomorphic reference can be meant literally in terms of the very physical transformations of the earth’s template and climate, cities do bear the sediments of all the ways in which the bodies of inhabitants have been opened to each other. Certainly, cities are dense areas of ingestion, gesture, elimination, coupling and coagulation, and the incompleteness and uncertainties of both colonial and postcolonial rule mean that the heterogeneity of wounding and suturing constitute highly particularised social architectures. How residents have persisted and have been changed through these different degrees of intensities is incalculable. Yet, as both postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak and theorist Nigel Clark have indicated, the work of these residents (and their work as a gift) makes up the basis of a different future, a more common world, as the more numerous arrivals would be unable to operate without it.\(^4\)

In a related formulation, anthropologist Filip De Boeck pushes the metaphor of the mirror, the speculum, to its limits, whereby the city becomes a mirror of itself, the past, and the outside world, providing opportunity for the city to reflect upon itself and project itself outward. The city is the mirror world of the colonial past and current imagining of the West, that De Boeck calls the “idea of Europe”. It is also a mirror of the village and of tradition, of the forest, the forbidden, the underworld and the afterworld – all too often reflecting death; and finally, the city is also a mirror of diasporic movement, of immigration abroad, of what lies beyond the postcolony. Together these mirrors, often fractured and sometimes partial, combine to reflect the relationship between the postcolonial city and the wider, increasingly global world.\(^5\)

In the contemporary rendering of urban development dynamics, this work done by those who are emplaced is largely peripheral, off the map. Yet these histories of trial and error, of residents facing squarely the often tumultuous oscillations of physical, social, and political disjunctions that are not smoothed over by premium infrastructures or overarching discourses, potentially compels tools of city-making those instrumental in city-building to exceed themselves and confront the kinds of fears and enchantments they have long denied.

Peripheral Vision

A preponderance of critical theory has pointed to the city as given over to spectacle, and as such no longer capable of performing the work of archiving its own layers of sedimentation and interpreting its history. The material coordinates of the city are effaced in service of hyperreal narratives that simply mark the oscillations of sensation and its absence.

According to Antonin Artaud, there is a specific point in urban crises where virtuality\(^6\) – the condition in which all that might happen can happen – always already present in the city’s efforts to keep it at bay – installs itself as a tumultuous activity without specific
purpose or end. Here, place is dispossessed of meaning and proper use; inside and outside, private and public fold into each other, and there is no clear vantage point from which to assess the efficacy of practices, interactions and speech now intensely entangled as the barriers and moulds have fallen away. But instead of this virtuality reassembling the ways in which residents live and work with each other, a sense of incessant anxiety is engineered that substitutes the variegated imagery of incessantly mutable urban conditions for any concrete deliberation of transformation.

Residents, who feel that their everyday life situations, their livelihoods, the characteristics of their living spaces, security and life prospects are increasingly connected to unknown events, situations and persons, and who have no collaborative engendered instruments for dealing with these widening circuits of transaction, simply consume images of a univocal participation in the simulation of urban life. Regimes tend to play on these basic uncertainties. That is, residents who navigate the city never can be sure how their own existence may be implicated in the narratives of others. They can never be sure whether their immediate positions and actions inadvertently place them in some ‘line of fire’.

As the possibilities of mediation diminish – i.e., the possibilities to convert differences of intensity, of disorder, always an aspect of the city – into clearly defined locations, corresponding entities and fields of reliable interpretation, the sense of potential harm increases. And so, lives are increasingly open to potentially everything – promoting a fraught vigilance and preoccupation with security, as well as investment in various technologies of calculation and probability.

Various artistic experiments have attempted to affirm that something may be resuscitated from the debris on which this urban void is formed – a particular conjunction between the periphery and its image, so that when observers look upon wastelands, the anachronistic industrial zones, the decaying residential estates, warehouses, overgrown access roads and dilapidated infrastructure, they can actually see the materiality of those trajectories at work across time in the making of the city. The traces of concrete inhabitations, labour and sensuous gestures are scattered across the landscape – never complete in themselves, but available to being re-linked in circuits of signification. This is a provocation to a mode of imagining that constitutes, as media arts scholar Stephen Barber writes, a memory still unthought, or that does not let itself be thought.7

Additionally, the periphery of the city, with its under-coded specifications of how any particular space is to be used – but which nevertheless, brings together a range of discrepant spaces so that they can remain without prohibitive definition – allows for sporadic gatherings of all kinds. For instance, banned political organisations, marginal religions, new cultural movements and incipient explorations of possible alliances among major political actors have often used the periphery as an important venue. These gatherings, in and of themselves, provoke a kind of gestation not possible in cities where the possibilities of negotiating access and interchange across niche identities and sectors is increasingly difficult.
At the same time, these inclinations could lead to a tendency to see in the periphery, as sociologist Bülent Diken warns, a narration of what is prior to or beyond the symbolic — a traumatic kernel incessantly antagonistic and disruptive of any effort to bring it under the apprehension of an order. As such, the periphery becomes itself a kind of fantasy space — a zone where the ‘real’ city is unleashed in all of its possibilities, and as such, then constitutes the core city as something that can be experienced as a coherent whole with fixed coordinates. Not only does such conceptual manoeuvring occlude the often highly elaborated management systems residents put together for their lives in the periphery, but also the reality that the core city is itself full of turbulence and the so-called ‘law of the street’.8

Therefore, it is important to think through these relations between core city and periphery in terms of potentialities and constraints that could ‘show up’ anywhere — where one does not presume the normative categorisations of territory, but looks at changing relations to contexts in which these contexts themselves are both changed and changing. This is not a relationship concerning what is happening ‘here’ to what is happening ‘there’, but rather establishing an understanding of relations between what Nigel Thrift terms the “known unfamiliar” and the “unknown familiar”.9

One way to envision this metaphorically is to take any aerial photograph of a large metropolitan system and remove all of the grids, streets and buildings, leaving simply the constellation of road junctions — traffic circles, U-turns, flyovers, exit and entrance ramps — that operate as relays and switches in what architect Pierre Bélanger has called “knot city” in the context of Bangkok, where the urban network is “barely recognisable as a system” but in fact signals the existence of “a hidden cosmopolitan order”.10 This is an infrastructure about redirecting, speeding up or slowing flows down, of modulating the intensities and rhythms of movement, of translating multiple directions and flows in terms of each other. Whereas these actual constellations of road junctions have specific shapes and locations contingent upon the areas in which they are embedded, using them as a metaphor for the street requires thinking about them as omnipresent — something that is located everywhere, given that all places entail switching and translation mechanisms. The periphery disappears from the version of how we have come to know it, and reappears across the city — in crucial ways, manifests as the city.

Notes