When the City Itself Becomes a Technology of War

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Abstract

The essay is framed by the proposition that cities are the frontier spaces for much of what is usually referred to as global governance challenges. It uses the case of asymmetric war to explore the contradictions that arise from this urbanizing – most significantly, the limits of superior military power when war moves to cities and the ways in which this makes powerlessness complex rather than elementary. The core of the paper focuses on Mumbai and Gaza as two sites that help us understand the enormous variability of war once it gets urbanized, and thus the multiplicity of types of asymmetric war. The essay concludes with a discussion about larger patterns we can see through the cases examined here, such as the repositioning of territory, authority and rights.

Key words

authority ■ Gaza ■ limits of military power ■ Mumbai ■ rights ■ territory

CITIES HAVE long been sites for conflicts – wars, racisms, religious hatreds, expulsions of the poor. And yet, where national states have historically responded by militarizing conflict, cities have tended to triage conflict through commerce and civic activity. But major developments in the current global era signal that cities are losing this capacity and becoming sites for a whole range of new types of conflicts, such as asymmetric war and urban violence. Further, the dense and conflictive spaces of cities overwhelmed by inequality and injustice can become the sites for a variety of secondary, more anomic types of conflicts arising from drug wars or the major environmental disasters looming in our immediate futures. All of these challenge that traditional commercial and civic capacity that has allowed cities to avoid war more often than not, when confronted with conflict, and to incorporate diversity of class, culture, religion, ethnicity.

    This unsettling of the urban order and its differences with the order of national states is part of a larger disassembling of existing territorial logics. It is happening even as national states and cities continue to be major markers of the geopolitical landscape and the material organization of territory. The type of urban order that gave us the open city is still there, but increasingly as mere visual order, and less so as social order.

    In what follows I first briefly introduce a range of global challenges that are altering the familiar urban order, and then develop one of these, the urbanizing of war. Then I take two specific attacks, one in Mumbai and one in Gaza, to examine the enormous particularities that this urbanizing of war takes on in diverse sites. Each of these cases illustrates diverse features of asymmetric war and the larger assemblages of territory, authority and rights within which they take place. Given the recency of the events that feed my analysis and hence the absence of a fully developed scholarship on this subject, what follows is in the tradition of the essay.

When Global Governance Challenges Become Concrete in Cities

Some of what are usually understood as global governance challenges actually become particularly concrete and urgent in cities. These challenges range from environmental questions to the flight of war refugees from and into cities. The major implication of this urbanizing is that cities also become a site for the making of new norms. This is a potentially significant possibility in a world where national states have had a quasi-monopoly over norm-making, to which we can add today's proliferation of privatized norm-making. This would not be the first time that cities have developed capabilities for norm-making, an issue I explore elsewhere (Sassen, 2008: ch. 2).

    We can organize the urbanizing of these various challenges along three vectors:

a) New military asymmetries

When national states go to war in the name of national security, nowadays major cities are likely to become a key frontline space. In older wars, large armies needed large open fields or oceans to meet and fight, and these were the frontline spaces. The search for national security is today a source for urban insecurity. We can see this in the so-called War on Terror, whereby the invasion of Iraq became an urban war theater. But we also see the negative impacts of this war in the case of cities that are not even part of the immediate war theater – the bombings in Madrid, London, Casablanca, Bali, Mumbai, Lahore, and so many others. The traditional security paradigm based on national state security fails to accommodate this triangulation. What may be good for the protection of the national state apparatus may go at a high (increasingly high) price to major cities and their people.

b) Global warming, energy and water insecurity

These and other environmental challenges are going to make cities frontline spaces. These challenges will tend to remain more diffuse for nation-states and for the state itself. One key reason is the more acute and direct dependence of everyday life in cities on massive infrastructures and on institutional-level supports for most people – apartment buildings, hospitals, vast sewage systems, water purification systems, vast underground transport systems, whole electric grids dependent on computerized management vulnerable to breakdowns. We already know that a rise in water levels will flood some of the most densely populated cities in the world. The urgency of some of these challenges goes well beyond lengthy negotiations and multiple international meetings, still the most common form of engagement at the level of national politics and especially international politics. When global warming hits cities it will hit hard and preparedness becomes critical. The new kinds of crises and the ensuing violence will be particularly felt in cities. A major simulation by NASA found that by the fifth day of a breakdown in the computerized systems that manage the electric grid a major city like New York would be in an extreme condition and basically unmanageable through conventional instruments.

These challenges are emergent but before we know it they will become concrete and threatening in cities. This contrasts with possibly slower trajectories at the national level. In this sense cities are in the frontline and will have to act on global warming whether national states sign on to international treaties or not. Because of this, many cities have had to develop capabilities to handle these challenges. The air quality emergency in cities such as Tokyo and Los Angeles as long ago as the 1980s is one instance: these cities could not wait until an agreement such as Kyoto might appear, nor could they wait till national governments passed mandatory laws (e.g. for car fuel efficiency and zero emissions). With or without a treaty or law, they had to address air quality urgently. And they did.

c) Urban violence

Cities also enter the domain of global governance challenges as a site for the enactment of new forms of violence resulting from these various crises. We can foresee a variety of forms of violence that are likely to escape the macro-level normative propositions of good governance. For instance, Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana have seen forms of gang and police violence in the last few years that point to a much larger breakdown than the typically invoked fact of inadequate policing. So do the failures of the powerful US army in Baghdad; to call this anarchy simply won't do. In terms of global governance questions, one challenge is to push macro-level frames to account for and factor in the types of stress that arise out of everyday life violence and insecurity in dense spaces. Some of these may eventually feed militarized responses, and this may well be inadequate or escalate the conflict.

In the next section I elaborate on one of these subjects, cities and asymmetric wars, where the city itself becomes a technology of war.

The Pursuit of National Security Can Lead to Urban Insecurity

With asymmetric war, the pursuit of national security has become the making of urban insecurity. Asymmetric war – war between a conventional army and armed insurgents – has made cities one site in the map for warring. Cities worldwide are becoming a key theater for asymmetric war, regardless of what side of the divide they are on – allies or enemies.

Since 1998 most asymmetric attacks have been in cities. This produces a disturbing map. The US Department of State's Annual Report on Global Terrorism allows us to establish that today cities are the key targets for what the report defines as terror attacks – attacks by non-conventional combatants. This trend began before the September 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon. The report finds that from 1993 to 2000, cities accounted for 94 percent of the injuries resulting from all terrorist attacks, and for 61 percent of the deaths. Secondly, in this period the number of incidents doubled, rising especially sharply after 1998. In contrast, in the 1980s hijacked airplanes accounted for a larger share of terrorist deaths and destruction than they did in the 1990s. Access to urban targets is far easier than access to planes for terrorist hijacking or to military installations. The report does not include conventional military action in and on cities; I consider such action also part of the urbanizing of war.

Asymmetric wars can be very diverse, but they share a few features. Asymmetric wars are partial, intermittent and lack clear endings. There is no armistice to mark their end. They are one indication of how the center no longer holds – whatever the center's format: the imperial power of a period or the national state of our modernity.

Here I want to distinguish four types of asymmetric war, though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One of these is the actual encounter between conventional and unconventional forces on urban terrain, with post-2003 Iraqi cities prominent instances. A second is the extension of the space for war beyond the actual 'theater of war', as might be the case with the bombings in London, Madrid, Bali, and other cities after the war on Iraq was launched. A third is the embedding of conventional state conflicts in an act of asymmetric war, as might be the case for the recent Mumbai attacks. And the fourth is the activating by asymmetric war of older conflicts that evolve into armed conflict between two unconventional armed forces, as is the case with the already mentioned Shiite-Sunni conflicts in Iraq.[1]

The new urban map of war is expansive: it goes far beyond the actual nations involved. The bombings in Madrid, London, Casablanca, Bali, Mumbai, Lahore, Jakarta, and on, are all part of this expansive map. Each of these bombings has its own specifics and can be explained in terms of particular grievances and aims. As material practices these are localized

actions by local armed groups, acting independently from each other. Yet they are also clearly part of a new kind of multi-sited war – a distributed and variable set of actions that gain larger meaning from a particular conflict with global projection.

Asymmetric war found one of its sharpest enactments in the US war on Iraq. The US conventional military aerial bombing took only 6 weeks to destroy the Iraqi army and take over. But then asymmetric war set in, with Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and other Iraqi cities the sites of conflict. And it has not stopped since.

A second set of features of contemporary wars, especially evident in the less developed areas, is that they often involve forced urbanization or de-urbanization. Contemporary conflicts produce significant population displacement both into and out of cities. In many cases, in African conflicts or in Kosovo, displaced people swell urban populations. In other cases, ethnic cleansing in its diverse variants expulses people, as has been the case in Baghdad and the departures of Sunnis, Christians and others. Finally, in many diverse contemporary armed conflicts, the warring forces avoid battle or direct military confrontation, a feature described by Mary Kaldor (2006) in her work on the new wars. Their main strategy is to control territory through the expulsion of 'the others' as defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, tribal membership, political affiliation. The main tactic is terror – conspicuous massacres and atrocities pushing people to flee.

These types of displacement – with ethnic/religious 'cleansing' the most virulent form – have a profound impact on the cosmopolitan character of cities. Cities have long had the capacity to bring together people of different classes, ethnicities and religions through commerce, politics, and civic practices. Contemporary conflicts unsettle and weaken this cultural diversity of cities when they lead to forced urbanization or internal displacement. Cities as diverse as Belfast, Baghdad or Mosul each was/is at risk of becoming an assemblage of separate urban ghettoes as a result of ethnic cleansing destroying their civic character and thereby also one key source of resistance to urban armed conflict. Baghdad has undergone a deep process of such 'cleansing', a major reason for the (relative) 'peace' of the last two years – which cannot be a lasting peace.

Elsewhere (Sassen, 2010), I have examined whether the systemic equivalent of these types of 'cleansing' in the case of very large cities may well be the growing ghettoizing of the poor and the rich – albeit in very different types of ghettoes. It leaves the middle classes, not always the most diverse group in cities, to bring urbanity to these cities. The risk is that they will supplant traditional urban cosmopolitanisms with narrow defensive attitudes in a world of growing economic insecurity and political powerlessness. Under these conditions also, displacement from countryside to town or within cities becomes a source of insecurity rather than a source of rich diversity.

Today's urbanizing of war differs from past histories of cities and war in modern times. In older wars, such as the two so-called world wars, large

armies needed large open fields or oceans to meet and fight and to carry out invasions. These were the frontline spaces of war. In the Second World War the city entered the war theater not as a site for war-making but as a technology for instilling fear: the full destruction of cities as a way of terrorizing a whole nation, with Dresden and Hiroshima the iconic cases.

Here we can see a critical dimension that shows us that cities can function as a type of weak regime: killing civilians in a city is a different type of horror from killing people – far more people – in the jungle and in villages. In that sense, the urbanizing of war points to the limits of power and, perhaps, the weight of weak orders such as the human rights regime. The countries with the most powerful conventional armies today cannot afford to repeat Dresden with firebombs or Hiroshima with an atomic bomb – whether in Baghdad, Gaza or the Swat valley.[2] They can engage in all kinds of activities, including violations of the law: rendition, torture, assassinations of leaders they don't like, excessive bombing of civilian areas, and so on, in a history of brutality that can no longer be hidden and seems to have escalated the violence against civilian populations. But superior military powers stop on this side from pulverizing a city, even when they have the weapons to do so. The US could have pulverized Baghdad and Israel could have pulverized Gaza. But they didn't. It seems to me that the reason was not respect for life or the fact that the intentional killing of civilians is illegal according to international law – they do this all the time.

Rather, I would posit that pulverizing a city is a specific type of crime, one which causes a horror that people dying from malaria does not. The mix of people and buildings – in a way, the civic – has the capacity to temper destruction, not to stop it, but to temper it. We let millions die worldwide from diseases that can easily be cured at low cost. So it is not the death of human beings as such. It is people in the context of the city, and the fact of witnesses – a sticky web of constraints consisting of a mix of law, reciprocal agreements, and the informal global court of public opinion. It is, I think, also the collective making that is a city, especially in its civic components. It seems to me that the explosion in ontological insecurity around the world was far more acute with the bombings in New York, Mumbai, Madrid, London and other cities than the death of millions from curable diseases. This might even be the case with the destruction of the large Buddha sculptures in Afghanistan.

Over and over history shows us the limits of power.[3] It would seem that unilateral decisions by the greater power are not the only source of restraint: in an increasingly interdependent world, the most powerful countries find themselves restrained through multiple interdependencies. To this I add the city as a weak regime that can obstruct and temper the destructive capacity of the superior military power, yet another component for systemic survival in a world where several countries have the capacity to destroy the planet (Sassen, 2008: ch. 8).[4]

Under these conditions the city becomes both a technology for containing conventional military powers and a technology of resistance for armed

insurgencies. The physical and human features of the city are an obstacle for conventional armies – an obstacle wired into urban space itself.[5] Would Gaza have been completely, rather than partially, destroyed if it was not densely populated, if it was just occupied by Palestinian-owned factories and warehouses?

Next I examine two cases, both with long histories of conflict, but representing sharply different trajectories and assemblages of elements. One of these is Mumbai, caught up in the older India-Pakistan conflict, with sharp fluctuations in its role as one site for asymmetric war. The other is Gaza, marked by a continuously live and open conflict with a modern state, Israel, a conflict which eventually fed a conflict with another asymmetric force, the Palestinian Authority. Both cases are enormously complex, and caught in very diverse assemblages of territory, authority and rights, each with multi-scalar dimensions. A question both these cases raise is whether they represent some of the future shapes of war.

Particularities of Mumbai

The Mumbai attack is noteworthy and different from some other examples of urban warfare because it might articulate a long-standing conventional regional interstate conflict with the mechanics of a type of urban warfare not really aligned with any conventional state interest. The Mumbai attacks succeeded in pulling conventional interstate conflict into the specifics and momentary event that was that attack. The available evidence thus far suggests that the masterminds of the attack exploited the fact of a long-standing, mostly low-intensity conventional conflict to achieve their own, perhaps separate concerns (see generally Rashid, 2008; Hamid, 2008; Devji, 2005; Das, 1990). Quite a few analysts warned that one purpose of the attacks was to draw India and Pakistan into conventional border warfare and therefore distract from Pakistani efforts at containing terrorism.

Veena Das (2008) complicates this analysis a bit, wondering if the 'new form of warfare' these attacks represent relies 'less on actual damage to life and property and more on the effects that it hopes to generate'. These effects could range from 'communal riots, more suspicion between Muslims and Hindus, further weakening of the recently elected government in Pakistan, and, ultimately, a war between India and Pakistan'. All of these effects comprise the means and implications of warfare in cities. Meanwhile, where does the most effective response to these effects originate? Sidestepping the engagement of 'failed and weak states', Das focuses on how 'civil action succeeded in thwarting the effects that the brutal violence had surely hoped to provoke'. She explains the various ways civic ideals contributed to avoiding the possible intended effect of exacerbating the interstate conflict. It seems to me that the popular tendency in post-attack Mumbai to characterize the attacks more as a war on the *city* of Mumbai goes in this same direction, using the civic capabilities of the city to move away from a geopolitical two-state conflict.

Likewise, immediately after the attacks, Juan Cole (2008) urged the Indian government to 'remember asymmetry', rather than seeing in their scale a sophistication that can only be state-backed and therefore might justify interstate tension, or as in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, a military response. Even now, appeals to stay away from a conventional military response invoke a distinction between Pakistan at large and the possible role of only some state-backed elements, rather than admitting that such intensity could be achieved without the authority of a state.

At the same time, we should note how both insurgents and terrorists draw on tacit state approval or even the segmented condition of modern statehood to establish their authority. The fact that 'weak' states can host terrorist infrastructure within their territory but beyond their authority has in the past justified so-called surgical or strategic campaigns to root out terrorist training camps and other facilities. But Bibhu Prasad Routray (2008) notes that such camps could not 'offer the training facilities for the urban operations that the terrorists carried out in Mumbai' and that such facilities are most likely located in big cities like Karachi, 'intermingled with civilian areas'. Now that asymmetric combatants are also based and training deep in urban areas, they are out of range of conventional warfare and strategies such as air raids prove tactically useless. In this way, the city is not only a target for attacking but also a constraint to conventional military attack.

Faisal Devji (2008) argues that any political motivation behind these attacks, even the attempt to instigate a conflict that would divert attention from the Afghan border, 'constitute a gambler's gestures rather than a set of political calculations'. He adds that the violence displayed takes political violence to a new level, that these gunmen represent a new class of militant actor. These terrorists are more like counter-terrorists, 'highly skilled "commandos" deploying rapidly to "secure" an entire sector of the city by the use of small arms, explosives and the controlled movement of crowds of civilians'. If they did fight alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda, they have learned more from their enemy than their comrades, as their terrorism resembles 'a military operation more than it does the amateur and individualistic militancy of Al-Qaeda' or 'the tribal warfare of the Taliban'.

Devji sees in all this the successful swallowing of an international terrorist network by its local protector, obsessed with totally local concerns: in other words, 'the global has disappeared into the local to animate it from within'. After all, the aims of the group responsible for the attacks are neither 'military or political advantage for Pakistan, nor a global Islamic caliphate' but some sort of factional, localized priority for Muslim communities against their local oppression. This type of program, Devji explains, transcends the political, even if it originates in political grievances.

Arvind Rajagopal (2008) adds that the urban geography of this attack, as with the 1993 bombings in Mumbai, mark a departure from 'previous episodes of a more domestic violence': not only did both attacks target rich areas in retribution for violence mostly concentrated on the poor, but

'violence in *media-dark* ghettos has been followed by violence in the most public and *media-bright* parts of the city'. Indeed, while the usual response is to assert that such 'senseless' violence reveals the limits of the political, Rajagopal explains that terrorism and other new technologies of publicity disclose the presence of those denied legality, albeit through criminal acts. If outlaws once laid the basis for law, today the challenge before the law is to respond not only to the terrorist but also to the migrant, the slum-dweller, the uprooted peasant and other victims of industrial development, and the religious and ethnic minority.

He emphasizes a 'growing separation between politics and publicity' that terrorism negotiates and the law, attending only to the visible, enforces. Others have also found the attacks useful for framing some important realizations about the conditions and contradictions of Indian democracy in a global context.

After all, the real dramatic impact of the Mumbai attacks was that they struck symbolic sites of the cosmopolitan and transnational elite, including two luxury hotels. Not only does the choice of these targets reflect a recognition of what spaces of the city will attract the most international visibility, attention, and sympathy, but Sankaran (2008) argues that it has allowed the domestic media to cast these sites and the sociology they represent as the 'face' of India, its proud future. More were killed in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station than in any of the other sites. But most media attention focused on the sites where foreigners and the wealthy were targeted.

Indeed, Sankaran (2008) asserts that while 'the ordinary Indian is unperturbed by terror', accustomed to other forms of persistent urban violence, the same is not so of elite India. Indeed, the degree of carnage is not remarkable when compared to the casualities of sectarian riots, or even past terrorist attacks. Even the tactics are familiar, recognizable to anyone familiar with the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which has been carrying out these 'fedayeen' (literally, death-defying') suicidal frontal attacks (therefore unlike most 'suicide attacks') against Indian government targets in Kashmir for years. Sumantra Bose (2008) calls fedayeen 'a rudimentary form of "shock and awe" warfare' and observes that its perpetrators have now 'brought the "war" – as they see it – to India's elite class, and to affluent Westerners living in or visiting India's most cosmopolitan city'. This is what urban insecurity represents in global cities, signaling the important connection it has to national security and the national interest, in the form of the global commercial and political value of the city that these sites represent.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) also connects the attacks to India's experience with globalization: he argues that 'diverse global tensions' such as 'terrorism, economic-environmental crises, and civil wars that dislocate populations' will raise the question of whether 'democratic states' need to become 'security-states' to cope with these new challenges. He describes the Mumbai attacks as introducing Indian democracy into the debates

surrounding the experience of rights such as the 'right to security' in a global age. Indian democracy has spent the past few decades dealing with politics of identity (i.e. minority empowerment), a struggle that relates to the inefficiencies in its administrative apparatus (corruption, welfarism). In order to restore the governance needed to deal with these challenges, this security-centered approach to rights will have to retake priority, insulated, he explains, from the political interference that has surrounded debates about rights in the rest of the liberal democratic experience.

Similarly, blogging on the rights and privileges of 'victims of terrorism' mere days after the attack, Mukul Sharma (2008) hints at how the state should deal with the aftermath of terrorism as a case of conventional war in contexts other than the actual warfare. Borrowing language from international humanitarian law, he discusses the right of terrorism victims to 'compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition' in ways that hint at their combined status as both victims and veterans of such war, and the state as a novel sort of guarantor of rights. Considering this attack in relation to the 'multi-scaled global urban war space' explains some of its particularity. After all, the attack featured terrorists exploiting the ease of attacking American and British citizens abroad, where security is poor compared to their countries of origin. In order to protect their citizens, nations cannot rely solely on their own security mechanisms and programs, they must invest in the urban security of wherever their citizens travel or do business. In this way, terrorism recasts the territorial boundaries of 'homeland' security, even if its immediate aims are irrelevant to the domestically-minded responses attended.

In a similar way, Arjun Appadurai (2008; see also 2006) emphasizes other very local power struggles that these attacks expose, less in their actual intention than in their implications. In regards to the former, he notes that Mumbai is one of the most militarized and well-guarded cities in India. Though perceived primarily as a commercial nexus, it hosts the 'Western Command of the Indian Navy, by far the most powerful base for Indian ships, sailors and naval strategists' and 'the Bhabha Atomic Research Center . . . a key part of India's nuclear apparatus'. Moreover, a 'vast proportion' of its real estate 'is directly or indirectly controlled by the Indian Navy, the Indian Army, the Mumbai police and various other military or security agencies'.

But beneath the embarrassment these attacks thus represent for India's military, he describes geographies of power and identity that received the attack on different terms, reflecting the city's implication in other circuits and geographies, such as 'struggle between the Indian Ocean commercial/criminal nexus and the land-based nexus that stretches from Mumbai to Delhi to Kashmir', 'the struggle between political and commercial interests now located in Maharashtra and Gujarat for control over Mumbai', and a more subtle struggle between the plebian Hindu nationalism of North and Greater Mumbai who care little for wealthy South Mumbai and

'the more slick, market-oriented face of the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose elite supporters know that South Mumbai is crucial to the mediation of global capital to India'.

Even if the enactors of the violence had little knowledge about Mumbai, the city's particularities emerge as a consequence of warfare in a city that has its own history and identity, beyond globalized narratives of terrorism that threaten to flatten these qualities.

The Particularity of Gaza

What has happened in Gaza is of a different order. Gaza's resistance is part of an asymmetry. But, ironically, it may well be of a more advanced sort than the other cases that are usually mentioned. Here I want to explore whether what we are witnessing is part of a larger emergent dynamic, one with vastly diverse manifestations and normative valences. This means seeing Gaza not just in its present condition of abuse by its powerful neighbor, but as a moment, an epoch in a trajectory that moves into the future. The increasingly acute asymmetry marking the Israel-Gaza 'interaction' may be pointing to a breaking point in the geometry of the current period of asymmetric war.

The recent one-way Israeli bombing of Gaza was more reminiscent of the six-week one-way bombing of Iraq in the 2003 US-led invasion. The asymmetric war that followed in Iraq's cities once the US-led forces were on the ground has not quite happened in Gaza. Hamas fired mostly ineffective rockets on civilian populations, which terrorized but did not inflict the deaths of civilians and military we saw in Iraqi cities. Gaza has become an extreme site for the unilateral developing and enacting of the instruments of war in urban settings on the part of Israel's conventional military force. It is a site where Israeli forces can experiment with modes of urban warfare (e.g. Weizman, 2007) given the fact of occupation and control over most of the means of survival of the Gaza people. In the process it terrorizes a whole population.

But Gaza has also become a site that makes visible the limits of power in a condition of absolute military superiority. Even in such an unbalanced military situation, the superior force can hit a point where it has to switch to obstructionism rather than pulverizing its enemy. Particular conditions need to come together to produce such constraints on the superior military force, and those conditions can be highly variable. In Israel's case it did not have the Dresden or Hiroshima option, partly because launching its most powerful bomb would have become self-destructive. But also partly because it is caught in a web of international interdependencies, none of which could actually overwhelm a country – these interdependencies derive their power from non-military capacities.

Gaza shows us the limits of power and the limits of war. Gaza is part of an asymmetry so extreme that it cannot even accommodate the kinds of asymmetric war we saw in Iraqi cities once the on-the-ground occupation started. In this regard it shows us the limits not only of power but also of war. Gaza's vulnerability to conventional military attack and control

increasingly makes Hamas into the main provider of civilian services. And, at the same time, Israel cannot use its most powerful weapon and is reduced to an obstructionist force, stopping food and construction materials sent by international aid agencies. Israel has destroyed thousands of homes, bombed schools and hospitals and the economic infrastructure. It has done targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders, it has basically razed vast parts of the built environment of Gaza, attacked the water and electricity supplies, and dismembered its territory. It has done just about all that is conceivable to destroy it and demoralize a people. Yet it is still not a victor according to its own definition of victory. And we can sense that it is not the end of Gaza – Gaza is not going away.

For years now Israeli efforts to challenge or contain Hamas's authority have relied on tactics of conventional warfare (bombing, controlling borders, air support) thereby asserting/demonstrating Israeli authority as military power. The aims included explicitly challenging the notion that Hamas rule could lead to any stability. Greenwald (2009a, 2009b) argues that the political purpose therefore was manifestly similar to terrorism, an approach that he describes as built into the Israeli army's strategy of urban warfare. This seems to arise from the very deployment of conventional warfare in the city, as though its situation in an urban setting confers on it qualities and purposes similar to terrorism. Urban space makes the aggressive presence of a conventional army into a terrorizing presence; this can hold even when its purpose is peace-keeping – always a dubious proposition when one side is a fully weaponized actor.

Hroub (2009) observes that the real effect of 'terror' has been to assure Palestinian faith in the everyday ability of Hamas to resist Israeli militancy. This is built into the asymmetric nature of modern warfare in urban settings.[6] In my reading there is a temporal dimension in this type of urban war which is critical to the unconventional side, in this case Hamas. It makes legible the limits of military superiority and that under certain conditions powerlessness can become complex (Sassen, 2008: ch. 6).[7] In this complexity lies the possibility of making the political, of making history. But this entails a far longer temporality than that of military superiority.

In general, these strategies have been figured as a matter of protecting Israeli sovereignty by diminishing Hamas/Palestinian sovereignty. Benhabib (2009) finds that it represents Israel seeking 'Westphalian security in a post-Westphalian world'. Meanwhile, Hamas's sovereignty also flirts with these notions in its rule of Gaza, especially as it pertains to the project of a two-state solution. Israel interacts with this prospect by overseeing, constructing, and innovating its own civic and municipal institutions and destroying those of Gaza. On the other hand, Benhabib describes an Israeli program of building greenhouses in Gaza to encourage Palestinian agricultural imports, and their destruction by Palestinian crowds. There is, in all of this, a conflation of military and political vision which may be one of the systemic dynamics of urban warfare.

Juan Cole (2009) describes this type of warfare as micro-war, to distinguish it from conventional macro-war. He outlines its specific strategies, notably ties to regional support, provision of civic/social services, media exposure. Israel, on the other side, seeks to challenge the ability of Hamas to support the Gaza public, 'denying it enough food, fuel, electricity and services to function healthily, in hopes that it could be made to turn against Hamas'. But in order to do so it must also carefully manage media attention, a crucial dimension of war in modern cities. Ultimately, the battle is for the impression of the Palestinian public, so civic and cultural appeals/challenges figure heavily. This is different from how sovereignty is constituted to the international public. And it is different from the role of humanitarian/peace activists: the 'peace process industry' emphasizes change through mechanisms of 'civil society' (tribunals, sanctions) that neglect concerns related to what actually has to change on the ground for Palestinian sovereignty to become possible (Christison and Christison, 2009). In other words, a state cannot form simply through a peace process. But the material practices of civic and social sovereignty Hamas represents and Israel challenges may well be one step. On the other hand, the unconventional symmetric conflict between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority is the type of conflict that can destroy that possibility.

Bits of a New Reality

The intensity and the thickness of these conflicts – whether the momentary explosion in Mumbai or the drawn-out conflict in Gaza – make it difficult to gain a more abstract understanding, one somewhat removed from its own horror. The urbanizing of war and its consequences is part of a larger disassembling of traditional all-encompassing formats of our early modernity, notably the nation-state and the interstate system. The consequences of this disassembling are partial but evident in a growing number of very diverse domains, from economic to religious. These issues are well beyond the questions discussed in this short piece.[8] But they could also explain why cities are losing older capacities to transform potential conflicts into the civic.

In the last two centuries, the traditional foundation for the civic in its European conception has largely been the 'civilizing' of bourgeois capitalism; this corresponds to the triumph of liberal democracy as the political system of the bourgeoisie. Today, capitalism is a different formation, and so is the political system of the new global elites. These developments raise a question about what might be the new equivalent of what in the past was the civic.

We are seeing the multiplication of a broad range of partial, often highly specialized or obscure, assemblages of bits of territory, authority and rights once firmly ensconced in national and interstate institutional frames. These assemblages cut across the binary of inside and outside, ours and theirs, national versus global. They arise out of and can inhabit national institutional and territorial settings; they can also arise out of

mixes of national and global elements and span the globe in what are largely trans-local geographies connecting multiple sub-national spaces.

The ascendance of cities as a strategic frontline space for major global governance challenges is a very complex instance of this dis- and re-assembling. It seems to me that cities which become part of the larger map of urban war contribute in particularly sharp ways to this disassembling of larger more encompassing organizational formats. I would posit that Gaza makes this visible through its unsettling of the military power of Israel and through its strengthening of the civilian role of Hamas. And the attacks on Mumbai make this visible through their drawing an interstate conventional conflict into the frame, even though they were activated by sub-national particularistic interests.

Using this lens to look at some current developments opens up some interesting vistas. For instance, Hezbollah in Lebanon can be seen as having shaped a very specific assemblage of territory, authority, and rights, that cannot be easily reduced to any of the familiar containers – nation-state, internal minority-controlled region, such as the Kurdish region in Iraq, or a separatist area such as the Basque region in Spain. Similarly, the emerging roles of major gangs in cities such as São Paulo contribute to produce and/or strengthen types of territorial fractures that the project of building a nation-state sought to eliminate or dilute. Besides their local criminal activities, they now often run segments of global drug and arms dealing networks; and, importantly, they are also increasingly taking over 'government' functions: 'policing', providing social services and welfare assistance, jobs, and new elements of rights and authority in the areas they control.

I see in this proliferation of partial assemblages a tendency toward a disaggregating and, in some cases, global redeployment, of constitutive rules once solidly lodged in the nation-state project, one with strong unitary tendencies. Since these novel assemblages are partial and often highly specialized, they tend to be centered in particular utilities and purposes. The normative character of this landscape is, in my reading, multivalent – it ranges from some very good utilities and purposes to some very bad ones, depending on one's normative stance. Their emergence and proliferation bring several significant consequences, even though this is a partial, not an all-encompassing, development. They are potentially profoundly unsettling of what are still the prevalent institutional arrangements (nation-states and the supranational system) for governing questions of war and peace, for establishing what are and what are not legitimate claims, for enforcing the rule of law. A different matter is whether these established arrangements are effective at it, and whether justice is secured. The point here is that their decomposition would partly undo established ways of handling complex national and international matters.

The emergent landscape I am describing promotes a multiplication of diverse spatio-temporal framings and diverse normative (mini)orders where once the dominant logic was toward producing (grand)unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings (Sassen, 2008: chs 8 and 9).

One synthesizing image we might use to capture these dynamics is the movement from centripetal nation-state articulation to a centrifugal multi-plication of specialized assemblages. This proliferation of specialized orders extends even inside the state apparatus. I argue that we can no longer speak of 'the' state, and hence of 'the' national state versus 'the' global order. There is a novel type of segmentation inside the state apparatus, with a growing and increasingly privatized executive branch of government aligned with specific global actors, notwithstanding nationalist speeches, and a hollowing out of the legislature whose effectiveness is at risk of becoming confined to fewer and more domestic matters (Sassen, 2008: chs 4 and 5).

My argument is that these developments signal the emergence of new types of orderings that can coexist with older orderings, such as the nation-state and the interstate system. Among these new types of orderings is the increasingly urban articulation of territory for a wide range of processes, from war to global corporate capital to the increasing use of urban space to make political claims.

Notes

1. Elsewhere (Sassen, 2010) I have examined how today's civil wars generate a very specific type of the urbanizing of war: as control over territory becomes acute, evicting people becomes critical, refugees flow into cities, which is the last refuge in many cases.

2. Even if the nuclear threat to cities has remained hypothetical since 1945, cities remain highly vulnerable to two kinds of very distinct threats. The first one is the specialized aerial attack of new computer-targeted weaponry, which has been employed 'selectively' in places like Baghdad or Belgrade. The second is civil wars in their many diverse instantiations.

3. A separate source for unilateral restraint is tactical. Thus, theorists of war posit that also the superior military force should, for tactical reasons, signal to its enemy that it has not used its full power.

4. And, from a larger angle than the one that concerns me here, when great powers fail in this self-restraint we have what Mearsheimer (2001) has called the tragedy of great powers.

5. This dual process of urbanization of war and militarization of urban life unsettles the meaning of the urban. Marcuse (2002) writes that 'the war on terrorism is leading to a continued downgrading of the quality of life in US cities, visible changes in urban form, the loss of public use of public space, restriction on free movement within and to cities, particularly for members of darker skinned groups, and the decline of open popular participation in the governmental planning and decision-making process'. Second, it questions the role of cities as welfare providers. The imperative of security means a shift in political priorities. It implies a cut or a relative decrease in budgets dedicated to social welfare, education, health, infrastructure development, economic regulation and planning. These two trends, in turn, challenge the very concept of citizenship (Sassen, 2008: ch. 6).

6. See Larison (2009a, 2009b) on Israeli strategies of asymmetric warfare, though not explicitly in urban contexts.

7. My argument (Sassen, 2008: ch. 6) is that we need to open up powerlessness into a variable: at one end, it is elementary and can be understood simply as the absence of power. But at the other end, powerlessness becomes complex and hence a far more ambiguous condition. Israel's military superiority has made legible the complexity of the powerlessness of Hamas and Gaza insofar as it has made the people of Gaza even more dependent on Hamas beyond war, for daily life.

8. For an elaboration see Sassen (2008: parts 2 and 3).

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