Marginality: Euphemism or Concept

Peter C. Lloyd

Scholars like to think that the concepts which they use are value free and of universal application; furthermore they denote a reality—'classes' for instance exist in the same manner as buildings or trees and are not merely constructs of the mind. Some are not so naive; but the conditioned nature of their own approach strikes them forcibly when they suddenly find familiar situations described in unfamiliar terms.

After many years involvement with West Africa I visited Lima, Peru, to study phenomena which had latterly engaged my attention in Nigeria—the perceptions of social inequality held by urban migrants. Superficially the situation in the two countries was similar—a massive migration from the rural areas to the towns, insufficiency of wage employment pushing most migrants into the informal sector, the development of shanty towns on the peripheries of the cities, the poverty and insecurity of the migrants. In Peru, as elsewhere in Latin America, recent literature devoted to these issues is largely based on the concept of marginality (*marginalidad*). This came as a surprise for the term is certainly not current in the African literature.

In such a situation one's first question is: does this term help one to understand the phenomena discussed, to develop new insights? In this case I confess that my own answer was largely negative —that is to say, I do not feel inclined to use the term myself. But then a second question poses itself: why has marginality become so popular a term in Latin America but not in Africa? And conversely: what term *has* enjoyed a similar popularity in Africa? It occurred to me that we in the 1950s had been similarly wedded to "detribalization".

The fears behind the choice of terms

'Detribalization' and 'marginality'—both reflect fears like those of the sorcerer's apprentice who triggered off a process which he was unable to control. But the social position of the groups using these two terms have been markedly different. Tropical Africa had a dominant white ruling group which was almost completely expatriate. Indirect Rule embodied a philosophy and policy which valued and sought to preserve the Africans' traditional way of life. Their social institutions should be developed—the African should not strive for positions in a superstructure which would ultimately wither away. Yet, in contradiction, some Africans were needed to man the administration, commerce and industry—and far more sought in migrating to the towns to participate in these alien structures. The dominant whites were apprehensive at the anomic consequences of uprootedness—the loss of values and traditional authority. Subsequent research proved most of these fears groundless—the African migrant seemed to cope very well.

The same fears were expressed in Latin America; but here there is a resident dominant group, in part descended from early Spanish settlers, in part from much more recent European immigrants. Their cultural life remains focused upon Europe; the traditions of the indigenous Indian populations were either denigrated or ignored. The recent urban immigration was thus positively threatening. What was to become of the new populations—were they, hopefully, to be integrated into the dominant culture, were they going to establish a new counter-culture, or would they merely stagnate on the periphery?

One might argue that the term 'detribalization' would not be used in Latin America partly as they do not refer to their indigenous Indian peoples as tribal; or that 'marginality' did not catch on in Africa because the Spanish literature is inaccessible there. However marginality probably has its origin in the concept of 'the marginal man' popular in sociological literature in English in the 1950s. The different usages, however, reflect more the characteristics of the users and their perceptions of the problems of that society.

The history of 'marginality' in Peru

In Peru concern with marginality had been preceded in the 1950s and 1960s by a focus on "cholofication"—a theme taken up both in local and American sociological literature. The *cholo* is the Indian who has migrated to the town, adopting certain urban values and styles of life—the typical migrant one might say. But he is distinguished clearly from the *mestizo* who overtly accepts the dominant Spanish culture and between whom and the Indian there usually exists, in rural situations, a strong hostility. The cholo remains proud of his heritage—and whilst in the town retains close links with his rural home. The usage of the term varied with social position; the

dominant whites would abusively refer to their servants or employees as cholo—upstart natives getting too big for their boots; among the cholo themselves it could be a term of endearment or used with only slight self disparagement—"I'm only a poor cholo—a poor country lad struggling to get ahead." The future of the cholo was debated in the terms already indicated—would they become absorbed into the dominant culture or would they dilute it or transform it? The debate has now died with the assumption of power by the Revolutionary Military Government. It is strongly nationalist and populist, successfully promulgating widespread land reforms, advocating greater workers' control of industry (and the consequent obsolescence of class conflict); the generals wear ponchos on their provincial tours. Quechua, the Indian vernacular still spoken in the rural areas, is not only decreed an official language on a par with Spanish but is to be taught in all schools; the Indian culture is respected—in dramatic legal proceedings an appeal court vindicated men of a remote village who had judged a wrong doer in the traditional manner, sentencing him to death by the collective action of the community. (A lower 'Spanish' court had convicted the five villagers of murder). The term cholo seems now to have fallen into comparative disuse—at least in academic and official literature.

The term 'marginality' has a variety of usages. It is used to refer to settlements—the peripheral shanty towns or to people. The marginal people are those with low incomes (but why are the high income earners not equally marginal?) or more graphically those living on the margins of subsistence, suffering not only low income but also insecurity. But not all marginal people live in marginal settlements—many live in the inner city tenements or in slum conditions on vacant city building lots. Similarly not all shanty town residents are marginal people—some have lived in the city for a long time, have stable jobs and built themselves a solid if modest house. Thus used marginality is a statistical concept.

In every day usage 'marginal' implies 'not integrated' and thus it is used sociologically; the marginals are those who are not integrated into city life, sharing in its consensus of values. Lack of integration is portrayed in a number of ways. Socially—the marginals are disorganised and experience anomie; their family organization (or lack of it) differs markedly from that of the dominant culture; they do not participate in voluntary associations. Culturally—the marginals retain customs appropriate to their traditional or rural culture; they don't share all the customs of the dominant groups. Services—the marginals do not participate in the social services of the city, do not use its electricity, transport, hospitals and schools. Economically—the marginals are not producers in the dominant sectors of the economy (the formal economy) though they may produce for other marginals; they do not consume the product of the dominant sectors—the electrical household goods, etc. Politically—the marginals do not participate in political decision making.

The implications of such a viewpoint are manifold. Researchers measure with endless questionnaires the degrees of marginality. One obvious corollary is that the marginals could be removed from the city and life for the remainder would continue as before. Hence, too, if the marginals contribute nothing, they should receive nothing—let them raise themselves by their own boot straps, if they must stay. More positively the marginality viewpoint emphasises the need to educate the marginals—to teach them the dominant values and styles of life and above all the necessity of hard work to achieve and maintain these; hence policies of *asistencialismo*.

According to such educators, the opportunities for social advancement already exist; but the poor do not take advantage of them either because they do not perceive the opportunities or because they lack the drive to improve themselves. A recent book on Lima's shanty towns *De invasores a invadidos* (From invaders to invaded) describes the activities of over 50 voluntary organisations which now operate to bring education, community service and relief to the poor. Apart from the fact that most are supported by Western industrial nations and may thus be designated 'agents of imperialism', the main criticism of these bodies is that they perpetuate dependency, encouraging the poor to believe that they can only achieve anything through outside assistance. The military government which assumed power in 1967 created a super-community development organisation, SINAMOS, to stimulate local activity and co-ordinate this with the appropriate government departments. However this organ came in for criticism from the radical left for its attempts to mobilise the population into those channels welcomed by the government. It recently fell under a cloud and is to be replaced by an alternative organisation which stresses mobilization from below.

From an integration to a conflict perspective

The thesis that the 'marginal' population lacks integration has been strongly challenged—especially by expatriate sociologists who have studied the shanty town dwellers. They point out that family life tends to be quite stable; that the

people do aspire to the values of the dominant society; that they do use urban services; that most are gainfully employed and that the work they do is productive for the entire society; that their purchasing power is not negligible; that they do belong to political parties or trade unions and can make their voices heard. In short the marginals *are* integrated into urban life—and if they do not always do things exactly in the manner of the dominant groups, the middle and upper classes, this is usually because poverty inhibits them. 'Marginal' is a grossly distorting and ethnocentric label applied by the dominant groups. Instead we should see the so-called marginals as fully integrated but exploited members of the society.

The model of society is thus changed from that of integration and consensus to its rival, that of opposed interests and conflict. This would indicate an analysis in class terms—and some Latin American writers have favoured a class analysis to that of marginality. But the more astute among them realise the difficulty of applying at least the cruder versions of Marxist class analysis in a situation where only a minority of the poor are wage employees and where these employees range from the 'aristocrats' with good jobs in multinational firms to the journeyman engaged by an artisan, the latter sharing the life style of the majority of self employed. Taken together with the continuing rural ties, the stated desire of many migrants to become petty entrepreneurs and other indications of a lack of commitment to urban factory life, these facts make it difficult to characterise the urban poor as a proletariat in the strict sense of the word.

Those who espouse the 'conflict' viewpoint would argue that opportunities for advancement do not exist. They seek to establish which groups in the society are most disadvantaged, which furthermore are most conscious of their predicament either in their experience of poverty or in their capacity to place the blame on the structure of their society rather than their own shortcomings. In other words, one is assessing the revolutionary potential of various groups—in order to predict radical change, to foster it by the support of those groups, or to impede it through the frustration of their efforts.

Within the Marxist framework there is another, and legitimate, use of 'marginality'. The capitalist system needs a "reserve army of labour" for its continuing functioning—to keep wages down, profits up. But this reserve army needs to be of limited size only—its continued growth will not reduce wages *ad infinitum,* the excess un- and underemployed population represented in the shanty towns and slums is thus marginal to the functioning of the capitalist system. Whatever the economic merits of this designation of a marginal population, it is clearly a very abstract usage—only some the poor are marginal, and there is no means of telling which.

I have cited the integration and conflict models of society as constructs used by the observer. There remains the viewpoint of the poor themselves to be considered; do they see themselves as marginal? In the 1960s western sociologists, echoing the fears of the resident middle classes, predicted waves of unstructured violence erupting from the squalor of the shanty towns. Not only has this not happened but research within these localities has tended to find basically conservative attitudes, petty bourgeois ideals of achievement, rather than radicalism. Marked trends are the desires that children should receive a good education, that one should own one's house. If these people were to use the term 'marginal' of themselves—and there is no indication that they do—it would be in a positive and hopeful sense; they seek those things enjoyed by those richer than themselves, rather than despair of ever being able to participate in the style of life of the higher social strata.

Multi-layered meanings: Quijano

As an observer of the Latin American sociological scene I have tried to unscramble the varied connotations of the term 'marginality' as used by academics. But, of course, most writers tend to use the word in several of the modes defined. Let me take as one example Anibal Quijano, a Peruvian sociologist who is not only a most prolific writer and one of his country's leading intellectual political activists but one of the most astute observers and analysts of urban poverty.

Quijano wrote his doctoral thesis on cholofication. He stresses that the cholos constituted a new stratum emerging in a society undergoing transition. They were a marginal group experiencing lack of clearly enunciated norms and values, cultural ambivalence and a personality marked by insecurity and frustration. (One senses here the same traits so often described in studies of detribalization.) The consequences of this process of cholofication included the impetus given to populist nationalist political parties drawing support from this group, the integration of traditional Indian and urban/Spanish cultures and the intiation of greater communication between the Indians and the rest of the society, the cholos acting as middlemen and innovators and raising the political conscience of the Indian.

In a later work Quijano describes the world view of the urban marginals. He declines to use the term 'lumpenproletariat' because this term implies 'dropouts', isolated individuals or groups who have not been able to cope with modern society, rather than a stratum produced by a reduced labour market. He distinguishes a marginal petty bourgeoisie and marginal proletariat in terms of their poverty and insecurity—thus dividing marginals from the affluent petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat in stable and well paid wage employment. Between these two marginal groups there is considerable mobility and indeed overlapping of occupational statuses, between marginal and non-marginal groups mobility is possible but difficult—many achieve it only to drop back again in failure.

Quijano follows the established usage in describing as minimal the contribution of the marginal groups to the national economy. They are a 'marginal pole' (*polo marginal*) in both cultural and economic senses, in contrast to the hegemonic pole. The former is dependent upon, not independent of the latter. Thus Quijano is able to combine both the senses of integration and conflict in his models. He goes on in fact to describe the relationship between the marginals and the rest of society in terms of exploitation and of the dependency denoted by *asistencialismo*.

The simple transition to a class analysis cannot be made, for the marginals do not develop class consciousness. One inhibiting factor is that few bonds of occupational interest unite the marginals. They tend to live in communities which embrace both marginals and non-marginals, and in these non-marginals usually take leadership positions and set the patterns of values. Family ties too draw together people of differing degrees of affluence. Neighbourhood groups are unlikely to promote political or occupational interests. Elsewhere, in the introduction of his wife's collection of biographies of shanty town dwellers in Santiago, Quijano argues that the marginals see oppressors in abstract terms as, for example, "the rich", rather than as concretely represented by specific employers. The state is seen alternately as a source of help and of extreme repression. The people hover between a realistic appreciation of their everyday needs (as limited by their extreme poverty) and fantasy in their view of their future.

Quijano's contribution lies in the designation of this large population which has been created by contemporary economic processes which lives in poverty and insecurity in the city slums and shanty towns. There is little sign of it disappearing for whilst some individuals achieve relative affluence and security, many more are daily replacing them. The relationships engendered in this mode of life inhibit the development of a collective consciousness. Quijano advocates research into the economic role and the attitudes of this population. Yet while he stresses its exploitation and dependent position, he still tends to use the themes of the integration model. It is easy to see to whom Quijano is referring in these essays. But what other word might he have used? The limits of the category are not precisely defined. Could one not simply refer to 'the poor' and 'poverty'? 'Marginality', it could be argued, gives one aspect of their condition pre-eminence, suggesting that this was a cause rather than an effect.

Perceptions and perceivers

'Marginality' has an appeal because it looks like a scientific concept—even though on closer inspection its precision seems most spurious. Is it just a convenient euphemism for poverty? Many such terms become popular just when their precise meaning becomes obsolete. Yet in using such a term it is difficult to avoid the overtones carried by it. Marginality implies ambiguity and transience—as many of its users intend. One may eschew the integration model of society and refer, as Quijano does, to a marginal petty bourgeois and proletariat. But this seems to infer that petty bourgeois and proletariat are well defined and unambiguous concepts—as they are to Marxists —into which these shanty dwellers do not quite fit; hence they are the marginals. Yet it is surely a matter for empirical investigation to discover what differences exist between the poorer and the more affluent, the wage earners and the self employed. 'Marginality' prejudges the issue by telling one where the boundaries lie. Like all concepts it governs the way in which one looks at the world. It tells us something about the Latin American scholars and the way in which they wish to perceive the world.

Whether the poor see themselves as marginal is quite another question. Their own view of the world in which they live undoubtedly governs their actions—though these are of course constrained by the world. Events in the world are the product of men's actions, not of impersonal forces. But, it is argued, to understand the working of man's mind is either an impossible or an unnecessary task. We must supply our own analysis of man's behaviour. The concepts we use may be judged useful in their predictive power; they must however distort the reality of the outside world.

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