

11.329 Social Theory and the City

Prof: Richard Sennett _ Fall 2005

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Exercise 1

What is the distinction between center and periphery?

Generate no more than 2 pages of theoretical writing on the above question without citing any sources or using any real-world examples. Do not fall into the trap of comparing and contrasting in a descriptive essay but rather develop a theoretical argument to answer the question. The objective of this exercise is for you to explore your own thoughts and assert yourself in the theoretical realm without hiding behind someone else's ideas.

The terms *center* and *periphery* appear frequently in discourse about the urban fabric. Their usage is usually constrained to their geometrical position in space. Every center is defined towards its periphery. Departing from this exact geometrical point, one could say that a center is defined by a periphery that encompasses it, and, simultaneously, the presence of a periphery immediately implies a center. Observing carefully the evolution of the geometrical center and the functions it historically hosted, an association with the display of power and the empowered class is revealed. In ancient Greece the geometrical center of the city coincides with the marketplace as a public (*dēmos*) space of decision making, in the medieval era the city's center is occupied by religious functions as monasteries and churches, while the early twentieth century city center circulates around a central square with City Hall.

The role of both *center* and *periphery* changes through history, nonetheless remaining in close relationship with their spatial context. It is only recently that the introduction of the terms "centralized periphery" and "marginalized center" provided the grounds for the unchain of the terms *center* and *periphery* from their geometrical place and opened the discussion on them as basic theoretical concepts. How can a periphery be

centralized and vice versa? What does this inversion imply about the distinction between *center* and *periphery*?

The discourse on the “centralized periphery” indicates a shift of interest from the center to the periphery. Centralized is used so as to accentuate an on-going desire towards the *center*, or, to be more precise, towards the milieu of the *center*. *Center*, and thus *periphery* as well, turns out to indicate more than a location. The spatial center in the history of Western cities functioned mainly as the site of political discourse where sovereign power was launched and displayed. One could claim that this is the essential characteristic that maintained even in the discussion about a “centralized periphery”. The desire towards the *center* is a desire towards the display of power, power per se and the practice of control. *Periphery* emerges then as the milieu where power is displayed through its phenomenological absence. Thus, *periphery* becomes essential to the existence of the *center* as the threshold of this power, the threshold of the *center*. It bears the trace of the difference; it is the “other” necessary for the center’s identity and function.

With the “centralized periphery” and “marginalized center” inversion, *center* and *periphery* continue to bear this difference in power as their distinctive mark. The notion of the *center* appears dislocated from the shrunk city-center and re-located in the sprawled periphery, as a trace of the *center*-desire. The periphery becomes now centralized as it offers the space for an absolute control of the boundaries of the private sphere and the taming of the public through its interiorization. The unexpected, the dangerous, will take place elsewhere; either in the city-center, or in the vast void of the periphery.