Urban militarism: excluding the 'disordered'

Vijay Nagaraj, 13th September 2011

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The coupling of revanchist logic with the new military urbanism is creating citadels of political and economic power from which the poor and 'disordered' are excluded. Stephen Graham in conversation with Vijay Nagaraj
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Vijay Nagaraj (VN) : *I want to start by asking you to reflect on how contemporary urban militarism [9] impinges on the governance of urban poverty?*

Stephen Graham (SG) : The trends towards increased militarisation need to be located within a broader geopolitical context where state versus state conflict is on the wane, and state militaries mobilise against a range of non-state actors, including civilians, social movements and other struggles. The way in which security politics and security agencies around the world are increasingly preoccupied, almost obsessed, with the city as a fulcrum of their work is problematic for anyone interested in urban democracy, rights to the city and the rights of the urban poor.

The war on terror operations in London, efforts to securitise and militarise cities during G-20 summits and other mega events, the counter-drug and counter-terror efforts in the favelas of Rio are all very similar in process, and link very closely to the full-scale counterinsurgency warfare and colonial control operations in places like Baghdad or the West Bank. Widespread metaphors of the war on drugs, the war on terror, and even the war against poverty are used within a broader culture of militarisation present across the global north and global south. What we have is a situation marked by the use of high-tech military-style technologies, either in para-military policing or full scale military operations, in cities where the supposed targets are indistinguishable from the wider population. This results in a profound sense of militarisation that targets everybody all of the time, which has very important legal, geographic, social and political effects.

The political geographies of social control are changing with liberal regimes resorting to illiberal [10] means, both within and outside of traditional western states. With state and security operations now mobilising against the mass civilian population, where the supposed enemy is not necessarily visible, enormous effort is put into a technophiliac imaginary of high-tech surveillance. Surveillance - marketed by a very big military-industrial complex - becomes a way of sorting the "enemy" from the population automatically. It works by looking at previous traces of associations, movements, habits, tastes and geographical behaviour to try to identify things that are deemed to be "abnormal" in the city.

VN : *Are we then witnessing the growth of militarised democracies in which technology and security governance reconfigure class differences, so that it is not just about 'haves' and the 'have-nots' but about those who are perceived to pose a risk and those considered safe ?*

SG : Yes, the geographies of these processes of securitisation and militarisation are very much about imaginaries*.* Mustafa Dikeç [11] has shown how the *banlieus* on the edge of Paris are very much

projected by the French right and the security establishment as a population that is also a threat to the whole project of French nationhood. This is a profoundly racialised discourse that is trapped in the postcolonial experience. More importantly, it invokes quasi-military solutions to problems concerning social welfare, social integration, employment etc. This response moves way beyond questions of citizenship, the rights to mobilise and to democratically engage, and instead constructs these groups as ripe targets for punitive solutions.

This brings together two trends. The first is the trend towards what's been called the revanchist city [12], motivated by the idea that the city needs to be reclaimed by the political and socio-economic elite. This has very much been the model of downtown gentrification of places like New York, where certain dominant groups deemed that there was too much disorder in the city and that this was problematic for economic development. "Disorder" meant disciplining the poor through zero-tolerance policing and other methods, which has effectively resulted in an enormous purge against the poor in housing, public space, the rights to assemble, legal proscriptions, and so on. The second trend is the blurring of the revanchist logic with the new military urbanism. We now have a very high-tech militarised approach to proscribing and demonising those "disorderly" populations, but it has a very similar effect to revanchist policies: it results in the building of citadels of consumption and of political and economic power from which the poor and the disordered can be excluded.

VN : *Your comments remind me of Sri Lanka; following the end of the war in May 2010, one of the first things the government did was to bring the Urban Development Authority [13] under the Ministry of Defence. The post-war militarisation of urban administration went hand in hand with a new discourse about how beggars and destitute populations not only posed a security threat but were also a blot on the landscape of the city. There have also been allegations of beggars disappearing [14]*

SG : The whole logic of emergency, whether it surrounds a major political summit in a city, an all-out civil war, or full-scale colonisation, allow the security industrial apparatus to intensify its hold over civil-democratic questions of the rights to the city. The problem, of course, is that even after a conflict or a mega-event cease, a very powerful sense of social control and demonisation of marginal groups in the city remains. So, you have this chilling effect, which is often milder than in Sri Lanka, for example, but still pushes together, in a very profound way, the militarised imagination about the city and about the need to target those deemed to be threatening the city's established order.

This is often linked to a very powerful sense of packaging the city for consumption and investment, such as the building of "World Class" cities. In Mumbai, for example, there is deliberate effort [15] to re-package, re-imagine, and re-plan the city on these lines. It is targeted to be the next big global financial center—the 'Next Shanghai'. Here, revanchist logic supports the erasures of informal settlements so that land can be speculated into gated vertical apartment complexes. A militarised logic, of course, wraps into the anti-terror discourse surrounding successive terrorist attacks, also feeding into the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Hindu fundamentalist political parties. Now, all this poses profoundly problematic questions regarding the politics of water and sanitation. There is now a big water crisis in Mumbai [16] and there are allegedly police squads that go out and destroy the improvised water systems that are built, often with collusion by corrupt state officials, in the informal settlements. This is all to do with taking back the water for the middle class to make Mumbai 'world class'.

Despite the contextual differences, the geographic binary of global north and global south is no longer very helpful. On the one hand, we have development geography and hyper-capitalist models at play in places like India, China and Brazil, which force extraordinary wealth, political and economic power into these supposedly Global South environments. On the other hand, we have profound economic backwardness, marginality, and poverty in large swathes of the Global North. There is a need for a much more fine-grain geographic language to tackle what we might call the 'world city network' and its archipelagos of wealth, poverty, social control, investment and disinvestment.

VN : *Linking this conversation to your work on technology, could social movements and communities appropriate the technology and the tools to subvert the structures of exclusion and power?*

SG : There are a whole range of possibilities being explored all over the world. Even though many technologies may have emerged through military industrial operations, we are able use things like GoogleEarth, GPS, Google maps, and a whole range of mobile communication technologies. Artist communities have long been critically engaging with these technologies, but social movements too are starting to realise their potential. Many communities are now using [17] data technologies, in engaging in disputes against demolition as well as punitive and predatory styles of urban planning. Other communities are interested in understanding how software and data are being used to red-line their spaces in the city from investment and access to financial and insurance services. Geographic Information Systems are used in a much more progressive way in response to the highly regressive data management practices of states and corporations. There is a *politics of data and of digital information* in the city expressing the need for robust, democratically organised social movements to really harness these technologies in their full range. There is also a *politics of witnessing* at work here. That these digital technologies are now rather ubiquitous in many cities itself can help force reforms in the way policing is governed and in the treatment of protestors, for example.

VN : *One final question: from your work and engagement with a number of different actors, how effectively do you think the global human rights movement has picked up on some of the issues you have been concerned with?*

 SG : Well, I actually think there is a lot of progress to be made here. Given the origins and the background of the global human rights movement, it is not surprising that it brings a non-spatial imaginary and non-geographic approach to its efforts—very laudable and important efforts—which leads to the emphasis on universalism. This emphasis is important but there is a pressing need for the human rights community to engage much more comprehensively with geographies and the particularly of the city as a space through which human rights are addressed, proscribed and facilitated because as you say, we are now in an urban millennium—a world that is now over fifty percent urban and by 2050 is likely to be around 70% urban [18]. Thus, it is inadequate to have a non-geographic approach to questions of human rights. It is through the material landscapes and legal geographies and political and institutional systems of cities that humans will be able to gain rights. Therefore the human rights movement needs to engage with and expose the links between the punitive world, revanchist politics, the global neo-liberalist system and new military-urbanism, and how they combine to undermine human rights in cities around the world.

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