

Libraries in the margins

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01. A place of enunciation

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?"

Frantz Fanon. In *Wretched of the Earth*, 1968.

Textbooks say that all research begins with a trigger, a spark that ignites the fuse of interest.

My spark came at a somewhat diffuse moment in the past, when I asked myself who I was and where I stood.

That happened the day I got fed up with being "the poor one", "the marginal", "the one from below", "the subaltern", "the different one", "the Other", and the myriad of other labels I have received throughout the years. And all those that I haven't received because I don't meet the requirements to have them attached to my back, but which are floating all around me.

I got fed up, moreover, with being called "rebel", "lefty", "revolutionary" or "misfit" every time I complained about some of those words above. Or against all of them. And I got fed up with the damned argumentative fallacy, so deceitful and harmful, stating that if I complain, if I resist and if I criticize — among many other nice activities that I have carried out since I have consciousness, especially *class consciousness* — it is because I am a resentful bastard who could not have the privileges that "those at the top" have, whoever are those placed in such a curious position.

If I complain, resist, and criticize, it is because the System — that group of individuals who are said to hold the handle of a certain pan or to play with the strings of a few million puppets — is sending to hell the world in which I try to live. And, at the same time, it kept me, for as long as I can remember, relegated to "the margins".

It was on those margins that I learned who I am.

I learned it through education (or the lack of it), exploitation, manipulation, discrimination, xenophobia and aporophobia, contempt for what is different, and all those small daily gestures and grimaces that allow one to become perfectly aware of where one stands.

With experience and over the years, I have discovered that "the margins" is a very wide space that extends far, far beyond this corner where I try to survive. The limits of that

space are so, so distant that the people who live near them may seem invisible, inaudible, untraceable....

They may seem (or they may be) that to those who are not on the margins, to those who look in from the outside (or just look out). I know where they are, who they are, and what their struggles and their voices are, even if I am to be convinced that my margin is not as much of a margin as the one over there, and I am told about abyssal lines and shallow limits.

"The margins" is the answer that pops up when I ask myself where I am, when I ask myself from where I look at myself, and from where I see the rest of the world.

I find myself on the margins. Which is not the same as being "marginalized" or being "marginal". I no longer want the labels that others put on me, nor am I going to "appropriate" any of them, a strategy used to get us to accept by hook or by crook what somebody else has foisted on us by force — especially when that "somebody else" neither carry nor appropriate any label at all.

If I am on the margins, it is because there is a "center". Or an "up there" for those of us who are "down here". And I get the feeling that this mental (or conceptual) image perpetuates and reproduces differences and hierarchies, and keeps us mentally far away, outside, and at the bottom of a bottomless pit.

That "center", that "up there", does not think of us except to "civilize" us or, to update the concept, to "develop" us. And to turn us into consumers, not only of their products but also of their ideas and values. We have been crushed so badly that nowadays we have an imperious need to imitate what is done in the "center" or "up there", and an equally overwhelming need for approval. Are we worthy, are we "developed" enough, are we doing well, or are we still the lousy, starving, ignorant, good-for-nothing beasts we were always told we were?

The asymmetry of such a "relationship" (if that word can be used, which I honestly doubt), the dependency, the undisguised (but eternally denied, and even ridiculed) colonialism, the oppression, the discrimination, and all the other systemic violence, both epistemic and otherwise, is more than evident. And no, no sociologist, anthropologist, analyst, or researcher needs to come and tell us that. We have been living it forever.

Is there a way to balance the equation? I don't know, I don't think I have an answer to such a big, vital, old question. What I do feel is that the first step, a necessary and urgent one, is to begin to identify, point out, mark, answer, debate, reject and eliminate those speeches of dependence, those words used to keep us there where they want us to stay, those unseemly arguments and strategies....

The game is rigged so that we are the eternal losers. However, it is not a Manichean, black-and-white situation. There are many grays, there is room for counterpunching, and for independence, there are trenches and shelters. There is a margin.

Margins, in fact.

And from here, from these margins, perhaps we can contribute elements to understand, appreciate, and (re)construct our spaces, whatever they are called, wherever they are located.

Including, obviously, those which we still call (and I assume we will continue to call) libraries, archives, and museums.

02. A matter of design

To be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.

bell hooks. In *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre*, 1984.

It seems that in our mental schemes, margins, whatever their type, hold the position and fulfill the function they perform on a printed page.

In that context, it is a matter of basic editorial design: a margin is the empty space surrounding a given block of text (or an illustration — which, in terms of content, is equivalent). Its function is to highlight that text, to give it meaning as "the important thing" on the page, to balance it.

The text obeys certain (generally rigid) rules of composition, organization, structuring and distance that are no longer valid outside this "block": the lines, for example, do not exist in the margins, because there, in the empty space, there is nothing to organize, nothing to regulate...

Generally speaking, it is considered that the wider the margin, the more the text "breathes" and the more elegant the publication. The emptier the margin, the more the writing stands out.

[Although the most useful and functional books are those with narrow margins. And most illustrated books do not have them at all].

It so happens that, ignoring the wishes of designers, editors and printers, margins often serve other, quite different functions.

Disregarding the rigid linear and monolithic structure of the block-printed text, the margin, with all its emptiness, gives space for commentary, gloss, note and addition, and allows for clarification, definition, and protest.

The old bookmakers and designers used to take advantage of the margins to include titles, comments or some definitions, an old tradition that now seems to have disappeared from the publishing industry. Be that as it may, margins have always been the spaces where opinions on the main text are noted. It is where the counter-discourse is recorded: what the lines do not say appears there. In that "blank" space there are correction marks, mocking monikers, crude reactions between big exclamation marks, a thousand and one colors of pencil and ink, references to other works that challenge a certain statement...

It is there that what is truly interesting develops — or, at least, there is the possibility of it developing: exchange, thought, reflection... In their versatility, the margins have always defied the desperate attempt of the written word to fix an opinion forever, in an immovable way.

Paradoxically, the wider the margin — and, consequently, the more elegant and respectable the text — the more room there is for criticism and observation, and even for jokes, banter, or plain and simple rebellion.

The margin thus becomes a space of freedom, empty only in appearance: in it, possibilities are concentrated. Anything can happen in the margin: it is beyond everything that the printed text represents. Since it is blank, it can be occupied and, since it has no rules, it offers space for any proposal.

Seen from such a perspective, many lines and possibilities of symbolic analysis open up: the margins and the "peripheries" as forcibly empty spaces, designed to give meaning and sense to the "centers", but where comments and criticisms end up developing, sometimes with contents much more valuable than what is presented as the main element. The margins as places where the central rules do not necessarily apply. The margins, in short, as a space that rebels against the emptiness that has been planned for it and against its original function and becomes a point of lively debate and critical construction.

Or of mockery and derision, simply.

Assuming the editorial simile, it could be said that the printed text is the equivalent of the official, hegemonic, academic discourse: fixed, static in its norms, with its constant typography, its rigid lines, and its balanced spaces. It is the social discourse that shapes us, that tells us what is "the right thing to do" and clearly indicates which are the limits from which we cannot leave.

Beyond are the margins.

And in those margins are (though not always) the annotations. The voice of the margins. What those spaces that are not empty, that are not blank, tell us.

Those marks are classically called *marginalia* (or *scholia*), and include notes, glosses, annotations, critiques, scribbles, drawings, corrections, and other elements. Sometimes these *marginalia* have provided access to other texts, some of them persecuted, censored and destroyed, and have opened doors to a different knowledge. It could be said that they have served to improve, in very general terms, the understanding of the text.

[Or the experience of reading it, especially in the case of extremely boring contents.]

The tradition of marginalia declined after the invention of the printing press, although its use continued well into the 20th century, especially in print. Today, some e-book models have been designed to allow for annotations. Some research has been done on the value of "margin notes" as a critical synthesis of knowledge, scholarly or otherwise....

...and such notes have been studied in authors such as Poe or Coleridge. In fact, some of these famous *marginalia* have been collected and published as books, adapting these once free contents to the rigid rules of the printed text. The voice from the margins has thus become hegemonic and has become everywhere as the new norm. But, in the process, it has lost its freedom, its freshness and, in many cases, its value.

Aware of the power of the margins, the "center" has labeled everything that inhabits it as "marginal". A label with connotations of something improper, incorrect, that does not conform to the norms, that is out of bounds. Something that does not have enough value, continuing with the editorial simile, to have been included in the printed block.

Although its value resides, precisely, in having been left out of it, free of everything.

03. Freedom in the void

Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988.

The margins do not necessarily have to be spatially or symbolically located in a "periphery", despite the fact that such "peripheries" (social, geographical, cultural, identity...) are often, in fact, margins. A margin is any space in which the central, nuclear, dominant, and hegemonic rules cease to be valid, generally by choice, but also by abandonment and forgetfulness of those who are in charge of imposing such rules.

A margin is, then, a space devoid or liberated from certain norms. This may entail a high risk of social conflict but, at the same time, it opens up a large number of latent possibilities. The fact that hegemonic controls and impositions are weaker, laxer, or do not exist at all, implies a series of problems for populations used to continuous State presence but, at the same time, it allows considering a set of opportunities and developing ideas that do not necessarily adhere to those promoted, accepted, or blessed by the status quo.

In that sense, the margin is a space of freedom. It can also be an "unprotected" space, indeed. But if one considers that many times "protection" implies the renunciation of a series of liberties and the acceptance of a number of rigid rules, of gags of self-censorship and shackles of self-control....

...perhaps the "danger" inherent in the life of the margin is compensated by the creativity that is allowed or enabled within its borders.

Returning to the editorial simile used in previous posts of this series, the margins turn out to be spaces that are usually considered as "empty of content" but in which the content ends up existing. Spaces designed to give importance and meaning to the "center" but which end up acquiring meaning on their own — and, sometimes, even a greater importance. Spaces where rules generally have no force or no value and in which, therefore, anything is possible, including intelligent criticism, acid mockery, creative dissent, informed debate, negation...

In general, the margins turn out to be forgotten spaces that, even so, continue to function in some way. Sometimes they become chaotic, dangerous, and shattered places — chaos and violence are the options that end up winning the game there. Other times, however, they are places where creativity takes over. Creativity understood not only (or not necessarily) as an artistic exercise, but as one of desperate innovation, of searching for solutions and urgent answers with the materials at hand.

It is then that the margins speak.

And that is when unique and rebellious ideas and practices appear, free of shackles and gags, madly creative, committed to the core of their communities, and devoid of prejudices and expectations.

Because they have nothing to lose, and so much to gain.

That, all of that, includes libraries, archives, and museums, if those labels can be used (or need to be used) to talk about those spaces. And of many others, similar or intermediate, or mixed, that have to do with knowledge and memory. Two elements, the latter, that are essential in the margins, and that have been systematically denied by the "center".