The cultural body of the margins: Anthropological reflections on a resilient concept

Mario Marasco, Sapienza University of Rome, ORCID: 0000-0001-5438-0991

Abstract

This article explores the persistence of margin and marginality as both analytical categories and lived realities, questioning why these concepts remain so deeply embedded in public discourse and in social science, despite repeated scholarly efforts to emphasize their porosity and relational nature. The endurance of marginality is also rooted in its symbolic dimension, which transcends time and different societies, shaping the ways in which exclusion is framed and legitimized. In the era of postindustrial capitalism, this symbolic level intersects with multiscalar dynamics of governance and valuation, contributing to the naturalization of discourses on differential citizenship and uneven access to rights and resources. Rather than a passive or peripheral state, marginality functions as a dynamic field of negotiation, where exclusion, resistance, and survival intersect. The study examines how marginalized bodies navigate urban space, oscillating between hyper-visibility and enforced invisibility, and how informal urban practices challenge dominant spatial and political orders. By analyzing processes such as spatial exclusion, securitarian governance, and informal modes of inhabiting the city, the article highlights how marginality is both imposed and contested. Ultimately, it argues that understanding the persistence of marginality requires moving beyond fixed territorial categories, recognizing borders as ambivalent zones and margins as sites of agency, ambiguity, and social transformation.

KEYWORDS: margins, embodied resistance, spatial exclusion, politics of presence, urban marginality

Introduction: Deconstructing the myth of marginality

The persistence of the margin, as both a cultural and ideological construct, is deeply intertwined with its historical use as a tool of exclusion[1]. The academic framework of the centrality of margins gained traction decades after Janice Perlman's seminal study, The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro (1976), which dismantled pervasive stereotypes portraying favela residents as culturally backward, politically inert, and socially disorganized—a narrative that naturalized their systemic exclusion. Through her immersive fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, Perlman demonstrated that the label of marginality was not an objective descriptor, but rather an ideological justification for systemic neglect. Far from being peripheral, favela residents were integral participants in the city's economy, engaged in sectors such as domestic labor, construction, and service industries, but systematically denied access to essential resources.

Contrary to the notion of a culture of poverty, Perlman found that favela residents exhibited many typically middle-class aspirations—such as valuing education, aspiring for home ownership, and engaging in civic participation. Yet these aspirations were consistently thwarted by structural barriers inherent in a socio-economic system designed to maintain their disadvantage. Perlman's analysis thus unraveled the myth of marginality, showing how it was used to obscure the agency of individuals and reinforce the status quo. Elite narratives portrayed informal settlements as hotbeds of crime, moral decay, and social disorder—an image reinforced by official documents like the 1968 Fundação Leão XIII report, which labeled favelas as "social cancers" (Perlman, 1975, p. 135). However, Perlman's findings revealed a different reality: cohesive communities with robust social networks, high employment rates, and political engagement, albeit under asymmetrical and unequal terms. This dissonance between the rhetoric surrounding the favelas and the lived reality of their residents created an ideological space where violent interventions, such as forced evictions and militarized policing, could be justified under the pretext of civilizing the urban poor.

Furthermore, the physical proximity of the favela to affluent neighborhoods, such as Copacabana, exemplifies David Harvey's analysis of urban spatial dynamics. Harvey (2009 [1973]) asserts that the city is a site of class struggle, emphasizing how urban forms are not neutral but serve to reinforce the interests of the capitalist class by struc-

---

1 Since this is a perspective article that seeks to critically reinterpret cross-cutting concepts such as margin and marginality, a comprehensive historical review of the relevant scholarship (starting with Park's early 1928 study on the "Marginal Man") would be excessive and beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this contribution focuses on the symbolic and cultural dimensions of marginality and their political and urban implications. For a more in-depth exploration of the topic, as illustrative examples rather than an exhaustive list, see Aceska et al. (2019), Thieme et al. (2017), Lancione (2016), Kokoreff (2009), and Tissot (2007). Additional references, including the essential contribution of Wacquant (2008), are provided in the text.

turing spaces in ways that perpetuate social inequalities. This spatial organization highlights how marginalized communities, despite their physical closeness to wealthier areas, are politically and economically excluded, reinforcing elite dominance.

Roberto Malighetti's (2019) analysis of Rio de Janeiro's favelas revisits themes of spatial exclusion decades after Janice Perlman's (1976) groundbreaking work. While Perlman challenged stereotypes of favelas as socially disorganized and economically peripheral, demonstrating their integration into the city's labor market, Malighetti shifts the focus to the state's active role in producing marginality through neoliberal governance. Where Perlman critiqued the myth of favela marginality, Malighetti introduces Agamben's (1995) framework of the state of exception to argue that favelas are not peripheral but strategically excluded: spaces where legal norms are suspended to legitimize violence, criminalization, and selective resource allocation (e.g. the Favela-Bairro program; see Malighetti, 2019, p. 76).

Malighetti does not engage directly with Perlman's work, but his analysis implicitly builds on her revelation that favelas are central to urban economies. He extends this insight by showing how, in the neoliberal era, the state formalizes exclusion through policies that fragment communities and depoliticize poverty. Where Perlman highlighted systemic neglect, Malighetti exposes a deliberate biopolitical regime that reduces favelados to "bare life" (Agamben, 2003, p. 75), stripped of political agency. This progression underscores how scholarly frameworks have evolved—from debunking myths of marginality (Perlman) to unmasking state-engineered exclusion (Malighetti)—while favelas remain trapped in cycles of exploitation. Teresa Caldeira (2000) further elaborates on the spectacle of violence, arguing that in São Paulo, violence itself becomes a tool that reinforces the marginalizing logic. Malighetti (2019, p. 79) extends this analysis, demonstrating how state and criminal violence converge to suppress dissent, creating a situation where citizenship becomes a "negotiated control" (Machado da Silva, 2002) and survival depends on compliance[2].

Despite these conditions, Malighetti underscores the role of grassroots resistance in contesting state-imposed emergency narratives. Community-led movements challenge these frameworks by advocating for participatory governance and cultural activism as instruments of social transformation. This resistance aligns with Arendt's (1951) concept of citizenship as the right to have rights, reframing it as a dynamic and lived experience rather than a static legal designation. Echoing Perlman's (2010) findings on community cohesion, these movements counter the apartheidization of favelas by fostering collec-

---

2 Quoted by the scholar.

tive agency and alternative political imaginaries. Situated in close proximity to wealth yet structurally excluded, favelados navigate this paradox by forging transnational alliances and reconfiguring notions of belonging beyond the confines of the nation-state.

It can be argued that, as a relational concept, marginality is less marginal than common sense might suggest. One is always marginal "in relation" to a center or multiple centers (see below). However, it is primarily in the symbolic realm that the concept of the margin retains its pervasiveness in contemporary discourse. In other words, we witness the persistence of the margin as both a social and cultural category. The symbolic weight of marginality concretely permeates the center (or centers) of our cities, embodied in the lived experiences and physical presence of marginalized individuals. Yet, when viewed externally, detached from their lived experience, these subjectivities— the informal parking assistant, the street rose vendor, the windshield washer at the traffic light, the squatter—appear to move in a desynchronized manner, clashing with dominant temporal and spatial values and enacting practices that challenge the implicit foundations of social organization (Saitta, 2019, p. 68).

Conceived statically, as a fixed place or a cluster of peripheral subjectivities, marginality is undoubtedly a misleading concept, incapable of capturing the complexity of today's neoliberal societies. This is precisely why Wacquant (2008), drawing from the American laboratory, interrogates and redefines the concept through the framework of advanced marginality—no longer a residual form of poverty (destined to vanish with a hypothetical macroeconomic recovery) but a structural byproduct of postindustrial societies[3].

The category of marginality as a container of crystallized meanings persists. From an anthropological perspective, we might argue that it becomes institutionalized—at least partially—through a continuous social process of naturalizing differences. This process is rooted in a framework of moral and symbolic signification that evokes deeply entrenched oppositional categories (and thus identity-forming ones), most notably the enduring duality of purity and impurity (Douglas, 1966). The margin, in this sense, does not merely outline and define the social order; it renders that order 'good to think', or bonnes à penser (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), acting as a constitutive element of contemporary reality itself.

---

3 It is important to clarify that Quijano and Westwell (1983), analyzing marginality through a Marxist lens, had already highlighted the capital's tendency to create a surplus labor force that expands and contracts with economic cycles. They argued that marginality was not only an economic byproduct but also an ideological construct shaping perceptions of excluded populations, particularly in imperialist contexts (e.g. Peru). However, their approach overlooked racial hierarchies in Latin America (cf. Grosfoguel, 2000). Perlman (1976) challenged this perspective, demonstrating that favela residents were deeply integrated into the system, albeit asymmetrically, thereby revealing marginality's ideological role in justifying exclusionary urban policies.

Symbolic margin

In Marcel Griaule's seminal *Dieu d'eau* (1975 [1948], p. 96), the Dogon village in Mali is conceived as a human body stretched from north to south. At the northern end lies the central square, representing the primordial field, with the council house (head) and the forge. The great families occupy the chest and abdomen, while communal altars to the south symbolize the feet. Beyond the walls, huts for menstruating women correspond to the hands and upper limbs. In the genital area, stones for crushing *Lannea acida* seeds (female sex) flank the foundation altar (male sex). This anthropomorphic figure mirrors the body of Nommo, an androgynous ancestral spirit in Dogon cosmogony. The Dogon house itself reflects this anthropomorphization: the round kitchen is the head, the storerooms the arms, and the entrance the genitals, projecting the macrocosm onto the microcosm of domestic space.

Human bodies and societies are endowed with margins. Both are symbolically constituted through these margins. Griaule's iconic depiction of the Dogon village is not merely a metaphor for communities now transformed by time and distant in space. Mary Douglas (2001 [1966], p. 115) underscores this when she writes:

> The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins […]. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas. For symbols of society, any human experience of structures, margins or boundaries is ready to hand […] The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception.

In another work, Douglas (1986, p. 45), drawing on Durkheim, explains how social order legitimizes itself through analogies with nature, and the symbolic power of the body is undeniable. However, if our conceptions of society reflect our understanding of the natural world, our classifications of nature often implicitly express the world of social relations.

Douglas underscores that "all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that, the shape of fundamental experience is altered" (2001 [1966], p. 122). Every conceptual structure is inherently fragile at its boundaries, with bodily orifices symbolizing points of heightened vulnerability. The substances emitted from these orifices—such as blood, feces, saliva, and others—serve as quintessential marginal materials, encapsulating the constant threat of contamination. However, Douglas warns against considering "bodily

margins in isolation from all other margins" (2001 [1966], p. 122), emphasizing the interconnectedness of various forms of boundary and exclusion.

In *Dieu d'eau*, Griaule (1975 [1948], p. 146) describes how Dogon women, during their menstrual period—a liminal phase of seclusion—retreat to round huts (symbolizing the womb) at the village's edge. Their impurity is mediated by rituals prescribing obligatory paths and prohibited actions. Though marginal, their temporary dwelling is interpreted by Griaule (1972 [1948], p. 148) as organically functional—part of a broader system ensuring the integrity of the societal body, where all institutions find their place, where none of them remain on the margins, "however divergent it might seem and however incompletely understood" (ibid.).

Foucault (1986, p. 24) terms these liminal spaces "heterotopias"—real, socially instituted spaces (unlike utopias). In "primitive societies" (ibid.) such marginal spaces acted as crisis heterotopias: sacred or forbidden zones reserved for individuals in critical life stages, like the aforementioned Dogon women, adolescents, women in labor, or the ill. In modern societies, heterotopias of deviation dominate—spaces for those deemed deviant (prisons and psychiatric hospitals being prime examples). However, heterotopias (socially instituted margins), by their very existence, carry the seed of contestation against the center (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

Deprived of ritual or symbolic means to reconstitute the social body's order, heterotopic margins persist as unsettling zones dismissed as "natural" byproducts of "progress". For Agamben (1997, p. 114), it is the extermination camp (perhaps the extreme margin of civilization?) that provides a hidden matrix for the "dislocating localization" of contemporary politics. This logic manifests today "into the *zones d'attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities" (Agamben, 1997, p. 118)—spaces that host what Bauman (2003) calls "wasted lives", collateral victims of presumed globalized economic progress. Paradigmatic are de-territorialized migrants, individuals excluded from the system, whom political power seeks to manage through the camp's dislocating logic, as "the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land" is no longer sufficient (Agamben, 1997, p. 118).

Agamben's notion of *dislocating localization*—spaces where sovereignty enacts exclusion through territorial fragmentation—manifests in both urban nomadic encampments and geographically remote indigenous reserves, as Leonardo Piasere (2006, p. 12) argues. These territorial concessions operate through a logic of exclusive inclusion: a paradoxical framework that grants nominal belonging while enforcing segregation (ibid.). Such spaces demarcate stark boundaries between their inhabitants and the surrounding soci-

ety, fracturing the nation-state's territorial coherence into discontinuities, ruptures, and symbolic wounds (ibid.). Beyond the expressive power of these concepts, the continued relevance of the margins should draw our attention to the performative nature of exclusionary practices and policies. These are no longer mere exceptions that validate a rule; instead, it is the persistence of exceptionality within the very rules that shape our daily lives, manifesting through the management of the peripheral and the liminal.

Embodied marginality

Marginal space is not merely a product of socio-economic dynamics but a field of forces that materialize in the body, shaping perceptions, aspirations, and identities. The anthropological approach of embodiment, developed by scholars such as Thomas Csordas (1990), allows us to explore how experiences of marginality are lived, internalized, and contested through corporeality. Csordas defines embodiment as a process in which the body is not simply an object of study but the very subject of culture—the existential medium of being in the world (1990, p. 5). This phenomenological grounding reveals how marginality is inscribed onto bodies as both a material condition and a lived experience, where the marginalized navigate spatial exclusion through their very flesh. From this perspective, bodies are not passive containers of exclusion but active sites where marginality is both imposed and resisted—a tension exemplified in the everyday struggles of those relegated to urban peripheries.

The work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) on the concept of the body is fundamental in this regard. The authors distinguish three dimensions: the individual body (phenomenological experience), the social body (a symbol of collective order or disorder), and the political body (an object of institutional control). In marginalized contexts, these dimensions collide: the body of a migrant, for instance, simultaneously becomes a suffering body (experiencing precariousness on an individual level), a threatening body (socially perceived as deviant), and a body-to-be-managed (a target of securitarian policies). This tripartite oppression exemplifies Judith Butler's argument that precarity/marginality is politically fabricated, rendering certain lives "ungrievable" (Butler, 2009, p. 38)—excluded from the symbolic and political frameworks that determine whose lives are publicly mourned, and thus never fully recognized as lives at all—while simultaneously making other bodies hypervisible as threats, thereby legitimizing their surveillance and control. This differential exposure to violence underscores the state's role in delineating whose lives are deemed worthy of protection and whose deaths are rendered inconsequential (Butler, 2015). The fragmentation is further com-

pounded by Spivak's (1988) epistemic violence: the imposition of categories that reduce individuals to bodies stripped of history and knowledge, confining them to spaces of non-belonging. The silencing of marginalized bodies facilitates their representation as threats, justifying institutional mechanisms of criminalization—whether applied to undesirable migrants or residents of stigmatized poor neighborhoods. As Fanon (1952) observed, such dehumanization is somatic: racialized bodies are not only disciplined through policies of exclusion and segregation but also through the internalization of spatial hierarchies, shaping self-perception and movement within social space.

Michael Herzfeld's *The Body Impolitic* (2004) deepens the anthropological understanding of embodiment by illustrating how artisanal knowledge and bodily practices operate as situated forms of resistance within global hierarchies of value. Drawing from ethnographic work in Crete and Thailand, Herzfeld explores how traditional artisans—through gestures, silences, and techniques of the body—perform a corporeal ethic of silence, dissimulation, and mimetic resistance that defies technocratic norms. These practices, often deemed *impolitical*, disrupt the rationalizing impulses of state and market, offering a poignant example of how marginality is both imposed and reproduced. Herzfeld shows how artisans' embodied forms of self-presentation—craftiness, secrecy, and learned opacity—are shaped by overlapping logics of masculinity, nationalism, and globalization. The body, in this context, becomes a terrain where the ethics of independence clash with the exclusions of modernity. Herzfeld's work underscores the importance of situating the embodiment of marginality within multilevel dynamics, where global appreciation for cultural heritage coexists with the economic devaluation and social containment of its producers.

A significant contribution to understanding embodied marginality and its spatial implications comes from Cecilia McCallum's (2005) research on Salvador de Bahia. The city's racial and class divisions shape the perception of urban space according to the social position of the bodies that inhabit and traverse it. The city's buses, for example, transform throughout the day, reflecting shifting social compositions: during hours when they are filled with white students and employees, they become spaces that embody dominant whiteness. Conversely, in the early morning and late evening, when passengers are predominantly lower-income, darker-skinned workers, these same spaces visibly represent poverty and marginalization. This racialized choreography of bodies illustrates how urban infrastructure becomes a stage for the performance of exclusion—a dynamic where marginalized bodies are both excluded from and constitutive of the city's spatial order.

Feminist critiques of visual regimes in urban space further illuminate how bodies negotiate marginality. Gillian Rose (1993) demonstrates how the "male gaze" in a patriarchal city structures the experience of urban spaces, allowing men to maintain the illusion of being free from the body, while women experience a heightened awareness of their corporeal visibility (*ibid.*, pp. 144–146). Marginalization thus stems not only from direct oppression but from the pervasive influence of other bodies—even at a distance—and is embodied through what Csordas (1993) calls "somatic modes of attention": intersubjective ways of self-definition that involve attunement to the bodies of others. For queer migrants or sex workers, this attunement operates as a survival strategy in spaces where their bodies are simultaneously fetishized and policed—a dual dynamic of hypervisibility and discipline that Puar (2017) identifies as central to biopolitical control over racialized and gendered bodies.

Drawing on the examples provided by McCallum (2005) and Rose (1993), Jaffe and de Koning (2023, pp. 68–71) illustrate how urban marginality is inherently intersectional, with gender, class, racial perceptions, age, and religion functioning as social markers only when considered in relation to one another (cf. hooks, 2003, pp. 94–105). Their critique of the masculine illusion of freedom discussed by Rose (1993) emphasizes that such freedom is accessible only to those who embody dominance within the social hierarchy. In Europe, this might apply to middle-class white men between the ages of thirty and sixty—but only within *their* spaces. If these same men were to enter a Parisian *banlieue*, they might experience visceral discomfort—nausea, a class-coded somatic response—rendering them acutely aware of their (relative) marginality (Jaffe, de Koning, 2023, pp. 68–71). This reversal highlights how spatial belonging is not fixed but contingent, as even privileged bodies can become momentarily out of place—experiencing a marginal displacement that unsettles the illusion of a stable spatial order (Cresswell, 1996).

Locating marginality: Borders, ambiguity, and social differentiation

The spatial dimension of marginality, as discussed so far, does not merely refer to peripheral locations or embodied experience, but often becomes a site of social negotiation and production of difference. One of the most insightful ethnographic explorations of this dynamic is offered by Sarah Green (2005), whose research in Pogoni, on the Greek-Albanian border, challenges the idea of marginality as clear spatial separation. While scholars such as Herzfeld (2004) have emphasized how marginality emerges through symbolic inversion and normative hierarchies that contrast the *peripheral* with the *cen-*

tral—often in relation to globally defined regimes of value—Green offers a distinct theoretical perspective. She conceptualizes marginality as a relational gap: not defined by distinctiveness and separation, but by ambiguity, instability, and the overlapping of classificatory, political, and experiential discourses. The border, in this perspective, is not a fixed line between self and other, but a zone of continuous negotiation where belonging and exclusion are fluid and contested.

Green shows, for instance, that categories of belonging in the area are influenced not merely by whether people cross borders, but by how their movements are interpreted within varying historical and social frameworks (Green, 2005, p. 67). She also examines how institutional mechanisms—such as land use classifications and population statistics—do not merely reflect administrative concerns, but actively participate in constructing what counts as local or foreign, central or marginal (Green, 2005, p. 199). Moreover, development discourses promoted through EU funding reinforce such distinctions by embedding them in technocratic procedures. As Green notes, "[the border] did not imply a fixed or essential difference between two sides" (Green, 2005, p. 231), and "the marginality of this place was reconstructed once again, and it was both the same and different from what had come before" (p. 248).

The idea that spatial marginality is produced through social differentiation has also been central to other anthropological studies. We cannot fail to mention Fredrik Barth's seminal work (1998 [1969]) on ethnicity, which introduced a critical distinction between physical *borders*—geographical demarcations—and symbolic *boundaries*, understood as socially constructed interfaces through which identities are negotiated[4]. His emphasis on the relational and processual nature of group formation laid the groundwork for numerous studies of boundary-making. For example, building on this perspective, Kjetil Tronvoll (2009) and Aurora Massa (2021) have shown how the Eritrean–Ethiopian border operates as both a material and symbolic mechanism for defining belonging, regulating visibility, and producing inclusion or exclusion. In these contexts, marginality is not a passive residue but a politically and socially constructed condition, embedded in everyday struggles over recognition, legitimacy, and classification.

---

4 Although widely recognized as a turning point in the anthropology of ethnicity, the volume has also been critiqued for reinforcing the association between ethnic identity formation and non-Western or "exotic" settings (Jakoubek, 2025).

94

Margins in motion: Embodied resistance and urban informality

In urban peripheries, actions that may seem mundane—such as a street vendor occupying a sidewalk or a migrant community reclaiming an abandoned building—become acts of embodied resistance. These practices, emerging from conditions of marginality, challenge the rigid binaries of visibility and invisibility, transforming public space into a contested terrain where exclusion is simultaneously enforced and subverted. Asef Bayat's (2013) concept of quiet encroachment captures this dynamic: a form of gradual, unstructured resistance through which marginalized groups claim space and resources without adhering to formal political structures. Unlike organized movements, quiet encroachment operates in the gaps of urban governance, relying on flexibility, opportunism, and discretion to subtly reconfigure power relations.

This ongoing negotiation of urban space aligns with Simone's (2004) notion of *people as infrastructure*, which reinterprets informal practices not merely as survival strategies but as active processes of urban transformation. In contexts where official infrastructures are absent or exclusionary, marginalized populations become the connective tissue of the city, building alternative networks through informal economies, reciprocal care systems, and collective spatial practices. Bayat (2013) specifically examines how street vendors in cities such as Cairo and Tehran reshape urban economies by informally occupying sidewalks and public spaces, circumventing state regulations while embedding themselves into the urban fabric. Meanwhile, Roy (2005) and McFarlane (2011) focus on the emergence of informal settlements in Latin America and Southeast Asia, arguing that these spaces are not simply precarious shelters but active reconfigurations of the urban landscape, where residents construct housing and infrastructure in response to the failures of state planning. These everyday acts transcend mere functionality, embodying what Lefebvre (1968) termed the right to the city—a political claim to urban belonging enacted through lived spatial practices.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Rome, where housing squats exemplify these dynamics. Cacciotti (2020) examines the case of Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs, a former state-owned building repurposed by housing activists and residents facing precarious living conditions. Beyond providing shelter to marginalized populations, the occupation transformed the space into a community hub, hosting cultural events, workshops, and social services. Such initiatives challenge dominant conceptions of property and urban governance, asserting the right of occupants to inhabit and redefine urban spaces.

Olcuire (2024; 2019) explores Quarticciolo, a Roman suburb marked by systemic political and social exclusion. Residents labeled two buildings, once inhabited by squatters, as

the *favela*— a term which, in that context, reflected their stigmatization by both the neighborhood and outsiders. However, within these spaces, a unique form of solidarity had developed, as precarious living conditions created a shared experience of marginality and illegality. This collective condition leveled the playing field, making it difficult to distinguish between individuals in terms of legitimacy or rights. In this context, the *favela* became a space of negotiation and coexistence, where the boundaries of marginality were continuously reshaped.

The struggle for spatial belonging is shaped by a constant tension between hypervisibility and erasure. On the one hand, state crackdowns on informality render marginalized bodies hypervisible as problems, reinforcing narratives of disorder and justifying increased surveillance and policing. On the other, communities navigate exclusion through strategic invisibility—evading control, adapting spatial tactics, or operating in provisional spaces to avoid displacement. This constant negotiation between visibility and concealment, as Bayat (2013) suggests, constitutes a politics of presence: a form of belonging that does not always manifest as open resistance but unfolds through everyday acts of persistence and adaptation.

Crucially, informality is not just a spatial condition but a form of knowledge production. While Roy (2005) highlights how informal settlements challenge dominant urban planning paradigms, McFarlane (2011) conceptualizes them as sites of learning practices, where marginalized groups actively develop and circulate knowledge to navigate precarious urban environments. Through collective problem-solving, material improvisation, and shared expertise, these actors reshape urban life within marginal spaces. Marginality thus emerges not as a passive condition, but as a space of ongoing negotiation—one in which the body itself becomes both a site of vulnerability and a tool of resistance.

Conclusions: The multiscalar fabric of marginality

The concept of the margin, analyzed through a dual anthropological lens—as both a symbolic space and an embodied socio-historical construct—remains a structurally essential feature of contemporary societies. As recent studies have emphasized, marginality cannot be reduced to a passive and peripheral spatiality. Rather, it functions as a field of forces where identities, power, and resistance are constantly negotiated (cf. Low, 2017). The symbolic dimension of the margin, deeply rooted in oppositional categories such as purity and impurity (Douglas, 1966), is continually reactivated in globalized urban contexts through practices of spatial exclusion.

The perspective of embodiment, on the other hand, highlights how marginality is inscribed onto bodies that both endure and contest social hierarchies. Fassin (2018) describes securitarian policies as mechanisms that produce *suspended* bodies, forcing migrants to reproduce their own exclusion through strategies of invisibility—such as hiding, remaining silent, or avoiding public spaces to escape repression or deportation (Fassin, 2018, p. 60).

At the same time, practices such as squatting in abandoned buildings, as shown by the two aforementioned ethnographic cases in Rome, highlight how marginal spaces can be reactivated as sites of collective resistance. Numerous other studies in different urban contexts could be added to these examples, demonstrating similar dynamics. These actions, often interpreted as disorder, reflect a kind of "informal urbanism" (Simone & Pieterse, 2017), composed of everyday tactics for surviving a system that marginalizes bodies that do not conform to neoliberal dictates.

While this article has emphasized the embodied and spatial dimensions of marginality, it is crucial to further acknowledge its multiscalar production. Marginality is not merely the effect of spatial exclusion or local policy failures but the outcome of transformations operating across interconnected scales. It does not concern only the devaluation of embodied local knowledge (Herzfeld, 2004), but also involves the fragmentation of welfare systems and the moralization of social protection. In her ethnography of volunteer labor in Northern Italy, Muehlebach (2012) highlights how neoliberal governance mobilizes unpaid relational work—particularly among elderly leftist activists—not simply as a means of service provision, but as a strategy to moralize the shrinking welfare state and re-legitimize public care through affective engagement. This dynamic produces what she analytically frames as *ethical citizenship*: a regime in which moral obligation and emotional commitment supplant rights-based entitlements, reshaping the very terms of belonging to the social body. These ethical subjectivities, far from resisting neoliberalism, become indispensable tools for its reproduction—channeling virtue, duty, and care into a depoliticized form of civic participation. As Peck and Theodore (2007, p. 753) argue, "variegated capitalism" is not governed by a single logic, but by uneven and evolving configurations of market rule that are institutionally embedded and spatially differentiated. In this sense, marginality is not only lived and embodied, but also institutionalized through affective and moral economies (Fassin, 2009) that legitimize new exclusions and unpaid forms of labor.

In sum, conceptually, the margin persists not as a residue, but as a constitutive element of the social order, sustained by mechanisms that naturalize inequalities. However, it

also represents a space of possibility: wherever marginalized bodies challenge hegemonic temporalities (Saitta, 2019) and geographies of power, fissures emerge through which alternative forms of coexistence can be re-imagined. Anthropology, in this sense, must not limit itself to documenting exclusion but should critically interrogate the processes that produce it, recognizing that margins are not an "elsewhere", but rather a heterotopic mirror of our own modernity.

References

Aceska, A., Heer, B., & Kaiser-Grolimund, A. (2019). Doing the city from the margins: Critical perspectives on urban marginality. *Anthropological Forum*, *29*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2019.1588100

Agamben, G. (1997). The camp as the nomos of the modern. In H. de Vries & S. Weber (Eds.), *Violence, identity, and self-determination* (pp. 106-118). Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2003). *State of exception*. University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (1951). The origins of totalitarianism. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Barth, F. (Ed.)(1998 [1969]). Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference. Waveland Press.

Bauman, Z. (2003). Wasted lives: Modernity and its outcasts. Polity Press.

Butler, J. (2009). Frames of war: When is life grievable? Verso.

Butler, J. (2015). Notes toward a performative theory of assembly. Harvard University Press.

Cacciotti, C. (2020). When squatting becomes "stable precarity": The case of Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs, Rome. *Visual Ethnography, 9*(2), 45-66. http://dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2019.1-0143

Caldeira, T. (2000). City of walls: Crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo. University of California Press.

Cresswell, T. (1996). In place/out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression. University of Minnesota Press.

Csordas, T. (1990). Embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology. *Ethos, 18*(1), 5-47. https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1990.18.1.02a00010

Csordas, T. (1993). Somatic modes of attention. *Cultural Anthropology, 8*(2), 135-156. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1993.8.2.02a00010

Douglas, M. (1986). *How institutions think*. Syracuse University Press.

Douglas, M. (2001 [1966]). Purity and danger. An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo. Routledge.

Fanon, F. (1952). *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Seuil. [English translation: *Black skin, white masks*, 2008, Pluto Press].

Fassin, D. (2009). Les économies morales revisitées. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, 64*(6), 1237-1266. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0395264900027499

Fassin, D. (2018). Life: A critical user's manual. Polity Press.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics, 16*(1), 22-27. https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

Green, S. (2005). Notes from the Balkans: Locating marginality and ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian border. Princeton University Press.

Griaule, M. (1975 [1948]). Conversations with Ogotemmêli; an introduction to Dogon religious ideas. Oxford University Press.

Grosfoguel, R. (2000). Developmentalism, modernity, and dependency theory in Latin America. *Nepantla, 1*, 347-374.

Harvey, D. (2009 [1973]). *Social justice and the city*. The University of Georgia Press.

Herzfeld, M. (2004). The body impolitic: Artisans and artifice in the global hierarchy of value. The University of Chicago Press.

hooks, b. (2003). The oppositional gaze: Black female spectators. The feminism and visual culture reader. Routledge.

Jaffe, R., & de Koning, A. (2022). Introducing urban anthropology (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Jakoubek, M. (2025). Fredrik Barth's Saxon ancestor and anthropology of Europe. *Anthropological Notebooks, 31*(1), 26-47. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15435739

Kokoreff, M. (2009). Ghettos et marginalité urbaine. Lectures croisées de Didier Lapeyronnie et Loïc Wacquant. *Revue française de sociologie, 50*(3), 553-572. https://doi.org/10.3917/rfs.503.0553

Lancione, M. (2016). The assemblage of life at the margins. In M. Lancione (Ed.), Rethinking life at the margins. The assemblage of contexts, subjects and politics (pp. 3-26). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315606118

Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le droit à la ville*. Anthropos. [English translation: *The Right to the City*, 1996, Blackwell.]

Lefebvre, H. (2004). Rhythmanalysis: Space, time, and everyday life. Continuum.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*. Puf.

Low, S. (2017). Spatializing culture: The ethnography of space and place. Routledge.

Machado da Silva, L. A. (2002). A Continuidade do probema de favela. In L. Lippi Oliveira (Ed.), *Cidade: Historia e desafios* (pp. 220-237). Fundação Gertulio.

Malighetti, R. (2019). Exception and resistance in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. *Tracce Urbane, 5*, 73-89. https://doi.org/10.13133/2532-6562_3.5.14559

Massa, A. (2021). Intrecci di frontiera. Percorsi, speranza e incertezze nelle migrazioni tra Eritrea ed Etiopia. CISU editore.

McCallum, C. (2005). Racialized bodies, naturalized classes: Moving through the city of Salvador da Bahia. *American Ethnologist, 32*(1), 100-117. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2005.32.1.100

McFarlane, C. (2011). Learning the city: Knowledge and translocal assemblage. Wiley-Blackwell.

Muhelbach, A. (2012). The moral neoliberal: Welfare and citizenship in Italy. The University of Chicago Press.

Olcuire, S. (2019). Quarticciolo, the perfect dimension. Decay, coexistence and resistance in a Roman ecosystem. *Lo Squaderno, 53*, 27-31.

Olcuire, S. (2024). Mapping relational ecologies of degrado. The case of sex work in Rome. *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa, 1*, 143-166. https://doi.org/10.3240/113463

Park, R. E. (1928). Human migration and the marginal man. *American Journal of Sociology, 33(6)*, 881-893. https://doi.org/10.1086/214592

Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2007). Variegated capitalism. *Progress in human geography, 31*(6), 731-772. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132507083505

Perlman, J. E. (1975). Rio's favelas and the myth of marginality. *Politics & Society, 5*, 131-160. https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927500500201

Perlman, J. E. (1976). The myth of marginality: Urban poverty and politics in Rio de Janeiro. University of California Press.

Piasere, L. (2006). Che cos'è un campo nomadi. *Achab. Rivista di antropologia, 8*, 8-16.

Puar, J. K. (2017). The right to maim: Debility, capacity, disability. Duke University Press.

Quijano, A., Westwell, P. (1983). Imperialism and marginality in Latin America. *Latin America Perspectives, 10(2/3)*, 76-85. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X8301000205

Rose, G. (1993). Feminism and geography: The limits of geographical knowledge. Polity Press.

Roy, A. (2005). Urban informality: Toward an epistemology of planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association, 71*(2), 147-158. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360508976689

Saitta, P. (2019). Sui margini. Note intorno a un oggetto problematico. *Tracce Urbane, 5*, 59-72. https://doi.org/10.13133/2532-6562_3.5.14560

Scheper-Hughes, N., & Lock, M. (1987). The mindful body: A prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly, 1*(1), 6-41. https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.1987.1.1.02a00020

Simone, A. (2004). People as Infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture, 16*(3), 407-429. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-407

Simone, A., & Pieterse, E. (2017). New urban worlds: Inhabiting dissonant times. Polity Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.

Thieme, T., Lancione, M., & Rosa, E. (2017). The city and its margins: Ethnographic challenges across makeshift urbanism: Introduction. *City*, *21*(2), 127-134. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1353331

Tissot, S. (2007). The role of race and class in urban marginality. *City*, *11*(3), 364-369. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810701669017

Tronvoll, K. (2009). War and the politics of identity in Ethiopia: The making of enemies and allies in the horn of Africa. Boydell and Brewer.

Wacquant, L. (2008). Urban outcasts: A comparative sociology of advanced marginality. Polity Press.

Povzetek

Vsebina članka raziskuje vztrajnost pojmov margina in marginalnost kot analitični kategoriji in življenjski danosti. Besedilo se sprašuje, zakaj omenjena koncepta ostajajta tako globoko zasidrana v javnem diskurzu, kljub ponavljajočim se znanstvenim prizadevanjem za poudarjanje njune poroznosti in relacijske narave. Obstoj marginalnosti je tudi ukoreninjen v njeni simbolni razsežnosti, ki presega čas in različne družbe ter oblikuje načine, skozi katere se izključevanje vzpostavlja in legitimira. V dobi postindustrijskega kapitalizma se ta simbolna razsežnost prepleta z večnivojskimi dinamikami upravljanja in vrednotenja ter prispeva k naturalizaciji diskurzov o diferenciranem državljanstvu in neenakem dostopu do pravic ter virov. Marginalnost ni pasivno ali periferno stanje, temveč deluje kot dinamično polje pogajanj, kjer se prepletajo izključevanje, odpor in preživetje. Pregledni članek pojasnjuje kako marginalizirana telesa krmarijo po urbanem prostoru in nihajo med hiper-vidnostjo in vsiljeno nevidnostjo ter kako neformalne urbane prakse izzivajo prevladujoče prostorske in politične rede. Z analizo procesov, kot so prostorsko izključevanje, varnostno naravnano upravljanje in neformalne oblike bivanja v določenem mestu, članek poudarja, da je marginalnost hkrati vsiljena kot tudi izpodbijana. Razumevanje vztrajnosti marginalnosti zahteva preseganje fiksnih teritorialnih kategorij, prepoznavanje meja kot dvoumnih območij in margin kot prostorov delovanja, dvoumnosti in družbenih sprememb.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: margine, utelešeni odpor, prostorska izključitev, politika prisotnosti, urbana marginalnost

CORRESPONDENCE: Mario Marasco, DICEA Department, Sapienza University of Rome, Via Eudossiana 18, 00184 Roma. E-mail: mario.marasco@uniroma1.it, mario.-marasco@hotmail.it