

Martin Coward
Newcastle University, UK
martin.coward@ncl.ac.uk

Crisis Forum Climate Change and Violence Seminar, London, 09.10.09

Confronting organised violence in and against the city: what do current trends in urban securitisation tell us about how climate change violence might be addressed?

Abstract

In this presentation I will examine the manner in which violences in and against the city foreshadow responses to potential violences associated with climate change in the context of urbanisation. Global urbanisation will be a defining feature of the twenty-first century. The growth of cities and associated increase in city-dwellers will transform both governance and ecology. Attendant to these changes will be a novel set of violences - both against the fabric of the city and within its spaces. I am particularly interested in the violences wrought by organised violence or warfare (rather than, say, the violence of gangs or organised crime). Two types of such violence stand out as exemplary: so-called 'terrorist' strikes against critical infrastructure and so-called 'network centric' counter-insurgency operations. These violences are exemplified by the London/Madrid bombings and ongoing US military operations in Iraq. These violences have distinctive contours and either generate or represent particular responses to perceived crises or security threats. Observing the contours of such violences and the responses they generate will tell us much about the way in which urban crises will be confronted. This is of particular interest when thinking about the possible violences associated with climate change precisely because urbanity and ecology are traditionally assumed to be separate spheres. However, climate change will have a distinctive impact on the city. Learning about the way in which violences within the city are currently confronted (and the short-sighted nature of these strategies) will tell us about the emergent trends that may well be mobilised to address violences associated with climate change in the context of urbanisation.

Introduction: the urbanisation of security

Let me begin by outlining my research interests and how they intersect with the workshop theme. Briefly put, my current research concerns the relationship between the city and war. This research agenda combines two intertwined themes that have defined my research to date. The first theme is that of the nature of political violence. In particular, I am interested in forms of organised violence such as genocide, war and terror. Most recently I have written about the nature of a particular form of organised violence against cities: urbicide, the widespread and deliberate destruction of urban environments. The second theme is the morphology of global order and the identification of future trends in geopolitics. Beyond globalisation it is the expansion and networking together of urban environments that is shaping the geopolitics of the contemporary period. Urbanisation thus comprises the most pressing problem when thinking about the future of global order.

These two issues are combined in the question of the nature of organised violence in city spaces. This is not a forced intersection of otherwise disparate research agendas. On the contrary, global urbanisation means that the city is increasingly the arena for, and target of, various forms of warfare. The two most prominent forms of war in the contemporary period are, arguably, counter-insurgency and terrorism/insurgency. Recent trends have seen the city take centre stage as both arena for, and target of, these forms of violence. Whether it is American forces in Sadr City or so-called 'al Qaeda style' attacks on Madrid and London, the targeting of the city has distinctively shaped these contemporary forms of violence and responses to them.

Examination of these violences against the city demonstrates that the contemporary period is characterised by what I have called the *urbanisation of security*. This reciprocal dynamic captures the sense in which on the one hand urbanisation inflects the conceptual imaginary and public discourses of security and on the other securitisation is shaping the form and character of the urban environment. The city – as arena and target of organised violence – thus shapes security; it urbanises it. But the city is itself shaped by security

discourses – surveillance, restrictions of mobility and hardening of urban fabric are the classical ways in which this occurs. It should be stressed that there is no causal primacy in this relationship, it is a dynamic of mutual constitution.

It is this urbanisation of security that I want to discuss today. Specifically, I want to discuss the manner in which the urbanisation of organised violence has given rise to a distinctive securitisation of the urban environment. In other words, I want to examine how the targeting of cities has given rise to particular responses. This, I take it is the departure point for the workshop – namely, that certain violences give rise to certain securitising impulses on the part of a variety of governmental authorities. In the main these impulses have been oriented towards securing the city insofar as it is perceived to be vital to the continued well-being of the state.

This is, of course only the departure point for this workshop. Examining securitising impulses is worthwhile insofar as it gives us insight into possible future scenarios regarding responses to violence associated with climate change. I will thus turn in the second half of this presentation to the way in which climate change, violence and the city are intertwined. I will focus two obvious dynamics. On the one hand I will look at the manner in which climate change is expected to bring about certain forms of violence – particularly as a consequence of the migrations and resource scarcities predicted to attend climate change. On the other hand I will look at the manner in which climate change itself is constructed as a threat to the city. I will suggest that the current urbanisation of security gives rise to a conceptual machinery ill equipped to cope with these scenarios.

Global urbanisation and organised violence

The fate of the state in the contemporary period is bound up with the fate of the city. As the UN documented in 2006, from 2007 over half of the world's population live in cities. Famously, this led UNHABITAT to declare the advent of an 'urban millennium'. Hyperbole aside, urban life has become the predominant mode of human existence in the contemporary period. As such, the fate of governance – which has been traditionally vested in the state – is bound up with the evolution of urban form.

Cities are increasingly expanding to merge into vast conglomerates in which what were city centres become networked together to create a multi-centric 'metacity' with no specific or obvious core. The metacity is a city that emerges from a number of previously extant, smaller cities by virtue of the linking together of these various urban centres. This dynamic of urban development is primarily driven by the emergence of various infrastructures including, though not limited to, roads and other transport systems, food, water and energy supply, waste removal and, perhaps most importantly, communications and information technology. Even where these infrastructures fail or are poorly developed it is the lack of such systems – and the problems that arise – that defines urban development, rather than some other principle. Thus Lagos for example is a dysfunctional metacity, measured by its failure to achieve infrastructural networking. Even slums are defined by this standard. One could, therefore, say that contemporary urban existence is defined, or constituted, in relation to infrastructure.

The emergence of metacities is related to warfare in three important ways. Firstly, the sprawl associated with this form of urbanisation means that an increasing amount of the earth's surface is occupied by cities. As such there is an increasing probability that military operations will take place in the city or that terrorists looking to target populations in order to achieve political goals will turn to the city as target. More importantly, the dynamics of urban expansion are fed by rural to urban migration and thus the city is swelled by increasing numbers of recruits to various insurgent causes and thus an increasing number of targets for counter-insurgent violence.

Finally, the city itself is the target for both types of violence. On the one hand insurgents target the metropolitan structures that are the defining characteristic of these cities in an attempt to undermine the ways of life that metacities support. Simultaneously these insurgent groups exploit the city as a densely linked infrastructure of support. Counter insurgent forces thus have two tasks on their hands – to prevent damage to the structures of metacity life and to deny insurgents the support that the city offers. They are stuck between irreconcilable impulses: protection of the city and destruction of the city. These twin impulses can be seen at their logical extremes in the City of London and Fallujah.

Securitisation of the city

Governmental response has thus been to secure city space. This response has comprised attempts to make the city resilient. In general terms this has meant hardening structures and restricting mobility (or perhaps, more fairly, channelling mobilities). This has encompassed a triumvirate of dynamics: surveillance, interdiction, hardening. It is from these dynamics that the urbanisation of security has emerged. Security technologies are urbanised – adapted to the demands of surveilling, interdicting and hardening city spaces and those very spaces are themselves securitised insofar as they are shaped to achieve resilience.

Simultaneously, the state has come to view the security problem posed by cities as one that is, ultimately, military in character. Though the city has often been reshaped by military forces (Paris being the classic example), there has been renewed focus on shaping both the military and the city to facilitate urban operations. Soldiers are now equipped to explore the city's spaces in novel ways – dragon runner and micro-drones being good examples. The military has acquired a number of technologies that can, in Steve Graham's phrase, 'switch cities off' – carbon filament bombs to destroy electricity grids being a good example.

The city is thus the target of a securitising thrust that, at its core, is military in nature. This securitising thrust shapes both the horizon of thought regarding threats and the spaces of the city.

Climate change, violence and the city

What then, will be the intersection of this securitisation with climate change and the violence associate with it? I take it here that there are two types of violence that will be visited on the city in light of climate change. On the one hand there are the violences that will arise as a consequence of the environmental and demographic trends associated with climate change. On the other there are the violent climate events themselves that are predicted to be either more frequent or more severe as a consequence of climate change. I will treat the former first.

Here I take it that the principle violences that will arise in the city are a consequence of intertwined dynamics of displacement and resource competition as a consequence of climate change and unsustainable resource use. This violence could take several forms: social friction as a consequence of rapid migration from rural to urban in an attempt to escape rural landscapes blighted by climate change induced scarcities; organised violence on behalf of groups affected by climate change (this could take a wide variety of forms but might be typified by eco-terrorism or violent protest on behalf of the dispossessed); organised violence to control resources vital to the city; or organised violence to control or destroy the infrastructures that make the city liveable and yet at the same time entrench harshly unequal power and wealth differentials.

All these violences will focus on the urban environment as their arena or target. All indications point to authorities selecting a militarised response to these violences. Surveillance, interdiction and hardening seem to be the strategic watchwords that guide securitisation against these threats. The hardening of critical infrastructures is instructive here since it indicates that unsustainable modes of life will not seek to modify consumption, but rather to repulse threats.

One caveat is worth making here. As Simon Marvin has noted, a number of initiatives exist to establish ecologically secure cities. These programs focus on zero-carbon building, reduction of energy consumption, increased sustainability and so on. On the one hand these programs seek to make currently unsustainable cities liveable both in terms of their resource consumption (which cannot continue without effects being felt by citizens) and ecological conditions (for example to mitigate the heat island effect felt by cities and amplified under conditions of global warming).

But more importantly, ecological security is also intended to confer a form of competitive advantage: cities that can claim ecological credentials can claim a moral high ground and attract the kind of attention that is valuable in attracting investment and tourism. As such this trend is a mixed blessing as its ecological credentials belie motives that are not wholly concerned with sustainability. After all, ecological security may mitigate consumption issues and yet it will still have to secure the premises and persons that are attracted as a consequence of investment. Thus ecology here seems to be a last gamble to keep the current urban economy running with a minimum of disruption.

Climate change as a violence against the city

The city's resource consumption is a profound ecological violence. But whatever violence urban life does to ecologies, climate events visit similar violences back upon the city. Although the city has always been at risk of earthquakes a new range of violences seem to be visited upon it with increasing severity and frequency. The two most notable are the wild fires of California and Australia and hurricanes such as Katrina. As Mike Davis notes in his *Ecology of Fear*, cities such as Los Angeles have consistently failed to properly understand the manner in which the urban environment is at risk where such violences are concerned. Indeed, as Steven Graham has noted, the US government actively contributed to the risk of catastrophic flooding faced by New Orleans by withdrawing funds necessary to complete levees and other safeguards against climate events.

But what is most interesting about these violences is the way in which the correct response is still seen as a securitisation predicated upon a militarised resilience: surveillance and hardening. Defence against future flooding to New Orleans lies in the hands of the Army Corps of Engineers, for example. Nature is perceived as a militant threat, a potential urban insurgent to be repelled.

Conclusion – on the problem of ecologies

The problem highlighted by this treatment of climate events that threaten cities is an impoverished notion of ecology and, hence, an impoverished notion of what must be secured in the course of predicted climate change. Put briefly, the problem is that ecology is conceived if as something external to the city, a threat that comes from outside its limits. The city itself is rarely seen as an ecology. But the city is both part of a wider ecology – it is a consumer of resources, excretor of waste, site of various niche habitats and so on. More importantly, the complex technological infrastructures of city life are an ecological system productive of a particular type of political subject: metropolitan humanity. Understanding the complexity of that infrastructural ecology is important.

The militarised outlook of urban securitisation is not promising in this regard. It encourages the notion that man-made urbanity is at threat from ‘natural’ violences. This image is nicely captured in Richard Norton’s notion of ‘feral cities’. Published in *Naval War College Review*, Norton’s essay of the same title captures a prevalent notion that the city faces the threat of decaying into a state of nature. Ever since Hobbes such a decay has been feared. But this vision also portrays ‘nature’ as something corrupting and violent and to be kept external to the ‘civilisation’ of the city. Of course, the threat of the feral city is often met with calls for greater military engagement.

To guard against such a response and to ensure we get a more nuanced response to the possible violences that climate change may bring to the city I would argue that we need to see it as an ecology both in a wider global ecology and in itself. If we do so we may find that we are able to counter the simplistic discourses of resilience that do not look hopeful when it comes to getting to grips with the challenges we will undoubtedly face.