URBAN CAPABILITIES: AN ESSAY ON OUR CHALLENGES AND DIFFERENCES

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Drawing on extensive research about global cities and citizens, this essay examines whether the proliferation of conflicts in cities across the world can overwhelm the urban capabilities that have historically enabled cities to triage conflict via commerce and civic engagement. Critical in this examination is recovering some of the differences between being powerless and being invisible or impotent. Under certain conditions the powerless make history without getting empowered in the process. There are two types of acute challenges facing cities that pertain to this question. One is asymmetric war and the urbanizing of war that it entails. My research finds that cities are a type of weak regime that can obstruct but not destroy superior military force; this weak regime rests on the civic character of cities. The second type of challenge concerns anti-immigrant hatred and violence. In an exploration of the hard work of making open cities, particular histories show us that it is possible to reposition the immigrant and the citizen as, above all, similar urban subjects, rather than essentially different. Cities are one of the key sites where new norms and identities are made. This is a particularly fluid process in our global era, when cities emerge once again as strategic economic, political and cultural sites.

Urban capabilities have often been crafted out of the struggles to go beyond the conflicts and racisms that mark an epoch. Out of this type of dialectic came the open urbanity that historically made European cities spaces for expanded citizenship. One factor feeding these positives was that both the modest middle classes and the powerful found in the city a space for their diverse life projects.[1] Less familiar to this author are the non-European trajectories of strategic spaces for the powerful and the powerless. As it is impossible to do full justice to all the aspects of this process in a short essay, I limit myself here to the basic building blocks of the argument. I focus on two types of acute challenges facing cities to explore how urban capabilities can alter what originates as hatred and conflict. One is asymmetric war and the urbanizing of war that it entails. The other is the

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hard work of making open cities—urban societies open to diverse groups with flexible mechanisms in place to resolve differences—and repositioning the immigrant and the citizen as coequal urban subjects rather than essentially different subjects, as much of the anti-immigrant and racist commentary does.

MAKING THE CIVIC

The large, complex city is a new frontier zone.[2] This is especially true if it is a global city, defined by its important function within a network of others. Actors from different worlds meet there, but without clear rules of engagement. Whereas the historic frontier lay in the far stretches of colonial empires, today it lies in our large cities. The efforts of global firms to force deregulation, privatization and new fiscal and monetary policies on host governments have to do with creating the formal instruments to construct the equivalent of a military fort on the historic frontier: the regulatory environment they need in cities worldwide to ensure a global space of operations.[3]

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But the city is a strategic frontier zone not just for the powerful but also for the conventionally powerless: disadvantaged outsiders or minorities facing discrimination. Those who are traditionally excluded can gain presence in global cities—presence vis-à-vis both power and each other. This signals the possibility of a new type of politics centered around new types of political actors. Access to the city is no longer simply a matter of having or not having power. Urban spaces have become hybrid bases from which to act via an increasingly legitimized informal politics. This is an example of what I seek to capture with the concept of "urban capabilities."

The work of making the public and the political in urban spaces becomes critical at a time of growing velocities in global life. We are witnessing the ascendancy of process and flow over artifacts and permanence; branding and the multiplication of massive structures not built to a human scale are the basic forms of mediation between individuals and markets. Since the 1980s the work of design has tended to produce narratives that add to the value of existing contexts and, at their narrowest, to the utility logics of the economic corporate world. But the city can, in its own way, talk back. For instance, there is a kind of public-making work that can produce disruptive narratives and make legible the local and the silenced. Here we can detect yet another instance of what I think of as urban capabilities.[4]

Thus, urban spaces possess the capacity to make new subjects and identities that would not be possible in, for example, rural areas or countries at large, which are dominated by different norms. Consider the formerly pro-immigration mayor

of a large U.S. city, who shifts to an anti-immigration stance when he becomes a presidential candidate; civic norms are defined differently in these spaces. A city's sociality can bring out and underline the urbanity of subject and setting, as well as dilute more essentialist signifiers. When cities confront major challenges, it is often the need for new solidarities that can bring this shift about. The joint responses required to solve urban problems place emphasis on an urban subject or identity, rather than on an individual or group identity, like one's religious creed or ethnic background.

The city, then, is uniquely capable of nurturing novel, partial orders.[5] The new strategic role of cities in international dealings is quite different from that of states. This suggests the possibility of bringing more commerce and more of the civic into these relations. It may also signal a return of urban law after a century of the ascendancy of national law. In previous research, I have explored in depth the resurgence of urban lawmaking and its significance.[6] In the United States, cities have increasingly begun to pass their own ordinances that contrast with state and national policy norms, designating their cities as sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants, for example, or passing progressive environmental laws. Movements comprised of disparate groups with a variety of grievances have managed to coalesce in increasingly legitimate ways, as seen in the "Occupy" movements that swept the United States in 2011 and 2012. Novel intercity networks across countries are growing in Europe, a process that has been helped by the growth of the European Union, the vast expansion of subsidiarity, a variety of intercity initiatives combating racism and environmental degradation and other such efforts. Such partial orderings also result from subnational struggles for self-governance at the level of the neighborhood and the city. The comingling of diverse struggles that is inherent to urban spaces is able to cultivate a broader and deeper push for a new normative order.

These are among the features that make cities a space of great complexity and diversity. Cities make possible the enhanced inclusion of diverse groups and causes, and strengthen basic civic capabilities. But cities also confront major conflicts that threaten to reduce that complexity to little more than a concrete jungle. The challenges of extreme racisms, governmental wars on terror and looming crises of climate change, to name a few, demand that we develop urban capabilities and expand the meaning of civic membership.

CITIES AND SUBJECTIVE IDENTITIES

Cities are one of the key sites where new norms and identities have been constructed, at various times, in various places and under very diverse conditions. With globalization and digitization, and all the specific elements they entail, global

cities emerge as even more strategic sites for norm and identity formation. Some of these norms and identities reflect extreme power, and others reflect innovation under duress, which often happens in immigrant neighborhoods. While strategic transformations are sharply concentrated in global cities, many are also enacted in smaller cities and suburbs, and even at lower levels of national urban hierarchies. The effects of these transformations are then diffused throughout the hierarchy.[7]

It is helpful to consider German sociologist Max Weber's landmark book, *The City,* in order to examine the potential of cities to make norms and identities. Two aspects of this early twentieth-century work are of particular importance. In his effort to specify the ideal features of a city, Weber seeks a kind of place where competing dynamics require both residents and urban leaders to respond and adapt with creativity. For Weber, the set of social structures in cities inherently encourages innovation, and thus these structures become key instruments of historical change and individual expression. In his research, he finds that it is particularly the cities of the late Middle Ages that combined the necessary conditions to push urban residents into action. Weber helps us understand the conditions under which cities can have positive and creative influences on peoples' lives. However, he did not find that the modern industrial cities of his own time (1864 to 1920) possessed these powers. Weber saw modern cities, dominated by bureaucracies and factories, as robbing their citizens of the ability to shape at least some of the city's elements.[8]

A second key feature in Weber's work is that cities have the power to effect lasting changes beyond the city itself, in that they can institute larger foundational transformations that can—under certain conditions—encompass society at large. Weber shows us how struggles in many cities have led to the creation of what today might be known as citizenship and participatory governance systems. Struggles around diverse issues centered in cities can serve as catalysts for trans-urban developments across many institutional domains.[9]

In our global era, cities have emerged once again as strategic sites for cultural and institutional change. Though counterintuitive, this quality has, by now, been extensively documented.[10] Key components of economic globalization and digitization concentrated in global cities fracture and destabilize existing institutional orders that extend well beyond cities.[11] Further, some of the key regulatory and normative frameworks for handling urban conditions are now part of the national framework—much of what is called urban development policy is, in fact, national economic policy. The high level of concentration of these new dynamics in global cities forces both the most powerful and the most disadvantaged to craft new types of responses, albeit for very different types of survival.

In contrast, when manufacturing dominated, cities were not sites for creative

institutional innovations. Rather, the factory and the government became strategic sites through innovations in mass manufacturing and mass consumption—the key building blocks of the economy at the time. My own reading of the Fordist city corresponds to Weber's in the sense that the strategic scale under Fordism is actually the national scale—cities lose significance.[12] But I part company from Weber in that historically, the large Fordist factory and the mines emerged as key sites for the making of a modern working class and for a syndicalist project; thus it is not always the city that is the site for making norms and identities.

It is worth noting that Weber's observation about urban residents, rather than merely leading classes, is also pertinent for today's global cities. As stated earlier, the disadvantaged in global cities can gain presence in relation to each other and in confronting power. This engagement represents a new opening for the disadvantaged compared with, for instance, the 1950s to the 1970s in the United States, when "white flight" and the departures of corporate headquarters drained cities of important resources and left underprivileged residents forsaken.[13] Today, the localization of the most powerful global actors in cities creates objective conditions of engagement. Examples include the gentrification of minority and disadvantaged neighborhoods in the United States, which beginning in the 1980s fueled struggles by the growing numbers of homeless, as well as demonstrations against police brutalizing minority people. Elsewhere I have developed the case that while these struggles are highly localized, they actually represent a form of global engagement. Their "globality" is a horizontal, multi-sited recurrence of similar struggles in hundreds of cities worldwide.[14] These struggles are different from the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s, which were brief but destructive eruptions confined to, and causing most damage in, the neighborhoods of the disadvantaged themselves. In these uprisings there was no engagement with power, but rather protest against power.

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Today, there are basically two conditions that make some cities strategic sites, and both capture major transformations that are destabilizing older systems that have traditionally organized territory and politics. One of these is the rescaling of the strategic territories that articulate the new political-economic system and hence at least some features of power. In turn, this weakens the national as the container of social process, which is also weakened by the variety of dynamics encompassed by globalization and digitization. The consequences for cities of these two conditions are many; what matters here is that cities emerge as strategic sites for major economic processes and new types of political actors.

Political practices in the global city today are quite different from what they might have been in the medieval city at the center of Weber's analysis. The medieval city offered a set of practices that allowed the burghers to establish systems for owning property and protected it against the desires of more powerful actors, such as the king and the church.[15] Today's political practices, I would argue, have less to do with the protection of private property than with the production of presence by the powerless who claim rights to the city.[16] What the medieval and modern global cities share is the notion that new forms of political subjectivity, such as citizenship, are being constituted through these practices and that the city is a key site for this type of political work. The city is, in turn, partly constituted through these dynamics. Far more so than a peaceful and harmonious suburb, the contested city is where the civic is built. After the long historical phase that saw the ascendance of the national state and the scaling of key economic dynamics at the national level, the city is once again a scale for strategic economic and political dynamics.[17]

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But what happens to these urban capabilities when war goes asymmetric, and when racisms fester in cities where growing numbers have to struggle for survival? Next I examine how cities can enable the so-called powerless to become participants in a range of struggles that can make an impact on the city, even if the powerless themselves do not necessarily gain power.

Conflict and Division

The increase in interdependence arising from globalization has acted as a restraint that makes great powers more likely to avoid war with each other. Yet asymmetric war has grown. The characteristics of asymmetric war—in which a conventional army confronts irregular combatants—tend to urbanize conflicts because irregular combatants can gain advantage by forcing the conventional army to fight in the city. In this context the city begins to function as a weak regime, because its dense population of civilians, hospitals, schools and homes obstructs the full deployment of air bombing and tanks.[18] The civic components that make a city—the mix of people and buildings—form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In this, the city has the capacity to obstruct the full assault of conventional militaries.[19]

But the physical and human features of cities that pose complex obstacles for conventional military technology also make them more hospitable centers for

insurgencies and unconventional tactics.[20] In earlier wars, large armies met to fight in fields or on the oceans. Conventional armies now face enemies who use asymmetric tactics, and major cities become the front lines. This completely disrupts traditional security paradigms centered around the safety of the state. What is good for the national security apparatus no longer applies to major cities—indeed, it may cost them dearly. According to information from the U.S. Department of State, most terrorist attacks since 1998 have struck cities, and these incidents account for the majority of casualties from terrorist attacks.[21] For small groups with limited resources, operationally speaking, access to urban targets is far easier than access to military installations or even planes for hijacking.

The war in Iraq that began in 2003 is a prime example of the urbanization of war. It took less than four weeks for coalition forces to cripple their Iraqi counterparts and open the country to U.S. occupation.[22] But asymmetric war quickly took over in Baghdad, Mosul, Basrah and other Iraqi cities that became sites of insurgency, and the bloodshed has continued for years. The largely urban theater of this conflict did not stop at Iraq's borders, revealing negative impacts on cities with only tenuous connections. Bombings in Madrid, London, Casablanca, Bali, Mumbai, Lahore and other cities could all be characterized as outgrowths of the war in Iraq, in that they gained legitimacy by opposing the so-called War on Terror, even though they were perpetrated by local groups. Grievances specific to the cities and countries where they took place inspired these attacks, which were carried out by groups acting independently of each other. And yet they fit clearly into an emerging trend of the so-called multi-sited war. The War on Terror, in its global expansiveness, gave larger meaning to local conflicts and was then expressed through varied and far-flung attacks, all in the name of the same struggle.

The militarization of urban life that results from these asymmetric conflicts unsettles the civic meaning of urban space.[23] This takes place even in cities that are party to the conflict but do not directly experience violence. In 2002, Peter Marcuse wrote of trends spreading to major cities around the globe after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001:

> The results are likely to be a further downgrading of the quality of life in 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.[24]

The militarization of cities also reduces civic capacity because it erodes their role 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. This trend challenges the very concept of citizenship and suggests that cities still must find new ways to transcend conflict and harness the power of the challenges they face. Such nimble capabilities are essential in order for the city to remain a diverse and inclusive space in spite of ideological war, racism, xenophobia and conflicts resulting from growing challenges like inequality, climate change and many others.[25]

Often it is the urbanity of the subject and of the setting that mark a city, rather than ethnicity, religion or phenotype. But the definition of urbanity through subject and setting does not simply happen; it frequently comes out of hard work and painful trajectories. One question is whether it can also come out of the need for new solidarities in cities confronted by major challenges, such as violent racisms or environmental crises. The acuteness and overwhelming character of the major challenges cities confront today can serve to create conditions where the challenges are bigger and more threatening than a city's internal conflicts and hatreds. This might force us into joint responses that emphasize the urban over the individual or group subject and identity, such as those denoted by ethnic or religious classifications.

Immigrants and Citizens

One important question in the making of norms concerns immigration. What must be emphasized here is the hard work of making open cities and repositioning the immigrant and the citizen as urban subjects whose differences are mostly transcended. In the daily routines of a city, the key factors that rule are work, family, school, public transport and so on, and this routine holds for both immigrants and citizens. Perhaps the sharpest difference in a city is between the rich and the poor, and both immigrants and citizens populate each of these classes.[26] It is when the law and the police enter the picture that the differences of immigrant status versus citizen status become key factors. But most of daily life in the city is not ruled by this distinction.

In my reading of the history of Europe and the Western Hemisphere, the challenges of incorporating outsiders often became the instruments for developing the civic and, in many cases, for expanding the rights of those already included. Responding to the claims of the excluded expanded the rights of citizenship. Similarly, restricting the rights of immigrants has often led to a partial loss of rights by citizens. This was clearly the case with the immigration reform act passed in 1996 by the Clinton administration in the United States, which showed that a Democratic Party legislative victory for a law on immigration had the effect of taking away rights from immigrants *and* from citizens.[27]

Anti-immigrant sentiment has played a major role in Europe's history, one overlooked in standard European accounts until very recently.[28] Anti-immigrant attacks have occurred during all major immigration phases in all large European countries. Neither countries with traditions of international neutrality, nor those ostensibly open to refugees, exiles and migrant laborers, have clean records. For instance, French workers killed Italian workers who immigrated into France in the 1800s, accusing them of being the wrong type of Catholic. Still, history suggests that those lobbying for inclusive cities and societies have made gains over time. Before the turn of the century, nearly a quarter of the French claimed a foreign-born ancestor within three generations, and about a third of the current Viennese population is born abroad or has parents from other countries.[29] These facts, in spite of the sentiment that has often opposed them, speak to the inherent inclusiveness of cities. By design, large urban service providers must treat their members equally in order to function optimally. Consider public transit: to devise a system that checked the citizenship status of all riders would be unfeasible if schedules were to be kept, and would render the service ineffective. One minimalist rule must apply to all: as long as you buy a ticket, you can participate, no matter your religion, marital status or nationality. Access is based on the same criteria for everyone, establishing the civic as a material condition.

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The New Civic Order

Global cities in large part transcend the confines of national hierarchies. They are now direct players in multi-scalar networks spanning regions and, often, the globe. Global struggles over the past two decades have increasingly found voice and organizational potential in urban spaces, where immigrants and citizens alike struggle for rights to the city and to participate politically. The hold of the urban civic order is diminishing. The major challenges facing cities, notably climate change and wars with global reach, threaten the civic order and, at the same time, may bring very diverse groups together. They affect all residents and do not discriminate along traditional lines of race, religion or phenotype. These new distinctions are acting as politically mobilizing forces in a context where the center no longer holds. ♔

NOTES

1   Saskia Sassen, "Foundational Subjects for Political Membership: Today's Relation to the National State," chap. 6 in *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages,* 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

2   Saskia Sassen, "Cities as frontier zones: Making informal politics" (lecture, "Thinking Worlds: An International Symposium on Philosophy, Politics, and Aesthetic Theory," Moscow, 17 November 2006), http://2nd.moscowbiennale.ru/en/sassen_report; Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights.*

3   For a detailed examination of this issue and extensive discussion of the relevant scholarship, see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo,* 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

4   For a more detailed discussion of urban capabilities, see Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2012); Sassen, *The Global City.*

5   Saskia Sassen, "Neither global nor national: novel assemblages of territory, authority and rights," *Ethics & Global Politics* 1, no. 1-2 (2008): 61–79.

6   The emergent landscape I am describing promotes a multiplication of diverse framings and normative mini-orders, where once the dominant logic was toward producing grand unitary national framings. Sassen, "Neither global nor national"; Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights.*

7   Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chap. 6.

8   Max Weber, *The City*, ed. and trans. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (New York: Free Press, 1966); Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chap. 2.

9   Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chaps. 2 and 6.

10   Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*; Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights;* Sassen, *The Global City.*

11   Emphasizing this multiplication of partial assemblage contrasts with much of the globalization literature that has tended to assume the binary of the global versus the national. In this literature the national is understood as a unit. I emphasize that the global can also be constituted inside the national, as is the case with the global city. Further, the focus in the globalization literature tends to be on powerful global institutions that have played a critical role in implementing the global corporate economy and have reduced the power of the state. In contrast, I also emphasize that particular components of the state have actually gained power because they have to do the work of implementing policies necessary for a global corporate economy. This is another reason for valuing the more encompassing normative order that a city can sometimes generate. For more on this and for full bibliographic information, see Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights.*

12   Named after the Ford Motor Company, Fordism refers to industrial systems of mass production and consumption that led to rapid growth in highly developed economies, especially between the 1940s and 1960s.

13   "White flight" describes the departure of white residents from areas where nonwhites are increasingly settling. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights,* chap. 6.

14   Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights,* chaps. 6 and 8.

15   In some parts of medieval Europe, members of the mercantile or middle classes were known as burghers.

16   The struggle for rights to the city is as old as cities themselves. The struggle took on a new set of meanings in the decades of high industrial growth during the mid-twentieth century and largely centered around the claims of workers for public transport, public health and public housing. In the last two decades the struggle for rights to the city has centered around anti-gentrification struggles, often at the neighborhood level, and anti-exclusionary residential practices of all sorts.

17   Saskia Sassen, "The Global Street: Making the Political," *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (October 2011): 573–79.

18   Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chap. 8; Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy.* From a larger angle than the one that concerns me here, when great powers fail in this self-restraint, we have what Mearsheimer has called the tragedy of great powers. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

[19] Saskia Sassen, "When the City Itself Becomes a Technology of War," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 27, no. 6 (November 2010): 33–50.

[20] Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010); Peter Marcuse, "Urban Form and Globalization after September 11th: The View from New York," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26, no. 3 (2002): 596–606.

[21] Calculations based on information contained in "Country Reports on Terrorism 2010," U.S. Department of State, August 2011, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/index.htm. My previous analysis of State Department findings from the 1990s onward revealed the same trend.

[22] Max Boot, "The New American Way of War," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 44.

[23] Graham, *Cities Under Siege.*

[24] Marcuse, "Urban Form and Globalization," 596.

[25] See Graham, *Cities under Siege*; Marcuse, "Urban Form and Globalization"; Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights,* chap. 6.

[26] See, for example, Michael Peter Smith and Adrian Favell, eds., *The Human Face of Global Mobility: International Highly Skilled Migration in Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific (Comparative Urban and Community Research 8)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

[27] Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights,* chap. 6; see also chaps. 4 and 5 for a diversity of other domains besides immigration where this holds.

[28] This paragraph is based on research conducted for two previous works. See Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens: Europe's Immigrants, Refugees and Colonists* (New York: New Press, 1999); Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), chap. 5.

[29] Michèle Tribalat, "An Estimation of the Foreign-Origin Populations of France in 1999," *Population* 59, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 64; "1,353 Mio. Menschen in Oesterreich mit Migrationshintergrund" [1.353 million people in Austria with an immigrant background], Statistics Austria, news release, 8 November 2007, http://www.statistik.at/web_de/presse/027382.