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“Development on the margin”

Marginal People - “Surplus Youth” in the Global Taxonomy of Insidious Harm

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Abstract

Marginality does not exist. No creature is marginal to its own existence. But among humans marginality is everywhere. The paradox arises because the concept does not refer to a real state or condition. It is the product of taxonomy. Humans are classifying animals. Society and economy function through erecting taxonomic schemes to legitimate acquisition and distribution of resources and power. Bankers have a magic touch and deserve riches, while the labouring masses should be helped to survive recession. But the marginal are those for whom there is no place (or at best a residual place) in the taxonomy. The work-shy proliferate children, pollute the planet, and should be sterilised. Mary Douglas has shown how a single (false) diagnosis of a disease (leprosy) was used in medieval Europe first to stigmatise representatives of a crumbling hierarchy, and then to marginalise the landless poor. These changes in the polarity of accusation (she argues) are evidence of important shifts in the organisation of early European society. There is no escape from taxonomy, she implies. All societies will target some groups and marginalise them as a way of protecting core values and functions. The important task is to establish, through analysis, what features of the system drive stigmatisation. That is the direction in which protections and remedies might be sought. Where her approach needs to be expanded is in relation to the complexities of globalisation. There is no single authority to underpin a stable taxonomy of threats to the world system. Civil society, the state, and the trans-national institutions develop competing schemata of marginality and insidious harm. It is an urgent task to bring interpretive clarity to the ways in which these new social taxonomies are produced. In this paper I trace some of the ways in which young labouring men have come to be seen as a source of insidious harm in one resource-rich African country, and how they then reclassified themselves through rebellion. Analysis establishes links between this presumed danger and the slave trade, colonial courts, mineral extraction and global conservation. What is the long-term stable solution to this presumed epidemic of stigmatised young men?