

# Cities as Strategic Sites: The Urbanisation of War and the Militarising of Urban Space

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It is already a cliché that the twenty-first century will be an urban century. Increasingly, the great contests of globalisation, cultural diversification, economic re-regulation and liberalisation, militarisation, informatisation and ecological change are boiling down to conflicts in the key strategic sites of our age: contemporary cities. As the events of September 11th demonstrated so starkly, warfare, strategic violence, and urbanism utterly interrelate. Any reader of Paul Virilio will find this as no surprise ; military considerations have a much greater presence in 20th century debates about urbanism in the West than is generally believed. For example, a key factor shaping Le Corbusier's 1930s plans for the modern city was to use high buildings to minimise the vulnerability of urban spaces to emerging techniques of aerial bombardment and gas attack (which is ironic, given that skyscrapers are now considered, post September 11th, to be extremely vulnerable). Similarly, post-war urban renewal and responses to the 1960s race riots in the US were closely informed by military think tanks, considerations and techniques.

Whilst cities have always been closely interwoven with military technologies, considerations, and techniques, it is now clear that the intensification of global urbanisation, resource shortages, inequalities and population pressures are further deepening the role of urban terrain as the strategic site of military, social and representational struggle. As we see from Stalingrad and Dresden to Grozny, Beirut, Sarajevo, Kabul or Ramallah, 'Urbicide' - the erasure or denial of the city -- is the sign of contemporary military 'success'. Four inter-related struggles over the city as strategic site can be identified.

## The Urbanisation of War

The first surrounds the urbanisation of war itself. There is intensifying military interest in the role of cities as the key sites in which military and geo-political conflicts are being fought. More 'urban studies' now goes on in US military institutions than in many of its top universities. Cold War military doctrine stressed the imperative of bypassing cities, based on the nightmarish spectre of Stalingrad-like house-to-house struggles with hellish casualty rates. But recent assessments of post-Cold War conflicts in Chechnya, Somalia, the Balkans, Palestine and elsewhere highlight the inevitable urbanisation of warfare. They do so in a context of intensifying global urbanisation, the growth of urban terrorism, the implosion of many nation states, and the efforts of US and its Allies to maintain and strengthen global political, economic and military hegemony.

Military strategies are thus being reorganised world wide to address the messy, costly and uncertain realities of urban and infrastructural warfare. Urban terrain increases risk and fatalities. It reduces technological gaps between hi-tech and lo-tech fighters. And it makes the occupation of territory very difficult. In response, a complete re-think on military operations is underway. US and NATO forces have thus taken renewed interest in Military Operation in Urban Terrain (MOU) with significant investment in urban warfare technologies, simulations and military exercises in existing cities.

In the US a range of whole replica cities are being built to support MOU training, complete with realistic sewer systems and massive computer simulations (sometimes lasting weeks at a time). Theme park designers are being enrolled to create a realistic urban feel to these sites. Weapons, communications, simulations and tactics are being devised to learn the lessons of the highly problematic operations in Mogadishu, Sarajevo and Grozny. Amongst a vast range of new innovations, miniature dragonfly-like flying vehicles with sensors and weapons are being developed by the US for room to room combat.

## Terrorism Meets the Networked City

The second struggle surrounds the adaptation of urban terrorism to the networked city as the central terrain of contemporary life. Increasingly, conflict is not occurring state-v-state but involves widening groups of participants: anti-modernisers, ethnic or religious groups fighting for self-determination, anti-globalisation activists, and private armies backing drug lords, local fiefdoms, or multinational corporations.

These struggles take the form of bloody, urban internecine warfare as well as cyber-terror attacks aimed at undermining the functioning of global and corporate information systems. In Israel suicide bombers attempt to deny Israelis the freedom of the street or restaurant just as Hamas fighters try to obtain shoulder-fired surface to air missiles to threaten the airline connectivity of Israel.

But it was the attacks on September the 11th that best demonstrates the mutation of urban terror to the new urban technological age. These attacks were a macabre yet subtle exploitation of the multiple and interconnected mobilities, continuously telescoping between the local and global, that sustain global urban capitalism : mobilities of people and machines ; mobilities of images and media ; mobilities of electronic finance and capital. Even the old-fashioned postal network was exploited by the Anthrax attackers that rode the wave of hysteria following September 11th.

The September 11th attacks forcibly redirected and perverted the fragile and subtle mobilities and technologies that underpin and sustain global urban capitalism. The strikes therefore mocked the political fantasies of the Bush regime that suggested -- and in fact still do --that major urban catastrophes could be kept at bay through Defensive Missile Shields laid out along Cold War, geostrategic, lines. Instead of 'rogue states' aping the superpowers and acquiring intercontinental nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, the equivalent of a nuclear impact was produced by the simple expedient of a few 'stone age' knives.

The attacks also exploited the intensely concentrating logic of global city development. The iconic power of the skyscraper - a symbol of urban 'progress' and modernisation for a century - was instantly reversed. From icon of power, progress and the dynamism of urban America it has been transmuted into a symbol of fragility which builds deep vulnerability into the cityscape. And yet skyscraper construction continues apace and many new proposals are still emerging.

### **The Militarisation of Urban Civil Societies**

The third struggle is over the militarisation of civil societies themselves. It is clear that the civil fabric of cities is being saturated with techniques, technologies and tactics only recently developed in the military domain. This process is far from new. But the time-lag between military and civil applications of technologies is decreasing ; the divide separating these two domains is rapidly blurring. This is driven by the spiralling incidence and fear of crime, a growing social polarisation, the proliferation of major civil unrest in cities (Los Angeles 1992...), and a colonisation of civil markets by post-cold war Defence companies. It is also accelerating due to a shift from welfarist and rehabilitative to carceral and punitive models of crime control and to the political responses to threats of urban terrorism.

As a result, as writers like Mike Davis have demonstrated, cities are now sites for the application of a whole host of military control systems that were unthinkable even a decade ago. GPS and mobile phone systems track the time-space trails of everything from cars to electronically-tagged offenders. Mass mobile phones provide an international personal tracking system by stealth. Automatic speed cameras trigger the mailing of fines through licence-plate recognition. Gated communities require bar-code swipes to allow cars to enter. Regular travellers use hand-scan biometrics to bypass immigration controls (whilst 'illegal' immigrants face increasing scrutiny in their attempt to cross boundaries). Strategic urban sites such as global financial centres and airport cities are now surrounded by 'smart' CCTV systems which automatically scan traffic for stolen cars. And the tens of millions of analogue Closed Circuit TV systems on city streets are rapidly being digitised and computerised to enable them to scan automatically for 'unusual' events and the stipulated faces of those deemed to be dangerous by the state, the police or local security officers.

The planning and design of Western cities is, once again, being scrutinised from the point of view of military vulnerability. In the US the war over urban sprawl is now a battle over the supposed vulnerabilities of central cities and mass, centralised, technological systems versus those of decentralised urban configurations with 'broken-up' and decentralised power, water and communications grids (with inbuilt 'resilience' when attacked). City-wide CCTV systems are being installed in cities like Washington DC, monitored by quasi-military organisations. The very idea of the future city must once again come to terms head to head with debates over the civil defence of millions of citizens. Our fundamentally open and mobile urban societies must somehow confront the threats of air attack, cyberspace infiltration, infrastructural sabotage, deliberate poisoning, or weapons of mass destruction.

### **Postmodern Urban Siege Warfare: Anti-Globalisation and Urban Conflict**

The final struggle is over the city as a contested terrain of globalisation. In the past decade we have seen a proliferating range of set-piece urban siege-battles at Seattle, Washington, Prague, London, Genoa, Ottawa, Philadelphia, Windsor, Melbourne, Cologne, Nice, Goteborg, and Barcelona to coincide with major meetings of the G8, WTO, IMF, NAFTA and the EU. Just as cities must compete for the roving accolades of World Cups, Olympics or City of Culture designations, so the roving urban war over the nature of globalisation incorporates a growing litany of the world's major urban cores.

The city is both the prime site for the economic and political coordination of globalisation, and one of the key terrains (along with cyberspace) where a disparate variety of groups resisting the neo-liberal orthodoxies of dominant globalisation trends can develop their resistance and bring it to bear. Cities are where multiple diasporas come together in place. They house the social movements, NGOs and independent media organisations that challenge and subvert dominant processes of contemporary economic, social and cultural change.

During these set-piece siege-like battles handfults of global leaders are separated in the citadels of city-cores from massed ranks of resistance by armies of security personnel, and new, postmodern city-wall structures replete with hi-tech surveillance and communications systems. These are sites of total, temporary, militarisation. Complex siege warfare tactics are employed. Access points to sewers are soldered shut. Every representational device is employed by both sides in the global PR and media war before, during and after the summit. And spirals of violence erupt as iconic but mundane spaces of globalised city - the hamburger joint, the bank, the NIKE store - are ritually destroyed. Such battles are attempts to force western media to expose the complex social and geographical divisions of labour of contemporary capitalism, and often hidden violence, that sustain and maintain them. With increasingly extreme state violence against the protests, such set piece battles inevitably claimed their first life in Genoa with the death of the activist Carlo Giuliani. In response to such global PR damage, global governance institutions are now shying away from accessible cities to retreat into easily-defended cities such as those in the Emirate states.

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