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Social Theory and the City
Prof. Sennett
Assignment 1
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The difference between the center and the periphery is primarily characterized by proximity and circumference. A place which is determined, designed, or described as a center in its purest form reduces to a point with zero circumference, a location, a concentrated place. This decreasing circumference means that being at the center means being inherently proximal, being close to everything and everyone else at or near the center.

Meanwhile, that which is designated as the periphery constitutes a group of places arranged outward, expanding to a large circumference. It is not a single location but rather many locations at distance from one another, a distribution. The periphery is relative to a particular center, but one may conceive paths which pass from point to point among locations within the periphery without traversing the center.

Both the center and the periphery are referential, however, in that they are relative to the viewer's perceptions. Being very close to the center within one frame of reference could seem highly peripheral if the frame of reference becomes much more narrowly defined. At one point in time a place that seems highly peripheral based on the speed of transport, the geography, or the means of communication, might change in time so that that same place could be conceived as not nearly as peripheral; the gradient of centeredness is fluid in time and in its perception. This is particularly evident with respect to circumferential paths or fortifications that ring a settlement; they are frequently concentric with human habitation at one time having been consistent with a particular outer (peripheral) limit, but with development or habitation at another (often later) time being pushed out beyond the wall, road, or moat, so that the circumferential path is expanded to define a new outer periphery.

I believe this spatial organization does not necessarily correlate with hierarchical order, however. The center's importance, relevance or popularity, frequency or activity, meaning or interest relative to the periphery should not be assumed to be greater. While traditional theoretical models of urban settlement (and of humans' belief structures and countless other aspects of life) may require a centered point or idea to orient the relationships therein, it is entirely possible for that which is understood as peripheral to nevertheless encompass and include sufficient importance and relevance, of people, places, and resources. In this condition the center can become correspondingly irrelevant, abandoned, or vapid, a black hole. The ever-increasing geometric area of the *extense* periphery, and the correspondingly *intense* but spatially limited center, mean that the periphery can quickly eclipse the center in capacity and range of possibilities. If

the desire for a single place of physical proximity (a center) is not great, the distributed arrangement within the periphery becomes a given and normative relationship. This poses the question of whether proximity to the center is relevant to the periphery given the many hierarchical possibilities

This is the challenge taken up by a polynuclear conception of community structure, urban form, and human relationships therein. Such a network, which is based upon the presence of multiple centers within the chosen field of view, allows for a distributed sea of peripheral "stuff" punctuated by identifiable centers. This enables the periphery to be understood as highly differentiated, with places and inhabitants having simultaneous relationships to many different points of focus rather than maintaining a feudal tether to a single particular center. This does not negate the importance of proximity, but rather articulates the distinction between the center and the periphery as a continuum of multiple proximities. This continuum therefore exists between having a single idea, point, or place as an explicit, proximal focus at the center, and having a variety of polyvalent possibilities in various proximities as potential foci at the periphery.

11.329 Social Theory and the City, Exercise 1
Assigned: Session 1; Due: Session 2
What is the distinction between center and periphery?
Generate no more than 2 pages of theoretical writing on the above question without citing any sources or using any real-world examples. Do not fall into the trap of comparing and contrasting in a descriptive essay but rather develop a theoretical argument to answer the question. The objective of this exercise is for you to explore your own thoughts and assert yourself in the theoretical realm without hiding behind someone else's ideas.