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11.329 Social Theory and the City

Between Center and Edge.

The experience of the city through a subway system is fragmentary. Disassociated from the light, orientation, and mnemonics above, subterranean transportation environments compel us to experience the world as discrete stops. As motivations vary, so do our destinations. Over time, the result is a kind of mental mapping of the city in network of loosely-related nodes, each formed in concentric circles that are sized by how far we need or want to venture out. Activity, habit, and happenstance help construct this network, but our experience is structured through an understanding of centers and edges. Some of the most interesting experiences in the city result not from our clear understanding of these terms, but from a kind of a productive ambiguity which situates us somewhere between center and edge. In this in-between zone, we are active interpreters of the city.

On a subway map, each stop is a point, a point around which activity, people, and memory pivot. As such, it is a center, one that may have both centripetal and centrifugal force. But, with all that is revolving around it, this point has a sphere of influence; for example, communities can forge their identities in reference to subway stops and neighborhoods form around them. Thus, just as the 'center' in political terms connotes a zone of opinion, a center may also describe an area – an area that could be presence, absence, or anything in between. And as in biology, a center can also express a grouping of elements, implying a less rigid set of geometrical relationships. So, though its hierarchy might be clear, a center may have area or none at all, may be a beginning as well as an end, and may be defined or nebulous.

As with centers, edges have an embedded ambiguity and a reflexive definition. An edge may be the boundary of something as well as that incisive quality which penetrates such a limit. On the subway, an edge might equally be a terminus station or one's comfort zone

around a particular stop. So, an edge can be both a border as well as zone adjacent to one. It can even be the condition of occupying such a zone, in the case of being 'on edge.' An edge may also be the difference between two things – or more commonly, people – as well as the line dividing them. It is a term replete with ambiguity, both in the abstract as well as in application.

The relationship between center and edge is as intertwined and multivalent as the individual terms. Center as zone requires an edge. Where center stops and edge begins is the crux of the conundrum, and this is a function of context, memory, and perspective. A subway stop can just as easily be defined as the territory from which entry is visible as it could in the physical barriers or property boundaries defining the stop. Interestingly, once a number of stops or centers are considered, their areas might overlap and intersect as wave patterns in ponds do, producing new zones that may be center, edge, or neither. So, an edge may define a center, it may be a center, and it may interact with other edges to produce new centers.

If experiencing the city can be thought of as the search for centers and edges, then ambiguity between them forces us to play active roles in the formation of this experience. When the conditions are clear – at water's edge, at the center of a plaza, or below a dome's oculus – we are passive observers of the environment. But, if for example after removing the subway's blindfold and venturing into the city, we force ourselves to infer connections between disparate experiences, to find legible edges and transitions, and to define our own centers and edges, then we discover and construct the city for ourselves.