

Glossary / Glossaire / Glossar Border Studies

# Periphery

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Peripheral to what or where, and for how long? Periphery is necessarily a relationship...

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From rural outlying areas to peripheries amidst urban regions, the term periphery is examined as a place, a concept, and a dynamic state in this glossary listing. The notions of peripheralization and former peripheries are likewise addressed.

## Periphery

In its most basic sense, periphery refers to a spatial locational relationship, as in periphery and center. Periphery has typically connoted remote, outlying areas that are far from central cities. It has been used to depict spaces of distance and difference (Paasi 1995). In geography, sociology, and economics, periphery can depict social, cultural, and environmental relationships as well as development models (Gerhard and Gamerith 2017, p.249). Thus, in a broader context, a city can be both a center and part of a periphery.

Colonialism, the world wars, rural and urban relationships, and economic trade have been formative in the concept of periphery. Likewise, an important aspect involves to what extent periphery constitutes a static concept or a dynamic process, as in peripheralization.

In discussing the evolution of the regional concept, Agnew (2018, p.27) traces global or “world-regional” narratives historically, in which periphery has been used to refer to formerly colonized countries. In the world systems theory, for instance, the core generally referred to Europe, and the periphery to its colonies. Semi-periphery countries were, accordingly, seen as being in the process of moving up in the world system (ibid). Post-colonial and decolonial scholars have critically addressed the Eurocentric and racist nature of many such models (Chakrabarty, 2008). In truth, conditions attributed to a core or periphery are more fragmented globally. A nation such as the United States may be a central economic player in the world economy, yet peripheral on aspects related to the environment or social programs for its residents in poverty (Gerhard and Gamerith, 2017). In addition, episodic events such as extreme weather events (e.g. Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans) and infrastructure crashes can reveal underlying societal conditions and influence our perceptions of periphery – especially in so-called modern, industrialized nations.

The concept of periphery has been a major part of land use planning as well as academic explorations of observable regional development patterns. A variety of center-periphery models permeate many hierarchical spatial planning systems, such as the influence of Christaller’s central place theory in Germany (Christaller, 1933). Focusing mainly on the national level, Friedmann (1966) developed an influential core-periphery model on the complex relationships between remote regions and more dominant, growth-oriented ones. Economists such as Krugman (1991) have explored the observable spatial patterns of economic activity, e.g. what one might frequently observe from outer space. Krugman’s model addresses locational decisions, or what determines whether a country’s industrial activity and population are spatially clustered (in a ‘core’ region) or deconcentrated in the periphery. Such models have motivated a wide variety of city-region research, for example the “functional complementarity” between London’s core and regional periphery (Pain, 2008).

Periphery has emerged as a major concept in rural development as well (Barlösius and Neu, 2008; Kühn and Weck, 2012; Dünkler et al., 2019). Here, too, the urban, as a point of reference, requires the concept of periphery, as in the ability of rural dwellers in peripheral regions to access urban centers (Stein et al., 2016), but this relationship is being challenged more and more. Changing urban-rural dependencies, in light of digitalization and renewable energy sources (largely rural), are affecting notions of periphery. In contemporary post-industrial society, some rural peripheries may be in the process of renewal in connection with rural innovation and the knowledge economy (Stein et al., 2016). Indeed, peripheral areas arguably generate innovation just as urban ones, despite a common “urban innovation bias” (Shearmur, 2019).

Small cities in peripheral locations recently have also garnered attention. The subject of a federal German spatial planning study, for instance, concludes that small cities in peripheral locations have substantially different structures, regional dependencies, and external influences (BBSR, 2019). Their peripheralization, in some cases, is transpiring due to changing economic, technical, and demographic trends. Peripheralization refers to the dynamic social process of “making” cities and regions peripheral (Kühn and Weck, 2012, p.14).

Frequently and historically, the geographic periphery of one nation borders the periphery of one or more other nations, creating periphery-periphery cross-border dynamics. The more restrictive borders have

tended to discourage investment and remain peripheral, but along more open borders cross-border municipal cooperation and interaction can be seen, such as along the Swedish-Finnish border (Paasi & Prokkola, 2008). Border peripheries are also addressed by European Union funding schemes that aim to encourage cross-border cooperation and innovation, including among groups of border regions (see Hjaltadóttir, Makkonen and Mitze, 2019). Especially in light of the socially constructed complexities of border areas, Paasi (1995, p.25) argues, “peripherality is, or should be, a contextual category”.

Finally, the dynamic state of being peripheral, in any sense, logically includes the possibility for its own undoing. The German term “Entperiphisierung” (undoing the peripheralization or “unperipheralization”) has been applied, for example, to the polycentric booming northern Oberschwaben (Upper Swabia) part of the Lake Constance region. The Upper Swabia area is peripheral in several senses (e.g. poor train access, far from a major metropolitan center), yet it has notably built upon its collective strengths through coordinated regional economic development (Köhler, 2012; Danielzyk, Köhler and Friedsmann, 2017).

Thus, once a periphery need not mean always a periphery. The term periphery itself will likely remain dynamic in its use and meaning.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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