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Plausibility of Cultural Marginality in Postmodern Times: A Study in Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract:

The concept of culture has come to be reconditioned in postmodern times, and as a consequence the notion of cultural marginality, too, has been subjected to reformation and reconsideration. The present paper attempts to study the issue of cultural marginality in postmodern times taking in consideration the contemporary sociological, psychological and phenomenological perspectives. Postmodern sociologists acknowledge the changing discourse of culture in light of the contemporary sociological climate as a vivid manifestation of the market-driven patterns of postmodernity. Positing postmodernism as the epochal backdrop of cultural marginality naturally follows when we consider the sociological logic of present-day societies and derive the plausibility of the phenomenon therein. Cultural marginality which presupposes a coalescence of the bounded constructs of culture can only take place where the profusion of symbols and discourses exist to provide the preconditions for shaping a multifarious personhood. The resultant paradox is that such an experiential reality as the standard for individuals to configure their identities is simultaneously reinforced. The shift in the discourse of culture also predicates the impossible existence of cultural marginality in the modernist climate and its contrary thriving in the postmodernity. With the eclipse of absolutistic project which alters the discourse of culture to be defined now by diversity, as well as the acceptance of uncertainty as the established reality of the postmodern, that capacity is opened up to accommodate the distinct configuration of a cultural marginal personhood. On the morality level, the issue of choice amid contextual ambivalence characterises both the postmodern moral conditions and the experience of cultural marginality. Since which cultural reference is adopted for judgement is weighed only contextually and no cultural system can stand as the ultimate truth, the speculative and uncertain nature of the moral dilemmas underlies both cultural marginality and the general postmodern contextual ambivalence.

Keywords: postmodern, sociological, psychological, phenomenological, cultural marginality, multifarious personhood, experiential reality, absolutistic project, cultural marginal personhood, contextual ambivalence.

The concept of culture has come to be reconditioned in postmodern times, and as a consequence the notion of cultural marginality, too, has been subjected to reconsideration and reformation. The novelty of the scope and nature of culture in postmodernity has

rendered the idea and implication of cultural marginality rather contentious. To clear the confusion about the concept of culture, there exist views which differentiate the traditional anthropological sense of culture from its broader contemporary consumeristic pattern. However, Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992) acknowledges the evolving discourse of culture in light of the contemporary sociological ambience as a vivid manifestation of the market-driven dynamics of postmodernity. He notes that from an orthodox proselytising ideology grounded in the anthropological sense of totality, the advent of consumerism opens up and alters the conventional paradigm and defines pluralism and relativity as the new existential conditions and values of culture.

The significance of this perspective is that it not only links up the multiple meanings of culture in face of the present-day sociological current, but also renders the shift from the traditional enclave of culture to the wider contemporary salience an indissociable dialectic. Culture is not invalidated in its traditional sense but rather embodies a wider dimension which directs our attention to the consumeristic dynamic that shapes its discursive shift. Differentiating between the anthropological sense and wider consumeristic sense of culture hence would render our conceptualisation easier on the surface. But understanding the postmodern requires us to come to terms with culture as a prevailing universal dynamic in relation to its anthropological meaning from where it evolves. Paradoxically, the consumeristic sense of culture also requires a strengthened foothold of the anthropological culture to facilitate its brandishing as a ready package for consumption in the consumer market. In truth, the sphere of anthropological culture works symbiotically to fuel the momentum of expansion of consumeristic culture. The concept of cultural marginality as articulated foremost by Park and Stonequist (in their papers “Human Migration and the Marginal Man” and “The Problem of the Marginal Man” respectively) was precisely founded on the anthropological frame of understanding, which has long served the intellectual paradigm for successive scholars to understand the phenomenon of cultural marginality. In this paper the investigation into the issue of cultural marginality will inevitably touch upon the implications of consumeristic culture as the discourse of culture itself undergoes a fundamental transformation in postmodernity (but not necessarily annihilating its conventional sense).

From the major theorizations on contemporary experience, positing postmodernism as the epochal backdrop of cultural marginality naturally follows when we consider the sociological logic of present-day societies and derive the plausibility of the phenomenon therein. From a hierarchical-based meaning construction to an imagistic and symbolic world marked by floating fragmentariness, the transformed nature of perceived reality and its new integrative principle render the postmodern the befitting description of contemporary existential conditions. Cultural marginality which presupposes a coalescence of the bounded constructs of culture can only take place where the profusion of symbols and discourses exist to provide the preconditions for shaping a multifarious personhood. The resultant paradox is that such an experiential reality as the standard for individuals to configure their identities is simultaneously reinforced.

Secondly, the shift in the discourse of culture also predicated the impossible existence of cultural marginality in the modernist climate and its contrary thriving in the postmodernity. Rationality stood as the governing centre in modernist thinking with the entrusted universalistic authority to curb any uncertainties and unknowns that would challenge the security its otherwise totalization would afford. Cultural ideology as it used to be legitimated and safeguarded by intellectuals had therefore the important sociological function to demarcate the relative boundaries of a sheltered zone for its inside members. The exotic novelty of the figural of a cultural marginal who did not conform to the collectively consented realm and was therefore feared to be unmanageable came as an intolerable violation of the modernist logic. In sociological terms, the incomprehensible cultural marginal is thereby certain to be excluded from the familiar group and “liquidated” as the “stranger” (Berger and Luckmann 115; Bauman, "Making and Unmaking" 18). It is only with the eclipse of absolutistic project which alters the discourse of culture to be defined now by diversity, as well as the acceptance of uncertainty as the established reality of the postmodern, that capacity is opened up to accommodate the distinct configuration of a cultural marginal personhood. In other words, while cultural marginality would present as an adversary, deviant definition of reality to the modernist societies, its previous dangerous character is displaced to constitute the normative landscape of contemporary societies.

On the morality level, as Bauman explicates in his *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (1995), the issue of choice amid contextual ambivalence characterises both the postmodern moral conditions and the experience of cultural marginality. In line with the conviction of universalistic reason in modernity, the institution of legislation was entrusted as the rationally conceived design to function as the supra-individual authority and decree ethical regulations for governing individual behaviour and societal practice. There was in essence then no real moral choice since the authority of legislation was the reference centre for retrieving moral judgment and moral decisions consequently did not originate from the individuals. With the demise of an all-encompassing ethical code to endow certainty and efficiency for moral conduct, the postmodern individual is left with the stark obligation to make the moral choices themselves without guidance of any unambiguous standard. There is no basis for moral decisions and if any appears to be one would momentarily become questionable and volatile.

Similarly if we shortly consider the moral experience of cultural marginality here, the multiplicities of cultural frames at work present confuse the authority that any single cultural voice may serve. The equally valid nature of the diverse cultural frames signifies that the individual becomes the sole actor for moral decisions and responsibilities. Since which cultural reference is adopted for judgement is weighed only contextually and no cultural system can stand as the ultimate truth, the speculative and uncertain nature of the moral dilemmas underlies both cultural marginality and the general postmodern moral situation. To appropriate Bauman's terminology, the existence of both the postmodern self and the cultural marginal is marked by the paradoxical quality of the tyranny of choice (*Life in Fragments* 4). With the absolutist principles in modernity, the moral predicament confronting the postmodern and cultural marginal individual would be implausible with the security

delegated by the ideology of a single cultural system and legislative authority.

Now, in the present context it will only be relevant to take note of the social structural view to marginality. Berry's widely-used acculturation framework which posits marginality as one of the four acculturation strategies by an individual and group also exudes a paradoxical duality of the marginality concept. Considering the two dependent variables 'cultural maintenance' and 'contact and participation', marginality is defined when individuals exhibit little motivation and possibility in maintaining original culture, as well as little motivation in engaging with elements of the host culture. The sociological frame of reference of marginality of Berry is clear as he posits the stalemate encountered by the individual as consequences of the exertion of group dialectics, which is then internalized and manifested by the individual. Therefore, Berry attributes an individual lack of possibility or interest in cultural maintenance and interaction with others to sociological explanations, such as "enforced cultural loss", social "exclusion or discrimination". His conclusion is that the individual acculturative behaviour can be predicted as a function of personal choice intertwined with perceptions and realities of group relations as a whole. Therefore, the individual acculturative outcome depends primarily on the broader sociocultural contexts (Berry 5-33).

The amalgamation of marginality as an individual experience and social process can thus be perceived to be even more blurred in Berry's treatment of the marginality notion. In effect, the more preferred use of "marginalization" instead of "marginality" by Berry may indicate his heavier leaning on viewing the marginal concept as a process of social dialectics than on an individual level of understanding. This casts as no surprise when in fact Berry places his investigation in the context of immigration and pursues to relate findings from his ecocultural framework for the wider societal acculturation policy and program. In addition, his approach is in line with the orientation of cross-cultural psychology. Despite a fundamental interest in the psychocultural adaptation of the individual, his research ultimately condenses the individual manifestations and generalizes as a collective, categorical phenomenon, with no particular awareness of the intricate dual embodiments of cultural marginality psychologically and sociologically. In addition, the categorical and mathematical construal of acculturative outcome as a formula of various psychological and environmental variables ignores the irreducible complexity and subjectivity of the acculturating process undertaken by each individual. An explicit critique of this regard is voiced also by Bhatia and Ram who advocate a more process-oriented analysis of acculturation rather than a categorical prediction and description (Hermans 243-281).

Nevertheless, Berry's approach draws our attention to the far end of the sociological approach to cultural marginality by highlighting the contemporary group dialectics of power which constitutes one of the main origins of cultural marginal experience encountered by individuals and groups. We can borrow insight here especially by structural social work as briefly mentioned above which adopts a keen group focus on marginality as intergroup differentiation and hierarchization, and plays down the phenomenological experience of marginality by the individual. In describing the transformed nature and dynamics of social

structural oppression, Mullalay describes a marginalized group as “constitut[ing] (an) underclass permanently confined to the margins of society because the labour market (and the general society) will not accommodate them” and “excluded from meaningful social participation and cannot exercise their capacities in socially defined and recognized ways” (qtd. in Berry 266). His repeated use of passive construction here together with his contextual explanation of marginalization as the process leading to the phenomenon of marginality, yields insight in positing marginality as a victimized experience of the oppressed excluded and exploited by the oppressor group via various social structures and institutions.

Byrne in his *Social Exclusion* also explores contemporary structural exploitation as engendering marginality comprehensively and even refrains from using the term 'marginality' which he deems as pertaining to a limited focus on discrete individuals. Rather, he endorses the wider sociological dynamics of “social exclusion” to underlie the conjoint social processes of power struggles in contributing to marginality. Let alone a detailed investigation into the nature and mechanism of institutional confines, the contribution of social structural perspective towards marginality lies in its acknowledgment of not only the relational nature of marginality but also of the vivid power dynamics among racial and cultural groups in present-day societies. Such power imbalances and struggles directly contribute to the marginal experience undergone personally and also in relation to group dialectics and identifications from which the self and identity inseparably derive and take shape.

Although group dialectics operate throughout human history as necessary sociological processes for social and individual identity constitution, their significance is intensified amid the postmodern sociological conditions. Variety as the normative sociological landscape of the contemporary societies provides the basis of contentions and conflicts among groups which target their struggles on the exhibits of differences now made more identifiable by the postmodern advocacy of diversity. The importance of the insight offered by the social structural work lies in its unveiling the inevitably politicized condition of the essentially relational and plausibly neutral nature of marginality. As such, it reminds of the poignant reality that group juxtaposition unfortunately often turns into institutionalized opposition and power struggle among the contemporary networks of power and desire. However, while the lens of structural social work lends its heavier focus on the marginality as a phenomenon arising from intergroup dialectics, it should be highlighted also that the manifestation of the marginality phenomenon on both individual and social dimensions is inherent in and indissociable from such a social process. With its mission as an academic discipline to discern and undermine structural hierarchies in a society, structural social work naturally places its enterprise at the systemic level of inquiry and critique of the social process in question. Hence its concern is rather on 'marginalization' and 'marginalized' rather than its individual realm of experience and manifestation ('marginality').

The discussion above describes the inherently multiple meanings and interpretations of marginality which pivot the concept with differing leanings on either the individual or group dimension wherein brew also the intellectual controversy. In effect, since the postulation of the marginal man concept by Park (1928) and Stonequist (1935), many reviews

have posed challenges to the validity of the marginality concept. A summary by Del Pilar of oppositions to the use of the notion reveals that the issue concerns more a lack of conceptual precision than a lack of empirical support. Dickie-Clark asserts the marginality concept should be discarded because of “a failure to make any distinction at all between the marginal situation and the marginal personality” (cited in Del Pilar et al. 5). Del Pilar goes further to advocate the ceasing of the concept both because of its lack of construct validity and the potential negative associations the term invites with the marginal individual and group (Del Pilar et al. 3-17).

If marginality as a construct entails such an extent of conceptual imprecision and elusiveness, is it still useful and valid then to discuss marginality in a wider sense and cultural marginality in particular? The real issue, however, is not that of failed effort to differentiate the concept of one frame of reference from another but the acceptance of the inherently ambivalent nature of the marginality concept. As pinpointed before, the notion carries dual specifications due to its simultaneous sociocultural underpinning and individual level of manifestation. Whereas Del Pilar and other critics challenge the wide appeal of the concept due merely to its commonsense plausibility, we can also think of what such conceptual plausibility can be that would support the validity and usefulness of the concept and lead to its wide popularity despite the attempts to negate it.

As invoked previously, the ambivalence of marginality is intrinsic as a sociological concept with dual specifications. Marginality as a construct underpins three essential thoughts and recognitions of sociology: first, the existence of human beings is fundamentally sociological in nature; second, the sociological nature of human existence maintains that all social structures and spaces function to differentiate between insiders and outsiders; third, the sociological nature of human existence ratifies the inalienable intricacy infiltrating between the individual and society. Marginality arises as a relative sociological phenomenon to the customary systems of thinking and practice that have been collectively adhered to and taken for granted by the majority. Meanwhile, such relational juxtaposition of the conforming whole and the non-conformist individual cannot evade itself as being a social structural phenomenon concurrent with the binary opposition of the two entities. Such views lead to understandings of marginality as a predominantly social phenomenon involving group dialectics. Concomitantly, the sociological nature of marginality affirms a social component of the marginality experience as the individual is reckoned with or views him-/herself as being deviant. Certainly how marginality embodies in the individual level relates to an intricate dynamics among the subjective self, the identification of self to relevant groups and other various contextual factors in force. Nevertheless, encompassing an individual dimension of the marginality concept is crucial for the concept to be complete apart from viewing it as a social and group-based phenomenon. The multiplicity of meanings associated with marginality is therefore an intrinsic and salient nature of the concept and phenomenon, and accounts for the dialectics between its widespread use and criticism. We can discern that the demand by critics of the marginality concept to separate its multiple meanings will only end in circular incompleteness, since the concept as a whole resists isolation of its social-based meaning and reality from its individual manifestation. While the confounding

ambivalence of the concept is its nature, the attempt to divide one dimension of understanding from another and limit marginality to only one aspect of conceptualization will only culminate in a conceptual flaw. Johnston in "The Concept of the 'Marginal Man': A Refinement of the Term" notes that the controversies towards cultural marginality have been polarized to either treating it as a psychological or sociological theory and urges instead for an integration of these theories to advance the theoretical implications of the term (145-147).

Weisberger's structuralist, integrative view presents one viable theory for responding to such multifold conceptual challenges of marginality and moving away from the stalemate caused by wrought conceptual oppositions. In attempting to clarify the conceptual insufficiency of Park's marginal man, he underlies squarely that the ambivalence of the marginality notion must be reckoned with, "for ambivalence is the foundation of marginality" (Weisberger 434). In his conceptualization, marginality is rather a state of structural ambivalence in the sociological context. As such, this state of marginality needs to be differentiated from the various concomitant reactions to this structural dialectic. He terms these as "directions of marginality" or "social conditions", and classifies dynamically under the four topology of "assimilation", "return", "poise", and "transcendence" (429). In other words, marginality is a structural problematic of multiple ambivalence for its embodied individuals owing to the qualitative changes and structural conflicts the specific historical contexts and differing sociocultural worldviews simultaneously pose to and exhaust the individual perceptual and interpretive framework.

The merit of positing marginality as a state of structural incompatibility is that the perspective not only acknowledges the vast variety of historical and sociocultural determinants of marginality at the contextual level on the one hand and the myriad possible responses to it exhibited at the personal level on the other. Also and more importantly, his perspective conjoins such sociological and individual dimensions of marginality with an underlying "logic" that regulates and explains the range of the manifest variances (Weisberger 434). The structural ambivalence that characterizes marginality in Weisberger's conception relates more to the sociological sense in that contradictions in structured social relations constrain to determine the social location the individual actor positions at a specific context and instance. Meanwhile, it appears also that the ambivalence he describes the concept in both the sociological and psychological sense is a gesture to combine the sociological and individual aspects of marginality. Although he discusses structural ambivalence from the sociological perspective, there is a concomitant tapping at the individual level to the subjective states, thoughts and emotions. Another related point of notice is Weisberger's conviction of sociocultural inequality as implicated in marginality, a view which sets out to reaffirm the inevitable politicization of sociological dynamics as fundamental contextual precursors brewing the phenomenon of cultural marginality. As such, the seemingly distant view presented by the above-mentioned social structuralist perspective to marginality is connectedly incorporated into this structural model of marginality theorized by Weisberger as fundamental conditions in which marginality emerges and evolves sociologically and phenomenologically.

One may contend at this point that his distinguishment of marginality from its various reactions could perhaps be instrumental in nature to yield functional convenience. Nevertheless, the capacity for his structuralist theory to integrate and explain the diversity of social positions of German Jewry in the Wilhemian era warrants empirical support for his theorization for the conceptual coherence and flexibility it renders. In addition, this structuralist view also affords crucial clarification for the negative connotation long associated with cultural marginality. He remarks that the profile of the buffeted cultural marginal as first articulated by Park is in fact only one “single social condition” among other possible revelations (Weisberger 429). Mistakenly, this limited view of the marginal man has been held as the only delineation of the experience of marginality as to have established the negative connotation tradition of the concept. His caution against confusing marginality itself and possible reactions to marginality offers apt response to the erroneous emphasis on marginality as a predominantly negative phenomenon. This evaluative view towards marginality conceals the richness of marginality as encompassing other possible responses and its intricacy as a socioculturally ambivalent phenomenon.

To borrow the view on ambivalence from a sociological perspective, the predominantly negative construal of the marginal man relates also to an over-emphasis of marginality as psychological ambivalence at the expense of sociological ambivalence which it simultaneously entails. In Merton's conception, the psychological ambivalence is interwoven with the conflicting normative expectations prescribed by the social institutions on the individual. The psychological ambivalence internalized and manifested in terms of contradictory ideas, and behaviour by the individual is a result of his occupation of a certain social position of the total sociological structure. In other words, both psychological and sociological ambivalence are “built into the very structure of social relations” and this implies the plausibility of investigating in parallel the psychological manifestation and social structural origins in examining ambivalence (Merton 4). To rest on the cognitive dissonance and affective anomie as experienced by the cultural marginal individual is to linger on the tradition of negative connotations and confine our analysis on the consequence of marginality, or “response to marginality”. Rather, the focus should be, if not equally, on the broad sociocultural structural patterns which cause and supply such psychological ambivalence. Using Merton's insight, the sociological inquiry into ambivalence will “instructively complement” the psychological inquiry into ambivalence of which cultural marginality presents as a salient type (5). Although, cultural marginality emerges as a distinctive phenomenon from the prevailing culture, over-emphasis on the marginal man as a single existential entity secluded from the sociocultural contexts in which it in actuality is embedded and evolves isolates it thus as a psychological phenomenon. Whether it pertains to a phenomenological analysis, or a general investigation into cultural marginality, the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of the phenomenon need to be analyzed in relation with each other.

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