Theoretical and Historical Aspects on the Problem of Socio-Economic Marginality

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THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS ON THE PROBLEM OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC MARGINALITY

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to discuss the problem of socio-economic marginality from a historical, sociological and economic perspective, by basing the premise of discussion on the concept that certain paradigm shifts in 18th century Western Europe unwittingly produced a change in the character of poverty, rather than eliminating it altogether, as it was intuitively suggested through the general idea of progress that took form during the Enlightenment. By discussing the changes entailed by modernity, urbanization and industrialization, I will present factors such as territoriality, spatial placement and differentiated access to knowledge and information that, by being accumulated intergenerationally, have the potential to produce an objective incapacity of marginal groups to exercise functional long-term socio-economic roles.

Keywords: marginality, poverty, progress, development, Industrial Revolution, modernity.

I. Proto-Theories on the Problem of Marginality and on the Idea of Progress

The condition of marginality was first underlined starting with the first period of industrialization in Western Europe. The new socio-economic context allowed the gradual development of norms for the analysis of systemic non-integration, on the basis of Enlightenment concepts regarding the emergent idea of intrinsic human rights. This idea signified an important turn, necessary for the emergence of modern

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political and economic theories. Thus, the 18th century was characterized by a fundamental transformation of the perception regarding poverty and, inferentially, the structural marginality of individuals and human groups. The idea of progress and of the potential of social, economic and political change manifested itself for the first time in the case of various thinkers and philosophers, such as Herder, Kant, Voltaire, or Turgot.

The paradigm shift that took root in the mid-18th century signified the establishment of the theoretical base for the transformation of the understanding of poverty. This became a contingency of the irrationality, inefficiency, and injustice inherent to the organisation of economic systems in that time, rather than an unavoidable phenomena characteristic of human life in societies.

A first analysis in this sense was undertaken by Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot in *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*, published in 1750, where the author explains the idea of progress as a constant of human activity in various domains, from art to science. It was in this context that poverty started to be seen as an avoidable, unusual, even abnormal condition, and this apprehension led to the development of two distinct theories of its determination: on one side, individual deficiencies, and on the other, objective factors like systemic injustice. Although different, these two views constitute an early attempt to portray poverty as an anomalous condition, rather than a purely natural and unavoidable one, as it was generally understood before.

After the events around the French Revolution and the temporary failure of its economic and political goals, the unified problem of inequality, poverty, and marginality was finally introduced in political discourse and in the theoretical environment, usually in a critical manner that proposed various solutions.

II. The Marxist and Weberian Turn in the Explanation of Injustice and Progress

The association between scientific feasibility and the construction of a better society gained a decisive momentum through the works of Karl Marx. In adding complex theoretical components to the socialist
and egalitarian developed before him, mainly the method of G.W.F. Hegel, the political economy of Adam Smith and the philosophical materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx established a new and highly influential domain of political philosophy, in which it is argued that a global society free of inequality, exploitation, poverty and aggression can be achieved through the rules inherent to the materialist conception of history.

The analysis of the determinant factors regarding poverty extended thus towards a view that the social structure itself, based on an unjust relation to the means of production, planted the seeds for injustice and discontent. The Marxist typology, connected to the condition of socio-economic inequalities is related to a contextual distinction, in the sense that the justifications for the legality of domination by a group of another are weaker in the conditions of the Industrial Revolution and in the imposition of an administrative bureaucratic order. The process of urbanization, of the gradual disappearance of the rural classes, of rationalized mass production, led to the formation of the proletariat, but, in the same time, signified the individualization and delineation of what Marx called for the first time in the *German Ideology* (1845), “lumpenproletariat” (Marx and Engels 1998, 218) a term that reappears explicitly in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852) (Marx 2009, 54-55), to describe the heterogeneous groups of socio-economic non-integrated people. Their multiplication was caused by deruralization through the amalgamation of agricultural fields in great farms necessitating less workforce, and in this case professionalized, and of the continuous specialization of the proletariat in the new factories characteristic of the urban space. This socio-economic marginality, through the inexistence of clearly defined occupations, of personal capital or property, was reinforced by a cultural dimension, underlined by the impossibility to adapt to the new structural norms of economic behaviour. It became the source of the first theoretical analysis regarding endemic poverty, and the contextual role fulfilled by this social category in the general phenomena of pressure maintenance on the salaries of the proletariat, and through the potential for counterrevolutionary disturbances.
Complementary to Marx’s theories, the ideas of Max Weber are also useful in explaining certain processes that led to an economic leap for a segment of the population in Western Europe. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he explained that an unprecedented economic revolution place plane as a direct result of the objective necessity of solving spiritual anxieties that was produced by some aspects of the Protestant Reformation. Weber would call the rationalization of human activities, a form of “disenchantment” of the Western world, in the sense of the collapse of supernatural justifications of power, domination, inequality, and poverty emitted by the hegemonic groups, represented a normative factor in the removal of traditional and pre-modern concepts about the desirable social structure.

This unintentional economic result of a religious reformation led to the gradual delineation of productive economic activities as a necessary element of a normal social existence. As the new economic practices produced an unprecedented widening of prosperity, mobility, and freedom, the social results manifested themselves through the gradual imposition of the secularizing, rationalizing, and bureaucratizing function of modern industrial capitalism. These produced the most relevant modification of the structural Western paradigm, through the gradual replacement of traditional rural cultural and religious community systems, with the rational calculation of economic decision in almost all the spheres of life.

The process of rationalization of decisions, practices and methods of economic projection was accelerated with the second Industrial Revolution, from the second half of the 19th century, leading to new productive leaps, to automation, and to the dispersion of technologies facilitating quick exchanges. The administration of these new types of activities led to the development of the first theories regarding the efficiency of projections and economic decisions, through the application of rational decisions in all the moments of productive activities. The main theory in this direction, Taylorism, became a source for the application of some early principles of action and rational decision, being extended towards other domains of society in the early 20th century. As a result of the processes of socio-economic rationalization, the access to structural benefits, like technical and theoretical knowledge became a conditioning
factor for the entrance of individuals inside the new system of production and distribution of goods. In this sense, the gradual manifestation of internal disparities within Western societies is related to the character and unequal distribution of progress.

Thus, the concept of marginality or social exclusion was developed in the specific context of rapid economic shifts that took place in Western Europe under the spectrum of the conditions of social reconfiguration produced by the Industrial Revolution.

In spite of the evolutions in understanding the context of marginality, the gradual monopolization of the political Left starting with the early 20th century by social-democratic parties that favoured only the proletariat in its drive for syndicalism, as well as by the Leninist totalitarian bloc, contributed to the limiting and eventual exclusion of the discourse regarding marginality. The concentration on the idea of class struggle, or on a self-declared avant-garde of the proletariat, did not contribute to an adequate understanding of the condition of poverty and marginality, signifying instead a polarization of the directions of thought towards the imposition of ideological systems, as dogmatic structures facilitating a discourse concentrated specifically on the ideas of class struggle and dialectical materialism. In this context, the understanding of marginality started to be monopolized by the concept enunciated by Marx regarding the heterogeneous anti-revolutionary class, the lumpenproletariat, which he brought into discussion after the coup d'état of Napoleon III.

Although the analysis started to become more ideological, it must be noted that the character of “classic” poverty, characteristic of the period dominated by the industrial revolutions, was generally residual and cyclic (Wacquant 1999, 1639-1647), being related to the cycles of production themselves. However, the process of economic restructuring and of the enlargement of the share represented by activities in the tertiary domain, changed the nature of marginality, increasing its temporal and spatial dimension. This new typology of marginality represents one of the results inherent in the structural permutations derived from the dissolution of the Fordist system of production, of the gradual replacement of the Keynesian economic theory, and of retreat of the welfare state by the decreasing of social services.
The approach on marginality and the general process of marginalization was established in the lines explaining its conditioning factors from several directions. In this sense, the congruence of some determinant factors started from the highlighting of the context and of the character of marginality in the specific conditions of the development of societies at a different place. Thus, the main point of the debate remains the conditioning of marginality by the rapid imposition of capitalist modes of production and distribution, or the objective incapacity of some societies or groups to adapt at the contact with a new economic reality and to overcome their structural gaps sufficiently fast. Although the implications of marginality derive from two conditionings with different reference points, the general considerations still start from the premise of a contradiction resulted from the superimposition or contact with a dynamic, competitive economic system, representing a total paradigm shift. This component of the analysis of marginality is placed in the larger area of discussion concerning the problem of socio-economic disparity between states and societies, and, not least, between groups situated in these societies.

III. The Role of Sociology in Analysing Socio-Economic Incongruities

Although the concept of persistent poverty and structural non-integration was revealed in the previous historical contexts, receiving political connotations through the Marxist theory by way of the definition inscribed to the lumpenproletariat, the specific term of marginality has its origin in five studies published by the American sociologist Robert Ezra Park. In the first of these studies, Human Migration and the Marginal Man (1928), Park developed the theory of the “hybrid”, explaining that some individuals and groups are suspended between two societies, cultures, and economic systems. Their placement on an ambiguous socio-economic and cultural territory produces, according to Park, the conflict of the “divided self” (Park 1928, 356), through the fact that non-affiliation to a clearly defined social system
determines a certain psychological vulnerability, an inter-generationally cumulative inadaptability, and a resistance to normative integrative steps.

In this context, it can be argued that societies going through a series of radical social, economic and cultural transformation are the depositaries of groups whose subjective incapacity or objective impossibility to adapt to transformations limits their operational capacity to develop and optimize capabilities of social interaction and economic productivity. In this regard, the development of the term in the United States in the 1920s is related to that context, because the period is associated to a vast economic development, under the spectrum of industrialization shaped by the Fordist model, that of mass production, of the exponential growth of income, and also of accelerated urbanization. The two factors that are over-imposed to the progress that transformed the United States into the most prosperous state of the world are represented by the massive immigration of people from underdeveloped regions, and by the stagnation of the southern and some of the Midwestern states, still dependant on an agrarian model. With some exceptions represented by persecuted intellectuals or scientists, most of the migrant groups came from poor rural areas, characterized by a traditionalist culture, and that did not yet go through the complete stages of modernization.

Similarly to groups that are coming from the outside of a specific social system that possess, correspondingly, different or even opposed sets of values, the concept of marginality was also applied to groups situated, on a spatial level, inside the societies that performed a process of change. This could be considered the relevant category in a discussion about marginality, the requirement being that an analysis of the conditions in which groups and individuals that are formally situated inside a specific society, are or become marginalised as a result of the gradual imposition of structural modifications that do not require their participation in the new economic and cultural activities.

The area of the conditioning of marginality represents a contentious point of analysis. As a result of the analysis of Park and Stonequist and, after 1950, through the contributions of Dickie-Clark, an individualization of five models of marginality can be traced: conflict, organizational, adaptive, hierarchical, and deculturation (Del Pilar and
The analysis of the first two models was achieved starting with the 1950s through a correlative method, through the development of tests and formal instruments for the purpose of tracing connections between the condition of marginality and certain personal characteristics. In the case of the adaptive, hierarchical and deculturization models, the appropriate analytical methodology is the convergent one, based on conceptual and structural theoretical investigations. They start with the objective background of economic, social, and cultural factors, and the way they interact and influence or condition certain values, characteristics, and processes of decision making in a rational or irrational way, in the case of individual and marginal groups.

IV. Analytic Approaches on the Problem of Marginality

The overcoming of contingency related explanations of marginality created the conditions for a more technical understanding of the problem. The theorists of the inter-bellum years started to view marginality in the sense of the lack of access of certain groups to material goods and services like housing, education, medical care, and access to public utilities. This fact was explained either through assuming that some economic fluctuations where inevitable, like the Great Depression, either through the contact between economically underdeveloped groups and advanced societies. Both where, in some cases, marked by a Nietzschean or Neo-Darwinian influence, that insisted on intellectual deficiencies replicated on the level of biological reproduction. The academic and cultural space influenced by Marx rejected these methodologically different propositions that implied a series of contingencies at the level of the argumentation infrastructure, claiming that poverty and marginality represented the direct and objective result of specific economic decisions of the political elite. It also put an emphasis on the mode of functioning intrinsic in capitalism itself, whose capacity of exponentially valuing certain activities, reduced the necessity for the perpetuation of some redundant economic practices, like agriculture and manufactories (Marx 1991, 614-615).
This macro-historic process led to a delineation of marginality in the direction of the assignation of a systemic cleavage between the new centre and the new periphery, through the dispossession of some groups of the means, methods and appropriate contexts in which they can undertake economically sustainable activities. It is important to note that this is the context in which the distinction between the pre-modern and pre-capitalist poverty becomes operational. The first represented an apparently perennial form of poverty, caused by the chronic economic and technological underdevelopment of society, and seen by its contemporaries as an unavoidable characteristic of life, in the conditions of a majority of the population formed by poor peasants, ruled by a nobiliary-clerical minority that justified its position by the means of supernatural concepts. This state of affairs, virtually unchanged for a long span of time, was disrupted, and eventually conclusively changed through singular event, encompassing the Protestant Reformation, Enlightenment, the Capitalist, Industrial, Scientific, and Technological revolutions, which took place between the 17th and the 19th centuries in Western and Northern Europe.

From this point on, marginality became intrinsically connected to the process of industrialization, urbanization, and proliferation of technology and transport infrastructure, that left some social groups behind, and altered the allocation of resources, knowledge, and wealth. This is the context in which the “centre-periphery” paradigm becomes useful in the study of the relation between the centres of political and economic power, and its passive subjects, represented by marginal individuals, groups, or even states. Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory regarding the character of relations between centre and periphery, which he expanded in his influential work, The Modern World System, was applied by various political philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and historians in the area of explaining distinctions developed under the spectrum of the new economic relations initiated through capitalism, technology, and the circulation of information on an increasingly global level (Fasano Guarini 1995, S75). The theory presents similarities with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and subordination (Urbinati 1998, 370), which was a practical adjustment of the Western Marxist point of view to the new economic and political
realities of the 1930s. The use of the centre-periphery terminology can lead to a wider analysis of the concept of marginality, by associating it with the increasing separation between the economic chances of social groups.

The application of the centre-periphery concept on the problem of marginality within states and societies was introduced in the 1970s, when a series of articles established models through which distinctions and discontinuities in the access to information and in the economic and political participation of groups where observed and analyzed. To distinguish between the different aspects of marginality, four models can be noted for their use in explaining a series of issues regarding accessibility, social and spatial positioning, and the level of systemic convergence. These models were presented by Robert E. Lane, Lester W. Milbrath, Johan Galtung, and Stein Rokkan.

In Lane’s view, the centrality of the location of an individual or a group is related to the aspect of communication, being sociometrically connected to their capabilities to access goods, services, and to actualize social and political rights. The access to information, to knowledge, to education, enables an optimum development of social capital, and also the capability to develop the potential to form and structure multidimensional relations in the area of social and economic activities.

For Milbrath, the central placement does not only represent a spatial dimension, but it is also a social positioning in the broad term, centrality representing the degree of proximity to the cores that generate socio-economic and cultural progress, and also to the centres of economic decision-making. The topic of degree proximity is related to empirical correlations developed between analytically different dimensions, through the fact that social status can in itself represent a standard of closeness or remoteness to a centre. An indicator of the degree of centrality of a group would signify, theoretically, a supplementary series of structural-informational components, apart from the statute itself. Given the context of a complex capitalist economy.

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2 The most important are Langholm (1971) and Naustdalsslid (1977).
that gradually became the norm in the second half of the 20th century in the developed world, it can be added that social statutes are not determinant constants of closeness to the centre, any more. They themselves suffer modifications as the old traditionalistic markers are replaced by objective modalities of measuring the normative capabilities of individuals and groups in their increasingly flexible relation with the economic and social centre.

Galtung’s outlook can offer a supplementary series of analytic methodologies in the problem of marginality and the evolution of its study, through the fact that it offers a model for the structuring of society in three distinct categories: the “core” of decision-making, the “centre” of the society, that usually accepts and applies the decisions and also enjoys their benefits, and the “periphery” (Langholm 1971, 274). The latter is formed, as it was noted, of groups situated in an objective incapacity to exercise socio-economic functions, or refractory to progress by way of various subjective motives, or rejected from the centre following political justifications, or economical ones. In this sense, it would be implied that the economic system, in the form it is conceived, cannot integrate the entire population. The “centre” does not represent a clearly defined social position, being only the heterogeneous segment of a society that adheres to the general values, norms and to the direction ratified by the members of the core. The “centre” also possesses a series of capabilities and specializations that allow a functional exercising of activities that are necessary to sustain the socio-economic infrastructure, and having in the same time real access to goods, services and rights.

For Rokkan, territoriality, spatial placement, represents a valid characteristic of distinctions within a society. This aspect, superimposed to the index of development or underdevelopment, and to that of population density, allows a structurally adequate analysis that is focused on the implications of objective characteristics of the spaces in which marginal groups find themselves situated. The theory also takes into account a multidimensionality of development and of centrality that presupposes the unequal progress in a society as a consequence of the differential investment of capital, technology, infrastructure, urbanization and industrialization. The concept can be connected to the classic
approaches on the problem of marginality, at least in the area of macrosystemic economic dysfunctionalities.

In the context of Rokkan’s theory, I would bring to attention the specific problem of “cultural distance”, as a secondary dimension of socio-economic marginality, in the area of differences regarding values and cultural systems between members of the centre or those of the periphery. This problem can be applied to the theory of cultural hegemony, as a method of analysing socio-economic determinant factors that materialize in the context of a normative distance from consensual cultural norms inherent in the “official” culture.

V. Conclusion

The debate regarding the type of marginality circumscribed in this model can be separated in two categories, depending on the conditional role fulfilled by culture. The first category is that in which a culture, as an individual entity, has a direct influence on economic disparities between the constitutive groups of society. The second one would contain arguments according to which the effect of economic and political factors on cultural norms produces a cumulus of elements that contribute to the perpetuation of marginalization. The second direction of research grants the economy of a state a bigger autonomy in the process of power and knowledge distribution, emphasizing cultural differences, but being completely free of their influence. In this sense, the process of peripheralisation is synonymous with that of marginalization, the determinant factors being either cultural, wither economic.

In this context, a view on social relations, from individual to groups, is that the process of complex knowledge distribution, that takes place when the non-integrated categories establish “counter-worlds”, alternative formulas of networking and value propagation, produce series of extremely different subjective social markers that substantiate the disparities between centre and periphery.

The debate is by no means resolved, as researchers from different domains produce various theories on this subject, many times mutually contradictory. Taking this into account and based on the arguments I
have presented, a short conclusion would be that the problem of marginality can be related to different issues regarding unequal distribution of material resources and of knowledge itself, being, in its modern and contemporary form, a secondary result of macro-economic, social and cultural changes that took a concrete form during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. Thus, its meaning, context and character are different from classical typologies of poverty, which are inherent in the objectively limited functional and technological capabilities of a society.

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