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Thinking the Periphery Without a Center: From the Produced Periphery to a Producing Space

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Research Article

Keywords: Periphery, Center–Periphery Relations, Incubating Space, Relational Space, Production of Space

Posted Date: November 20th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11575998/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This article aims to reconceptualize the periphery beyond its conventional dependence on the center, examining its capacity to generate new forms. Drawing on conceptual history, genealogical critique, postcolonial approaches, and relational spatial theories, the study demonstrates that peripheral spaces are not merely produced through center–periphery relations but can become productive themselves. Its central theoretical contribution is the concept of "incubating space," defined through five dimensions: local specificity, relational openness, autonomous production, horizontal circulation, and plural futures. The article concludes that the periphery can generate distinctive social, political, cultural, economic, and aesthetic forms under specific relational and historical conditions.

Introduction

The periphery figures among the concepts most frequently invoked in studies of political, social, and cultural transformation. Yet it rarely appears there as a historical category demanding scrutiny; more often it serves as a given point of reference, one that describes social reality and is defined against the center. The meanings now attached to the periphery — backwardness, dependence on the center, conservatism, localism — are not properties that have existed unchanged across history. They are ways of making sense of space, produced within specific historical processes. The task, then, is not to settle what the periphery is, but to explain the historical and epistemic conditions under which it became thinkable in its present sense. Understood this way, the periphery cannot be treated merely as an element of administrative organization or as the geographic counterpart of cultural and social difference. It must be approached instead as a spatial category produced within particular configurations of knowledge and power.

The literature on the periphery draws on a range of theoretical orientations, though it can be grouped, roughly, into five approaches. The modernizationist-developmentalist perspective comes first, positioning the periphery as an area lagging behind the center in economic development, urbanization, political institutionalization, and standards of civilization. A second body of work, centered on cultural representation, identity, and belonging, associates the periphery with tradition, naturalness, and authenticity, while also showing how local identities are continually reshaped through changing social and spatial relations (Chakrabarty, 2000; Said, 1979; Williams, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2003; Massey, 2001, 2008). Postcolonial and critical approaches question these frameworks, treating the periphery less as a passive environment subjected to the center's domination than as a site where alternative knowledge, social relations, and political practices can take shape (Scott, 1990, 1998; Chakrabarty, 2000; Quijano, 2007, 2024; Lefebvre, 2003, 2009, 2014). A fourth approach treats the periphery as a historical and epistemic construction, asking under what historical conditions particular places came to be classified as "periphery," "hinterland," "backward," or in need of modernization; its focus falls on how practices of representation, mapping, census-taking, classification, standardization, and administrative centralization have historically produced spatial difference (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b; Said, 1979; Anderson, 1983; Scott, 1998; Tilly, 1992; Deringil, 2003, 2014). The fifth, working from relational space and the production of

space, conceptualizes center and periphery not as pre-given geographic units but as spatialities produced reciprocally within social, economic, and political relations (Lefebvre, 2003, 2009, 1991; Massey, 2001, 2008; Harvey, 1992, 2003, 2000; Brenner, 2004; Lipietz, 2003). Each of these, in its own way, makes the case that the center-periphery divide cannot be treated as a natural or unchanging geographic opposition.

These approaches establish, convincingly, that the periphery cannot be thought of as a natural or self-evident category. This study, however, does not set out from the claim that the literature has explained the periphery wrongly. The real difficulty lies elsewhere: showing how the periphery was historically produced, how local difference has managed to persist against central domination, or how spaces come into being relationally does not by itself explain the conditions under which such difference becomes capable of generating new forms. The relational approach to space is especially useful here — it releases center and periphery from being fixed, opposing categories and lets us think of space instead as a plural, open-ended process, continually formed through the encounter of different histories, relations, and trajectories. What relational becoming does not explain, though, is the condition under which this relational particularity turns into a cultural, social, political, economic, or aesthetic capacity to produce. Starting from this gap, the study aims to conceptualize not the periphery defined against or relative to the center, but the conditions under which the periphery's own historical and relational particularity can be converted into a productive capacity.

The theoretical intervention this article makes, then, does not stop at asking how the periphery is produced; it pushes further, toward what the periphery can produce and under what conditions. Put differently, the concern here is not with preserving spatial difference, or with how such difference comes about relationally, but with the conditions under which it turns productive. Scott's emphasis on local and experiential knowledge, Lefebvre's account of the social production of space and spatial difference, and Massey's attention to relational, plural, open-ended spatiality together supply the theoretical ground on which this study rests. Even so, the question driving it is not how local difference survives against central domination, how space is produced within social relations, or how different spatial trajectories coexist. What matters is the condition under which this difference, and the relations that sustain it, becomes capable of generating new forms.

To answer this, the article proposes the concept of the incubating space. What it aims to capture is that the spatial particularity formed through the encounter of different historical and social elements does more than reproduce itself relationally — it can also generate new cultural, political, social, economic, and aesthetic forms. The central claim advanced here is that overcoming the center-periphery hierarchy does not mean putting the periphery in the center's place and inverting the existing order. It means overcoming the concentration, in a single center, of the capacity to produce, to be recognized, to circulate, and to build futures. On these terms, the concept of the incubating space offers a way of thinking about the periphery as a constitutive spatiality — one able to generate new forms out of its own historical and relational particularity without having to become a center itself. The periphery's analytical visibility is thus grounded not in its distance from the center, its resistance to central domination, or the

set of relations it maintains with the center, but in its capacity to turn its own historical and relational particularity into new forms.

In this respect, the incubating space draws on the theoretical resources offered by Scott, Lefebvre, and, above all, Massey, without being identical to any of them. Massey's relational approach to space explains the encounter of different spatial trajectories, their plurality, their open-endedness; the incubating space takes this relational ground and pushes the analytical emphasis further — from how space comes into being to what kinds of new forms that becoming can generate. The concept on offer here is less an alternative to relational space than an extension of it, carrying its theoretical openings into the question of productive capacity through five dimensions: local specificity, relational openness, autonomous production, horizontal circulation, and plural futures. Read this way, the article's principal contribution lies in conceptualizing the periphery not merely as a "produced" spatiality, but as a constitutive one — capable, under given conditions, of producing and of generating different possible futures.

The article unfolds in three parts. The first builds the conceptual and theoretical framework needed to understand the historical and epistemic constitution of the periphery, drawing on conceptual history, genealogical critique, and postcolonial approaches. The second carries this framework into the mechanisms of historical production, examining the processes of centralization, classification, temporalization, and spatial hierarchy that made the modern periphery possible. The third turns the question around: building on the relations of production laid out in the first two parts, it asks not simply how the periphery is produced, but under what conditions a produced spatiality can develop a productive capacity of its own. Here the concept of the incubating space is developed, articulated through local specificity, relational openness, autonomous production, horizontal circulation, and plural futures. The argument as a whole moves through three stages: from the conceptual constitution of the periphery, to its historical production, to a final rethinking of the produced periphery as a producing spatiality.

1. Thinking the Periphery as an Epistemic Category: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Political concepts are not neutral labels attached to given facts. They are intellectual structures that make particular historical experiences visible and arrange them within specific frames of meaning. Understanding a concept therefore requires more than establishing what it denotes; it means asking through what historical transformations the concept came to carry that meaning. The periphery, approached this way, is less a fixed geographic or administrative category than a historical one — a category that, in the modern period, established a particular spatial hierarchy. This section sets out the conceptual and epistemic shifts that made this sense of the periphery possible.

The study begins with the semantic sensitivity offered by the tradition of conceptual history. Koselleck's approach shows that political and social concepts do not hold fixed meanings; their meanings shift with historical experience and social-political transformation. The Sattelzeit, roughly 1750 to 1850, marks a particular such shift: concepts came to carry expectations about the future as well as past experience, taking on more abstract, temporalized meanings. As collective singulars such as "History," "State," and

"Progress" gained strength, they opened the way for diverse social and spatial experiences to be reinterpreted within broader historical totalities (Brunner et al., 1982; Koselleck, 2002, 2009).

Within this frame, the periphery can be treated as a relational concept that gains meaning under specific historical conditions, rather than a fixed or natural spatial category. The question is not what the periphery is, but through what historical transformations it came to occupy a particular position relative to the center. Koselleck's analyses of Herrschaft and Landesherrschaft trace the shift of sovereignty from personal bonds of allegiance toward a more institutional, territorial form of political organization — a shift that reveals the historical conditions under which spaces were redefined within broader, centralized political totalities (Brunner et al., 1982).

As collective singulars like "State," "History," and "Progress" gained strength in the modern era, local and plural experiences began to be located within broader political and historical categories that exceeded them. In this process, the periphery stopped generating meaning on its own terms and became a category defined instead through its place within the central state, national history, and the idea of progress (Koselleck, 2009). Its meaning, then, was constituted not through spatial distance alone, but through its position within a given historical time and political whole.

Tracing the historical transformation of a concept's meaning, though, does not by itself explain the political function that concept serves in a given context. Skinner's contextualist approach fills this gap by asking not what concepts mean but what they do within particular historical settings. Concepts, on this view, are less descriptions of political reality than instruments of political intervention — they legitimize, constrain, or transform specific forms of action and authority (Skinner, 1969, 1978, 2002).

Seen this way, naming a place "periphery" does more than label a spatial position; it takes part in constituting the relation between center and periphery within a specific political meaning. To call a space peripheral is to give its status relative to the center a meaning within a given political order, not simply to describe it. Yet an approach focused on actors' linguistic interventions and the contextual use of concepts cannot, by itself, account for the wider apparatuses of knowledge and power that make the periphery possible in the first place.

Beyond the contextual and political functions of concepts lies the broader question of the knowledge and power relations that make them possible — and it is here that Foucault's genealogical critique offers a decisive analytical resource. Genealogy does not search for a concept's unchanging essence, true meaning, or pure origin. It asks instead through what historical conditions, regimes of knowledge, and power relations the categories we now take as natural and self-evident became possible at all. Genealogical analysis thus situates concepts and forms of knowledge within the power-knowledge (pouvoir-savoir) relations that produce them, asking which discourses come to count as true and which modes of producing knowledge become legitimate (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b).

Power here is more than a prohibitive or repressive force; it is a positive web of relations that produces particular objects, subjects, and fields of knowledge. Techniques of observation, record-keeping,

classification, and surveillance render social reality visible and governable within given categories (Foucault, 1980b). The genealogical gaze thus opens a further question beyond what a category means: through which practices of knowledge and administration did it become a possible, interventable object at all?

This frame allows the periphery to be examined as an object of knowledge produced within specific power-knowledge relations, rather than as a natural or given spatial category. The question is not what the periphery "really" is, but through which practices of knowledge and administration it was turned into an observed, classified, and interventable field. The periphery, in this light, is no longer simply a geographic space; it becomes a relational position about which modern forms of government produce knowledge, and through which that knowledge in turn organizes it (Foucault, 1980b, 1972).

Foucault's analysis, however, remains focused chiefly on Europe's internal history. Quijano's account of the "coloniality of power" extends this frame by making visible the relationship between modern political-epistemic categories and colonialism. Modernity and rationality, Quijano argues, did not develop independently of Europe's internal transformations; they took shape within global power relations that emerged alongside colonial domination. Europe's establishment of its own historical experience as the universal model of development, and the placement of other societies at varying stages relative to that model, meant that modernity produced a temporal and epistemic hierarchy at the same time as it produced everything else (Quijano, 2000, 2007, 2024).

From this vantage point, spatial difference gains meaning not simply as geographic distance but through a hierarchy that assigns different societies to different stages of the same historical time. As Europe became the norm for modernity and progress, the rest of the world was positioned against that norm as "backward," "traditional," or "undeveloped." Center and periphery thereby turned into political, economic, and epistemic relational positions produced by colonial modernity, rather than natural geographic locations. Quijano's point that coloniality can outlive colonial rule itself — persisting in forms of knowledge, economy, and social classification — shows that this hierarchy cannot be reduced to colonial administration alone (Quijano, 2007, 2024).

Read this way, the periphery is less an administrative or geographic zone outside the modern state's center than a relational position, one where spatial difference is made sense of through a temporal and epistemic hierarchy. Imagining the periphery as backward, lacking, undeveloped, or dependent on the center is a consequence of the center's establishment as the norm of modernity and progress, not just of administrative distance. Taken together, Foucault's account of knowledge and power and Quijano's account of coloniality support the claim that center and periphery are not given spatial positions at all; they are produced reciprocally within the modern state, colonial modernity, and the orders of knowledge and space that accompany both.

Within this theoretical framework, each thinker contributes something distinct: Koselleck lets us treat the periphery as a shifting historical horizon of meaning rather than a fixed category; Skinner directs attention to what functions this category performs in specific political contexts; Foucault supplies the

tools for analyzing the knowledge-power relations that make the periphery possible; and Quijano situates this whole constitution within modernity's global and colonial spatial hierarchies. Taken together, these approaches reframe the study's guiding question. It is not whether the periphery is truly backward, but through what historical, political, and epistemic processes backwardness, dependence on the center, and secondary status came to be built into the periphery as constitutive traits.

The approach developed in this section treats the periphery as a relational position produced within particular understandings of knowledge, power, and history, rather than as a given geographic category. Left there, though, this remains an abstract proposal until the historical mechanisms of production are shown. The second section takes up that task, examining the formation of the modern periphery through the processes of centralization, temporalization, and spatial organization.

2. The Production of the Modern Periphery: Centralization, Temporalization, and Spatial Hierarchy

The periphery is often taken for a straightforward geographic fact — an administrative or social area lying outside the center. But the history of concepts does not run parallel to the history of geography. To call a place "periphery" is to do more than classify it administratively; it is to establish a particular spatial imagination. Explaining what the periphery means in its modern sense therefore requires first making visible the historical transformation that made this meaning possible.

Modernity did not invent the center-periphery hierarchy. What it did was recode that hierarchy through the ideas of progress, development, civilization, the nation-state, and linear history. Empires had long organized vast territories as administrative units tied to central authority in varying degrees, but this variation had not yet taken on the systematic, universalizing, developmentalist form it would acquire in the modern period. The periphery, before modernity, was not a space left behind by history — it was simply one scale among others in political organization. The modern imagination of the periphery, then, cannot be read as a mere continuation of pre-modern administrative structure.

This section follows that transformation through three interrelated processes. The centralization of the modern state turned spaces outside the center into fields of government subject to increasingly direct observation, classification, and standardization. Modernity and colonialism, together, recast spatial difference as a temporal hierarchy of development and backwardness, making the center the norm against which progress was measured. And this hierarchy did not stay at the level of discourse — practices of representation, planning, and administration carried it into the material constitution of social space. The historical and epistemic transformation of the modern periphery will be examined at the point where these three processes intersect.

The first of these is the transformation in how areas outside the center were governed, driven by the centralization of the modern state. Tilly's account of state formation shows that pre-modern empires governed vast territories mostly through local intermediaries; central power could demand taxes and military resources but had a more limited capacity to intervene directly in everyday social and economic life. As the rising cost of war increased the state's demand for manpower, money, and materiel, indirect

rule gave way, more and more, to direct forms of governance. Local intermediaries lost autonomy, populations and resources were registered, and common standards of law, language, education, and administration spread outward. As all this happened, the center settled into the position of producing the norm, and the areas beyond it came to be measured against that norm (Tilly, 1995, 1992).

This centralization also reconstituted space as an object of knowledge. Anderson shows how mapping, census-taking, and classification turned the modern state's domain into a bounded, countable, governable "geo-body." Regions beyond the center stopped being merely territories subject to political authority and became fields of government — recorded, classified, and systematically positioned relative to the center (Anderson, 1983). Taken together, Tilly's account of centralizing dynamics and Anderson's account of classificatory practice make clear that the modern periphery is not simply the imperial hinterland carried forward. It was reproduced as the state's capacity to know, classify, and govern space expanded.

This transformation also laid the ground for the difference between center and periphery to harden into a normative hierarchy. Deringil's studies of the late Ottoman Empire show how, in the nineteenth century, centralization and administrative practice could fuse with a discourse of "civilizing." The Ottoman center came to regard certain Arab provinces and nomadic communities not merely as areas requiring administration but as populations in need of civilizing — evidence that the center-periphery relation could be built through normative distinctions of advanced versus backward, civilized versus uncivilized, reaching well beyond political-administrative difference (Deringil, 2003, 2014). The periphery began, in this way, to carry a double sense: an area to be governed, and a space to be remade according to the norms of modernity and civilization the center claimed to represent.

Read together, then, the centralization of the modern state, the classification of space, and civilizing practice suggest that the periphery's identification with backwardness is not the natural continuation of a pre-modern administrative divide; it is the outcome of a transformation in the modern state's capacity to govern and to set norms.

This transformation within the modern state took on a global dimension within the broader spatial and temporal hierarchies produced by colonial modernity. Read through Quijano's account of coloniality, the modern center-periphery divide is not just a political or economic arrangement of space — it is an epistemic hierarchy that assigns different societies to different stages of a single historical timeline. Europe's move to make its own historical experience the universal measure of modernity, rationality, and progress allowed societies living in the very same historical moment to be sorted, temporally, into "advanced," "backward," "modern," or "traditional" (Quijano, 2000, 2007, 2024). Spatial distance thereby acquired the meaning of temporal lag, and the center became something more than the seat of political authority — an epistemic position representing the norm of the future and of progress itself.

Practices of representation play a decisive part in building this hierarchy. Said's analysis of Orientalism shows that modern regimes of knowledge do not simply describe spaces; representing them within particular oppositions is itself what produces epistemic positions. The West constitutes itself as an

active, rational, civilized subject while representing the East as a passive, backward "other" requiring intervention — one of the clearest instances of spatial difference converted into hierarchical, temporal difference (Said, 1979, 1994). A parallel logic operates around the periphery: the center stands as the measure of modernity and progress, and the periphery is imagined as a lacking or belated space that has not yet reached that level. The periphery's "backwardness," on this account, is not a natural feature of geography; it is an epistemic position produced by modern regimes of representation and knowledge that read spatial difference as deficiency, delay, and incompleteness.

The periphery's constitution, however, is not only conceptual, epistemic, or representational. This hierarchy is also produced within the material and institutional organization of social space, and it is here that Lefebvre's account of the production of space shifts the analysis onto different ground. Space, for Lefebvre, is not the passive, neutral backdrop on which social relations happen to unfold; it is a social product, produced by social relations even as it reproduces them in turn. Every society and mode of production makes its own space, and space, in the process, becomes an instrument for reproducing property, the division of labor, hierarchy, and relations of power (Lefebvre, 2009, 1991).

For the modern state and capitalism, this process works by making space plannable, classifiable, governable. At the level Lefebvre calls "conceived space," scientists, planners, and technocrats reorganize space through knowledge, codes, and classifications. Mapping, planning, and zoning are, on this account, not merely technical operations but spatial instruments of dominant forms of knowledge and power (Lefebvre, 2009, 1991).

On this basis, the periphery is more than an administrative region lying outside the center. Through the administrative centralization of the modern state, the expansion of transport networks, the production of statistical knowledge, population classification, and spatial planning, it became a field of government whose population and resources were planned and arranged according to economic and political needs. In Lefebvre's notion of "internal colony," the center organizes the periphery's populations and resources to its own ends through spatial segregation, planning, and administrative regulation (Lefebvre, 1976, 2009).

Following Lefebvre, then, the periphery can be read not as a pre-existing natural geography that is subsequently governed, but as a social and epistemic space produced by the practices of knowledge, planning, and administration bound up with the modern state and capitalist relations of production. Defining the periphery as a source of raw materials, a zone of production, a place of leisure, or simply the city's opposite reveals that its meaning comes less from its own historical particularity than from the functions central power assigns to it (Lefebvre, 2009, 1991).

Taken together, these discussions bring three interrelated processes into focus in the constitution of the modern periphery. Centralization turned areas outside the center into objects of government, observed, counted, mapped, classified, and standardized with growing directness. Modernity and coloniality reinterpreted spatial difference as a temporal hierarchy of development and backwardness, with the center becoming the norm of progress and universality against which the periphery was measured as

lagging. And practices of representation, planning, and administration carried this hierarchy beyond discourse and epistemology into the material and institutional constitution of social space itself. The production of the modern periphery thus takes place at the intersection of three distinct mechanisms: centralization renders space governable, temporalization converts spatial difference into a hierarchy of development and backwardness, and planning and representation crystallize that hierarchy in material and institutional space.

As this section has shown, the modern periphery is a relational position where flows of knowledge, resources, and legitimacy, historically produced through centralization, temporalization, and spatial organization, are regulated by central hierarchies. But being historically produced does not make a space merely the passive object and outcome of that production. Quite the opposite: showing how the periphery was produced raises the further question of what this produced position can generate out of its own historical and relational particularities. The task, then, is not to deny the central relations through which the periphery was produced, nor to invert them by putting the periphery in the center's place, but to make visible the productive capacity of the periphery as produced. The third section moves the question from "how was the periphery produced?" to "what can the produced periphery produce?" — laying the theoretical ground for thinking of the periphery not as the center's deficient or belated form, but as a constitutive spatiality capable of generating new social, political, cultural, and spatial forms out of its own historical accumulation, relations, and particularities.

3. From the Produced Periphery to the Producing Periphery: The Incubating Space

Modern thought has, to a considerable degree, imagined the periphery as the center's deficient, belated, or unfinished form. Periphery projects of very different ideological stripes have accordingly tended to define the periphery's transformation, modernization, and development in terms of how closely it comes to resemble the center. In such an imagination the center stands for more than a geographic or administrative position — it represents the historical future the periphery is expected to reach. The periphery's present is coded as the center's past, and the center's present as the periphery's future. Development, urbanization, architecture, culture, political organization, education, everyday life — each of these domains gets evaluated by its proximity to, or distance from, the norms the center produces. The center thus stops being a particular place and comes to stand for the general and the universal, while the periphery is fixed in a position defined against the center: particular, local, and lacking.

But casting the center-periphery relation as "center: defining, classifying, transforming, producing subject; periphery: defined, classified, transformed object" carries a structural problem. What matters is replacing the idea that "the center produces, the periphery receives, and develops to the extent it comes to resemble the center" with a grasp of the periphery as itself a site of production. This is not a call to imagine a world without centers, but an objection to production having only one. It is exactly here that the shift from a periphery produced by the center to a periphery that produces gains its importance. Getting past the center-periphery dichotomy requires asking not only how the center produces the periphery, but what the periphery itself can produce.

Working from Massey, it becomes possible to think of the periphery as a constitutive spatiality that produces its own relations, histories, and political possibilities. The first condition for this is giving up the conversion of space into time — abandoning the ranking of different geographies as different stages of a single developmental line, and accepting them instead as spatialities that coexist while following different trajectories. Space, on these terms, stops being a derivative of history and becomes a field of simultaneous multiplicity and heterogeneity. Second, the periphery should be treated not as a closed, fixed, unchanging place but as a site of encounter and an event — a point where different histories, social relations, and trajectories intersect. Rather than tying the periphery's identity to an unchanging origin or a pure authenticity, this view holds that identity is continually reproduced through the relations a place forges at different scales. Third, the approach demands a radical sense of simultaneity: recognizing that societies outside the center live in the same historical moment as the center, produce their own histories, and possess futures of their own works against seeing them as "belated" or "not yet complete" (Massey, 2008).

In Massey's relational approach, the periphery is not a space transformed by the center alone, nor merely the passive result of globalization. The local acts on global processes as much as it results from them. Migration, cultural circulation, and social interaction moving from periphery to center do more than mark the periphery's transformation by the center; they point to processes that remake the center itself. The "arrival of the periphery at the center" can force the center to rethink its own boundaries, identity, and the hegemonic narrative of modernity it tells about itself. In this sense, the periphery counts as a constitutive spatial actor, one that contributes to the center's own transformation and redefinition (Massey, 2008).

At this point the concept of the "incubating space" can be proposed to explain the periphery. "Incubation" is chosen because it holds together the encounter, transformation, and becoming that spatial production involves. To incubate is not for different elements to sit side by side in isolation, but for them to form a new composite through encounter. Elements arriving from outside are not simply preserved intact or copied directly; they are reinterpreted within local history, social relations, and everyday practice. What results is not a straightforward repetition of any of the elements present at the start. The incubation metaphor, for this reason, does not treat the periphery as a vessel carrying a past that must be preserved. It lets us conceptualize the periphery instead as a field of becoming, where different relations can produce forms not fixed in advance. This capacity for productive transformation is the concept's central claim.

The incubating space overlaps considerably with Massey's relational understanding of space, though the two are not identical. Both treat space as a plural, open-ended process, continually formed through the encounter of different histories, relations, and trajectories, rather than as a closed and fixed whole. Both, on these grounds, refuse to reduce local specificity to a pure, unchanging authenticity, and refuse to rank spatial difference along a single line of development. That different spaces have their own historical trajectories and future possibilities is the ground the two approaches share.

Even so, the incubating space takes this shared relational ground and stretches the emphasis further — from how space comes into being to what new forms that becoming can produce. Where Massey (2001) foregrounds the plurality, openness, and mutual constitution of spatial trajectories, the incubating space turns toward that plurality's capacity to generate new cultural, social, political, economic, and aesthetic forms. Autonomous production and horizontal circulation become the decisive concepts here. Autonomy does not mean a space becoming independent of relations; it means transforming what arrives from outside within one's own particularity, without needing that transformation to be legitimized by resemblance to the center. Horizontal circulation, in turn, describes different spaces relating to one another directly, without having to pass through the center to gain visibility or legitimacy. The incubating space, then, is not simply a place where differences happen to coexist — it names a spatial process through which difference, via encounter and transformation, converts into productive capacity.

This distinction also shows up in the analytical weight each approach gives to the center-periphery relation. For Massey, that relation is one manifestation, among others, of the wider relations and power-geometry that constitute space; the incubating space, by contrast, places the effects of the asymmetric center-periphery relation on production, circulation, legitimacy, and future-building capacity directly at the center of analysis. The incubating space, then, is best understood less as an alternative to Massey's relational thought than as a development of the theoretical ground it opens, one built around the periphery's capacity for autonomous production, horizontal circulation, and plural futures.

Within this frame, the incubating space can be thought through five interrelated dimensions: local specificity, relational openness, autonomous production, horizontal circulation, and plural futures. These are not an assortment of independent criteria brought together after the fact; they derive from the core problems of the center-periphery relation discussed above and from the emphasis the incubating space places on productive capacity. Each dimension answers to those problems by marking a different moment in the conversion of spatial difference into productive capacity: local specificity supplies the historical and social ground of production; relational openness names the condition under which differences meet and transform; autonomous production is the capacity to form new configurations; horizontal circulation is the ability of those configurations to circulate without depending on central recognition; and plural futures marks the opening of this whole process beyond any single developmental trajectory.

These five dimensions, then, should not be read as separate properties a space must possess, but as a relational whole that explains how spatial difference converts into productive capacity. The incubating space's central analytical question is not how powerful or resource-rich a place happens to be, but the degree to which it can turn its own historical and relational particularity into the capacity to produce new forms, circulate them, and generate different possible futures.

Local specificity

The first dimension underlying the incubating space's productive ground is local specificity. Every space accumulates its own historical experience, social relations, geographic conditions, modes of production, languages, memories, migrations, conflicts, and everyday practices. Within the centrist paradigm of modernization, much of this difference has been read as an obstacle to development, a traditional residue to be overcome, or a local trait that makes conformity to the center harder to achieve. The incubating space model treats local difference instead as raw material for new production rather than a deficiency to be eliminated. That a place does not resemble another does not have to signal underdevelopment; it can just as well be the condition for producing different social, cultural, political, economic, and aesthetic forms. Local specificity, though, does not mean a fixed, pure authenticity. Locality has been continually reconstituted throughout history by migration, trade, state intervention, conflict, borders, diasporas, and cultural circulation. The model's starting point, then, is not some "local essence" purified of outside influence, but a particularity historically formed through encounters and still in the process of transformation.

Relational openness

Relational openness names the relational condition under which this productive ground can transform through encounter with other spaces. Nothing in the model's critique of centralization implies spatial isolation. A periphery can build dense relations with other cities, regions, migratory movements, diasporas, and global circuits, and transform through them. The distinction that matters is between relation and dependency. The problem is not being affected from outside; it is that relation becoming one-directional, with a given center turned into the normative standard against which every other space's transformation is measured. The incubating space is not a passive environment absorbing knowledge, culture, technology, capital, or political ideas from elsewhere; it is a field of relations that selects, interprets, and transforms them within its own historical and social context. Spatial openness, in this sense, is the capacity to select and transform within a field of differing relations.

Autonomous production

Autonomous production is the dimension that expresses the incubating space's productive capacity most directly. Local specificity and relational openness earn the name "incubation" only once they translate into the capacity to produce new forms. Autonomy here means selecting, interpreting, and transforming knowledge, culture, technology, capital, or political ideas from outside within one's own historical and social particularity — and it also means that whatever emerges need not draw its legitimacy from resembling the center or winning the center's approval. This constitutive capacity can surface across a wide field: in architectural form, in the use of public space, in models of economic solidarity, in mechanisms of political organization and participation, in music and literature, in educational practice, in gastronomy, in the textures of everyday life. The periphery, grasped this way, becomes less a folkloric zone of difference worth preserving than a site of production where social forms not yet in existence can be tried out. Locality, on these terms, points toward producing the future rather than safeguarding the past.

Horizontal circulation

Horizontal circulation concerns how what gets produced comes to be recognized and to circulate. In a centrist spatial order, knowledge, culture, and innovation are mostly imagined moving vertically: the center produces, and the periphery receives. But the central hierarchy is not confined to where production happens — whatever the periphery produces usually needs the center's recognition before it can gain visibility, value, or legitimacy at all. The center thereby becomes not just a source of production but a locus of legitimacy, deciding which productions deserve recognition and circulation. Horizontal circulation names the overcoming of this obligatory mediation. Productions from different spaces can enter into direct relation with one another, share their experience and their output, and transform each other reciprocally, without the center's recognition standing as a mandatory checkpoint. In this sense, horizontal circulation is not the disappearance of the center but the breaking of its monopoly over recognition and circulation.

Nor does horizontal circulation mean that productions get transferred elsewhere unchanged, or standardized. What emerges in one place, meeting another place's historical and social particularity, can be reinterpreted and take on a different shape. Circulation, then, is a relational process generating new encounters and new differentiations, not a transfer that erases difference. This process, by reworking local specificity in turn, opens room for still further production to emerge. Horizontal circulation, understood this way, moves the analysis beyond simply noting that relations exist between spaces, toward asking through which channels productions come to be recognized, legitimized, and set circulating.

Plural futures

Plural futures form the model's normative and theoretical horizon. The modern imagination of center and periphery turns spatial difference into a temporal hierarchy as well: the center represents the future, the periphery gets placed in the past, and the periphery's future is defined, from the outset, as resembling the center's present. But once local particularities keep their productive capacities, form open relations with other spaces, generate their own forms, and set these circulating through horizontal networks, the future stops being singular. Different spaces cease to be units positioned along different stages of one developmental line and become, instead, sites where different possible futures are produced. The final concern of the incubating space model is thus less the preservation of the periphery than the pluralization of the future. What spatial homogenization costs is not only the erosion of existing cultural difference; it is the narrowing of the very possibility that spaces, working from their own particularities, might bring forth political, social, cultural, economic, and aesthetic forms not yet known. Put differently, what homogenization loses is not only pasts — it is futures that never get the chance to happen.

These five dimensions make the incubating space available for empirical analysis across different historical and spatial contexts, not only for theoretical definition. They should not, though, be treated as fixed, universal criteria that mechanically determine whether a given space qualifies as incubating. They

function instead as analytical questions, ones that let us examine the forms productive capacity takes in different spaces. Table 1 sets out the phenomena through which each of the five dimensions can be studied empirically, along with the guiding question each dimension raises.

Table 1
Analytical Dimensions of the Incubating Space and Empirical Research Questions

Dimension	Analytic function	What can be empirically sought	Guiding research question
Local specificity	Establishes the historical and social ground of production.	Place-specific historical experiences and repertoires of knowledge and practice; local institutions, forms of everyday life, and their historical composition.	Does the space possess specific knowledge, practices, and relational forms arising from its own historical and social experience?
Relational openness	Establishes the relational condition under which local specificity can transform through encounter with other spaces.	Relations with outside networks; migration, trade, cultural circulation, and knowledge exchange; the selective adoption and transformation of outside elements.	Is the space neither isolated from, nor passive toward, outside relations — can it selectively relate to and transform what arrives from elsewhere?
Autonomous production	Expresses the capacity to convert historical and relational specificity into new forms.	Local reinterpretation, rather than direct imitation, of outside models; the emergence of original cultural, social, political, economic, or aesthetic forms.	Does the space transform outside models within its own particularity, rather than simply copying them, to produce new forms?
Horizontal circulation	Expresses the capacity of produced forms to circulate without central recognition as an obligatory passage point.	Direct networks among non-central spaces; production gaining visibility, recognition, and circulation without central mediation; mutual learning and transfer.	Can local productions relate to other spaces and gain recognition and circulation without depending on the center's approval?
Plural futures	Constitutes the normative and theoretical horizon opened by the first four dimensions, letting different spaces imagine futures independent of a single developmental line.	Visions of development, life, politics, and space not reducible to imitating the center; alternative narratives and projects of the future.	Can the space's vision of its future move beyond the goal of resembling the center, generating alternative possible futures from its own historical and social conditions?

The analytical planes set out in the table should be read as a guiding framework that makes the concept researchable across different empirical contexts, not as a measurement model that sorts spaces by fixed indicators. Whether a place has the quality of an incubating space is a matter to be sought in how the dimensions relate to one another and generate productive capacity together, not in whether each

dimension is individually present. The model can accordingly be used to examine the conditions under which spaces peripheralized by central norms, in different historical and geographic contexts, manage to convert their own particularities into productive capacity. The limits of this explanatory capacity, and how it operates across different contexts, remain questions for comparative and empirical research to test. None of these analytical distinctions implies that the five dimensions are independent of one another, or that they form a linear sequence of stages. It is the reciprocal relation among the dimensions that grounds the incubating space's productive capacity (Fig. 1).

As Fig. 1 shows, the five dimensions are not stages that follow one another mechanically; they are processes that mutually enable and reproduce each other. Local specificity transforms through new encounters made possible by relational openness; those encounters feed the capacity for autonomous production; what gets produced generates further spatial encounters through horizontal circulation; and this whole process opens onto new production and new possible futures. The model's ideal outcome, then, is not a set of fixed, isolated peripheries, but spatialities that remain in relation with one another while staying irreducible to one another.

This perspective also shows that overcoming the center-periphery dualism does not require putting the periphery in the center's place. Such a move would simply reverse the direction of the existing hierarchy and reproduce the same epistemic structure. The point of incubating-space thinking is neither to summon back a pre-modern periphery nor to preserve local culture unchanged. What is being objected to is not change itself, but change whose direction, criteria, and legitimacy are set by the center alone. The real issue, then, is not making the periphery into a new center, but decentering the capacity to produce and to build futures.

At this point, the incubating space model's relationship to relational space can be sharpened alongside its relationship to Scott's and Lefebvre's critiques of the effects modern statecraft and capitalist rationality have on local difference. Scott's concept of metis brings out the value of local, experiential knowledge against central rationality; Lefebvre's critique of abstract space explains how state and capital subject difference to a spatial order that is measurable, plannable, governable (Scott, 1990, 1998; Lefebvre, 2009, 1991). The incubating space shares this critical ground but shifts its analytical focus from domination and resistance toward the productive capacity of spaces themselves. Where Scott grasps local specificity through metis, everyday resistance, and infrapolitics set against central simplification, and Lefebvre grasps it through lived space and the production of differential space set against abstract space, the incubating space centers instead on the capacity of different historical and social compositions to produce forms that do not yet exist. That capacity emerges as local specificity and relational openness, working through autonomous production and horizontal circulation, generate new encounters and new possible futures. The model, on these grounds, holds that spatial difference is not only a value worth preserving — it is a capacity able to generate new spatialities and plural futures.

This approach also puts pressure on the very idea of a single, unified periphery. Places as historically, culturally, economically, and socially different as Muş, Van, Çorum, Trabzon, Mardin, Kars, or Afyon get

placed in the same category on the sole ground of "not being the center," which renders their differences invisible. It makes more sense, then, to speak not of one homogeneous periphery but of plural spatialities that the center has grouped together under the single label "periphery."

This homogenization appears not only at the conceptual level but in the very processes of spatial production. Different cities being rebuilt through similar administrative, architectural, public, and consumption spaces points to historically distinct places being subjected to the same grammar of modernization. The real question, then, is not why peripheries fail to resemble the center closely enough, but whether, in coming to resemble it, they lose the capacity to produce new forms out of their own differences. Local difference, in this sense, is not merely a past worth preserving — it is a possibility from which new political, social, cultural, and aesthetic forms can be produced.

To defend the periphery's constitutive capacity, in the end, means foregrounding local differences' potential to produce new social, political, cultural, and spatial forms, rather than treating them as a static inheritance handed down from the past and requiring unchanged preservation. The periphery, in this sense, is not the center's deficient form, not a stage of modernization awaiting completion, not an authentic essence to be safeguarded. It is an open, constitutive spatiality, able to produce different futures out of its own historical accumulation, social relations, and local dynamics.

An approach along these lines replaces the one-directional hierarchy of the center-periphery relation with a plural spatiality, one in which different places, in relation with one another, can produce out of their own particularities. The point is not to romanticize the local or to endorse everything a periphery happens to produce, but to keep open the possibility that different spaces can produce different things. The transformation at stake, then, can be understood as a shift from a produced periphery to a producing one, and from a single periphery to plural peripheries.

The periphery steps out of the center's shadow not by taking the center's place, but by becoming constitutive without having to become a center at all. Decentering, in this sense, does not mean reversing the existing spatial hierarchy; it means multiplying the capacity to produce, to be recognized, to circulate, and to build futures across different spaces. The measure of development, on these terms, stops being resemblance to the center and becomes instead a space's capacity to convert its own historical, social, and cultural particularities into new forms. The periphery, no longer modernity's missing link, takes on the character of an incubating space — one where social, political, cultural, and spatial possibilities not yet realized can be produced.

Conclusion

This study's central theoretical proposal is neither to leave the periphery as a position simply produced by the center, nor to reject that position by turning it into a romanticized locality. The first section established that the periphery is not a natural, self-given geography but a relational position constituted within the center-periphery relation. The second showed how this position was historically produced through the processes of centralization, temporalization, and spatial organization. The third section

takes up the critical question that this analysis of production leaves open: must a produced periphery only ever reproduce the position assigned to it, or can it generate new forms out of its own historical and relational particularity? The concept of the incubating space answers this not by denying the relations through which the periphery was produced, but by making visible the productive capacity that lies within those relations. The article's argument thus moves from defining the periphery, to explaining how it was produced, to conceptualizing how a produced periphery can turn into a producing spatiality. The original claim here is not to set up a new center against the old one. It is to propose a model that questions the concentration of production, legitimacy, circulation, and future-building capacity in a single spatial position, and that explains how different spaces can become constitutive out of their own particularities. The incubating space, then, is offered not as a renaming of what the periphery is, but as a conceptual framework that tries to explain what the periphery, starting from its historically produced position, can produce.

The analytical reach of the incubating space is not limited to the periphery problematic that serves as this study's starting point. The periphery, here, functions as a concept-generating problematic, one that makes visible how modern spatial hierarchies place spaces outside the center in derivative, belated positions. Developed out of that problematic, the incubating space offers a more general analytical framework for examining under what conditions peripheralized spatialities of various kinds can convert their own historical and relational particularities into productive capacity. Testing the concept's explanatory reach across different contexts — peripheral cities, border regions, rural areas, postcolonial and diasporic spatialities — through comparative work could form an important research agenda for establishing its scope and its limits.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Yunus KOÇ and Gökhan TOPLUK contributed equally to the conception, development, writing, and revision of this manuscript. Both authors contributed equally to the study and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Figures

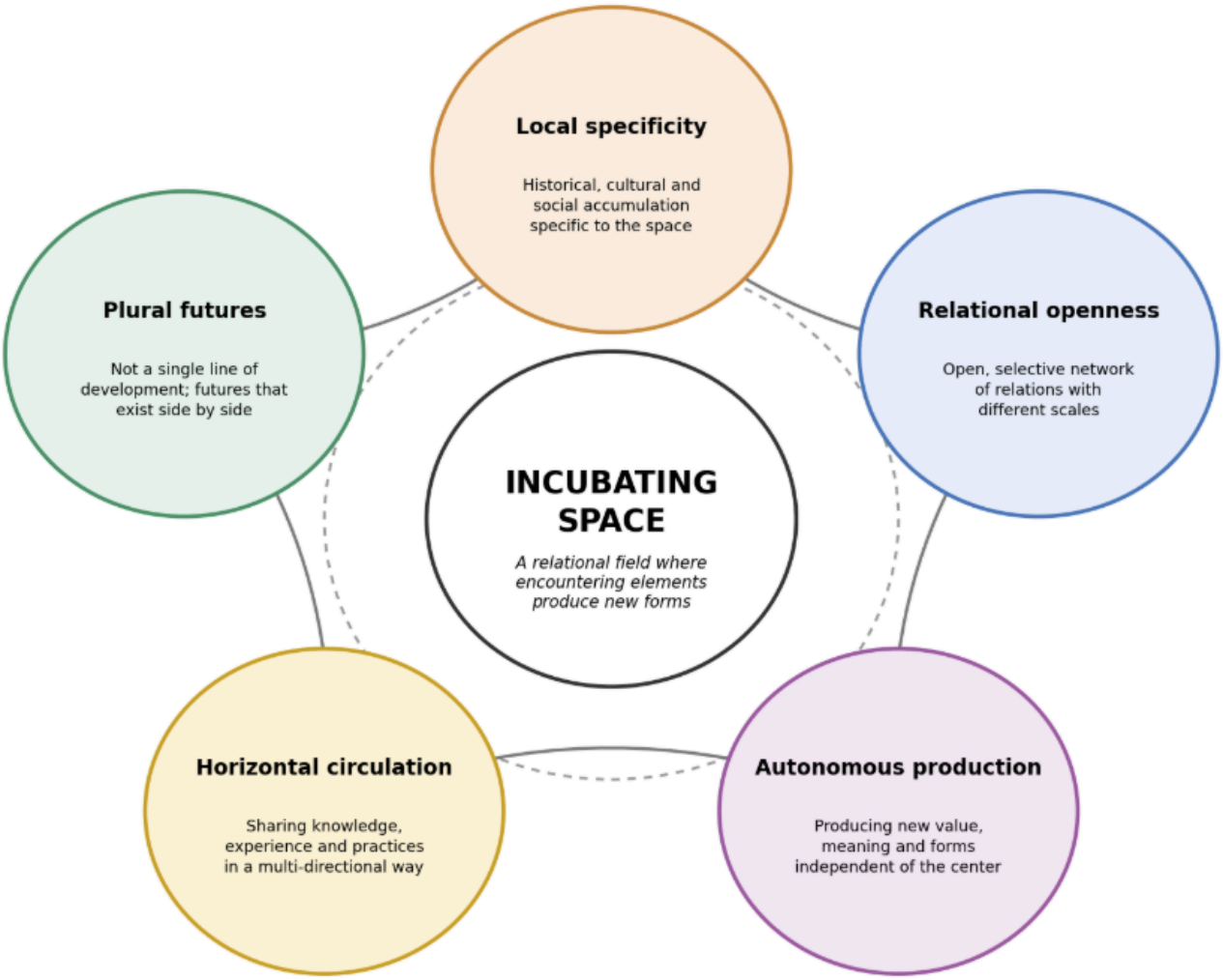

Figure 1

The Five Dimensions of the Incubating Space Model and Their Relational Structure