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Towards Urban Geopolitics

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Towards Urban Geopolitics

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Rachel Pain and Susan J. Smith (2008), *Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life*, England, USA: Ashgate. ISBN 978-0-7546-4966-3 (£60).

Victor Jeleniewski Seidler (2007), *Urban Fears and Global Terrors – Citizenships, Multicultures and Belongings after 7/7*, London and New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-43614-4 ($150).

Michael Sorkin (2008), *Indefensible Space – The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*, London and New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-95367-2 ($135).

The political philosophy of the urban as a political and spatial entity emphasises the nature of cities "as places where strangers meet, remain in each other's proximity, and interact for a long time without stopping being strangers to each other" (Bauman 2003, p. 6). This idiom – which contains the inherent tension between the private and the public, the foreigner and the familiar, the "me" and the "they" – is manifested in the seminal writings of Lefebvre (1996), Arendt (1958) and Young (2002), to mention but a few. Such social relations are dynamic and they are shaped by political events, spatial arrangements and emotional geographies such as the events of September 11th that became a landmark of re-examining this view.

The three recently published books reviewed here advance the study of urban geopolitics, by which I mean not merely a discussion of international relations and conflict or the role of military acts and wars in the production of space. Rather, urban geopolitics refers to the emergence of discourses and forces attached to technologies of control, patterns of migration, and the flow of cultures and capital. In this context, geopolitics is a useful

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analytical framework for studying the production of space that subverts the traditional distinction between domestic and international affairs habitually taken for granted in political geography. More specifically, beyond the differences between the books under review here, they share a valuable new agenda by referring to the politics of fear, (in)security discourse, and the production of space as important factors that must be integrated into the study of geopolitics in general and urban geopolitics in particular.

These books also contribute notably to the analysis of geopolitics and everyday life – a category too often left to sociologists and anthropologists. By providing a micro-context for daily events – such as those of the author, who wrote considerable parts of this article in a guarded café in West Jerusalem – these books shed light on larger political and cultural implications. This café, like many others in the city, was fortified with barricades in the year 2000 following the *al-Aqsa Intifada* and the growing violence between Israel and the Palestinians. As in other public places, entering this café resembles the crossing of a border; an armed guard sits outside "welcoming" the clients, trying to identify their accents while checking their bags for explosives.

While on first glance, such caution might be considered a normal reaction to the violence that has included a sharp increase of Palestinian suicide bombings against Israelis and heavy Israeli military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the books reviewed here suggest that the above explanation is insufficient. Rather, it is also a result of wider geopolitical circumstances, namely, the depth of ethnocentricism in Israel, the fear still embedded in Jewish culture following a history of persecutions and the Holocaust, the impact of renewed Palestinian reaction coupled with repeated public calls for the 'liberation of the entirety of Palestine', and the return of refugees into Israel Proper. Importantly enough, this fear has also been amplified by another geopolitical affair, the events of September 11th and the rise of American foreign policy, with Israel as a main ally in the 'war against terror'.

This theoretical move – i.e., referring to urban events while contextualising them in a micro-scale context – can be identified in Michael Sorkin's collection of essays, "*Indefensible Space – The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*". The importance of this book lies in its attempt to illustrate the tangible expression of security discourse on urban landscapes as discussed, for example, in two chapters: In the chapter by Stephen Graham, one of central scholars dealing explicitly with urban geopolitics, he relies on postcolonial critique while analysing the construction of "imaginative geographies separating the urban places of the US homeland and the Arab cities purported to be the sources of 'terrorist' threats against the U.S." (p. 2). The chapter by Eyal Weizman explores the Israeli Air Force control over Palestinian cities – "technology instead of occupation" (p. 326) – that has been developed into a policy of targeted assassination in which "killing is not a by-product of military maneuver . . . but its very aim" (pp. 326–327).

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Yet Sorkin attempts to go beyond explicit security discourse, arguing that contemporary urban space is reproduced not solely upon the axis of terror and security but also on the basis of fear, stating that "we are being trained to be phobic, to be constantly on guard, to stay at home, to be wary of difference" (p. xv). Vis à vis such politics of fear, Sorkin includes other articles such as Setha Low's chapter and Teddy Cruz's piece that unveil, in different ways, the links between ethnic and racial Otherness and the development of security discourse that are the very logic of the new social and architectural morphology of gated communities.

An important insight of the above shift is that these secured spaces are not just the products of neo-liberal policies, but rather a justification of the use of politics of fear and the "necessity" for surveillance and control. Viewing the integration of both the military and the economic as part of the current urban habitus is a key contribution to the geopolitical discussion. Sorkin's intellectual agenda in this book is a critique of the liberal view of urban space, in its essential density and diversity, as "open to flows of people" (Katznelson 1995, p. 57). Such a perspective relies heavily on the belief that the city has the potential to disrupt the existing hierarchy of ethnic and class structures. Yet, as Laura Liu argues in her chapter in Sorkin's book, the militarisation of and spatial demarcation of "disaster zone" post September 11th "restricted mobility for immigrant workers . . . and created a general sense of fear and intimidation" (p. 178). Indeed, the very interrelations mentioned in this chapter between post–September 11th security discourse and the exclusion of migrants is important for understanding the current situation of other multi-ethnic cities, as they are trapped between their commitment to the logic of the global economy manifested, for example, in the exploitation of migrant labour, and their dedication to the securing of national space.

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The political debate around ethnic and racial diversity in cities at the time of traumatic events stands at the core of Victor Jeleniewski Seidler's monograph, "*Urban Fears and Global Terrors – Citizenships, Multicultures and Belongings after 7/7*". This book is based on discourse analysis of the British media coverage of the London bombing on 7 July 2005, and it departs from the collective shock that followed it into a wider discussion of the necessity of developing a critical vision of multiculturalism that goes beyond the traditional liberal conception of citizenship. The qualitative research approach of this book demands great appreciation; Seidler positions himself throughout the book not just as a writer and social researcher but also as a citizen of a multicultural society who calls for "shar[ing] our own vulnerability [so] that we can listen to the diverse voices of young Muslims in Britain and across Europe" (p. xxix).

The organisation of the book indicates the key themes that arose from Seidler's discourse analysis – such as "*Missing, loss, fear and terror*" and "*Risk, traumas and insecurities*" – all of which represent the variety of social

components that must be examined while studying urban geopolitics. Certainly, if we follow Seidler's argument, he provides a clear theoretical debate concerning the production of identity, sense of belonging and socio-spatial boundaries. In other words, Siedler shows how the social construction of belonging of ethnic, religious and racial minorities in cities is constructed by the formation of common consciousness and collective interests that here involve conflicts that in their very essence contain social, economic and cultural oppression. In this sense, Seidler shares his view of fear with Sorkin as well as with Pain and Smith (discussed below), suggesting that "fear of terrorism had somehow become a feature of everyday life. . . . People learned to live with their own anxieties, learned how to ignore what they feared and live life 'as if it were normal'" (p. 65).

As Seidler details (pp. 82–83), the demographic changes in Britain, followed by the material exclusion of Muslim communities and manifested in segregated space, is a good example of the way in which the discourse of fear is constructed upon the question of "what" and "whom" we should be afraid. And as Leonie Sandercock (2003) and David Sibley (1995) have already suggested, referring to specific sites as physically neglected or socially and morally unordered leads to the conclusion that these places should be the subject of isolation and cleansing and that this in turn justifies separation between communities. Urban space in this perspective is aestheticised, as Sharon Zukin suggests (1995), producing a more "ordered" landscape that aims to hide the undesirable.

Here we can identify Sorkin's and Siedler's common understanding of the politics of fear. Fear is considered as elusive on one hand but significant on the other – that is, linked to the anxiety arising when the "Other" is present. As both books point out, fear of the other is a central component in the discourse of urban geopolitics, yet rather than being a simplistic reflection of social reality, it is itself a mechanism that produces "reality" – one that is mediated through discourses of hygiene and order.

The above viewpoint is well articulated in the third book, "*Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life*", which offers an excellent discussion of the relevance of fear for understanding geopolitics. With this collection of essays, Rachel Pain and Susan Smith set an important platform for the discussion by bringing materiality back into the debate about fear, everyday life and space, suggesting that territoriality is an essential factor that ties together state power and its political supremacy. This argument is clearly laid out in the editors' introduction – an essential text for those who are interested in mapping emotional geographies within critical geopolitics – where they state explicitly that "fear is a social or collective experience rather than an individual state. But it is more than this – it is also a morality play and a product of the power relations that shape the moral codes of everyday conduct as well as those of international affairs" (p. 9).

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This argument frames the chapters into a coherent volume, while the decision to divide the book into five sections enables a detailed discussion of the following themes: "*State Fears and Popular Fears*", "*Fear of Nature and the Nature of Fear*", "*Encountering Fear and Otherness*", "*Regulating Fear*" and "*Fear, Resistance and Hope*". Here I can discuss only the section "*Regulating Fear*", which contains three important articles that analyse the ways in which fear is manipulated and legitimises official policies.

Henk Van Houtum and Roos Pijpers discuss in their article the management of the borders of the European Union, especially in relation to the Internal Market project. The authors suggest using the spatio-political metaphor of gated communities to describe the EU's selective bordering process by exposing the analogy between the economic protection against free mobility of products and restrictive measures against (free) migration. This analysis is articulated within the authors' argument that "whereas harsh realities of a hostile world outside may evaporate in gated communities, they continue to haunt the desires and dreams of those inside. Fear of immigrants for that matter . . . will not dissolve through protection" (p. 158).

Such argument is also relevant to the growing literature of critical geopolitics suggesting that while globalisation does enable some cross-border flows – cyberspace and capital, for instance – borders still characterise our social and political hierarchies. To put it differently, the process of globalisation produces principles of closure – "a mobility regime" that actively seeks to contain social movement both within and across borders (Shamir 2005). This is a view that dominates the emerging critical border studies that accentuate the impact of borders and territoriality which is not diminishing; rather, new scales of territorial affiliations and borders are recognisable that may be flexible but are still selective (Newman 2006).

While the case of the EU focuses on global fear of immigration, the chapter by Nadia Abu Zhara investigates the very local conditions in Palestine in relation to Israeli control over the supply of identity cards to Palestinians. Zhara suggests that there is a link between fear and the Israeli regime of mobility. The politics of ID are linked to the politics of fear, according to Zhara, since IDs are part of the materiality of oppression, "but equally, fear of being stripped of an ID opens those who are already tagged and targeted to other kinds of coercion" (p. 177). The importance of this chapter lies in its ability to point to the way in which fear and hostility shape daily life in Palestine through administrative acts, where "coercion is broader than just checkpoints and prisons. The fear it engenders is felt in the middle of the night in one's own home, as soldiers enter and demand all the IDs in the house" (p. 189).

The third chapter in this section further emphasises the necessity and relevance of bringing geopolitical knowledge to urban studies. Peter Shirlow, whose research on Belfast is well-known, discusses the current situation in Belfast showing that "segregation is both a response to and a factor in the

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reproduction of . . . the suspicion and hostility that divide Catholics and Protestants in Belfast" (p. 193). Shirlow's data collection and interviews show that fear is a central component in the spatio-politics of the city, since it affects mobility and the spatial perception of safe and unsafe zones among most inhabitants living under highly segregated conditions. Indeed, as the author notes, "despite the cessations of most paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland, we are left with a situation where the historical creation of territorial division and rigid ethno-sectarian communities means that fear and mistrust still frame the desire to create communal separation" (pp. 204–205).

Shirlow's conclusion brings us back to the argument that links the three books, concerning the implications of a sense of belonging that produces loyalty to one specific group rather than others, which is expressed in the notion of "us versus them". Such belonging reflects a sense not only of difference but also of supremacy, and both are backed with the politics of fear. This issue has spatial meaning that characterises a current urban condition that is multi-ethnic, contested and dynamic, since the creation of affinity between identity and territory is crucial to the formulation of boundaries between "us" and the "other." But what we also learn from these books is that these boundaries, in turn, produce different forms of territorial control that are significant for the reproduction of those in power, who construct their affiliation on the grounds of historical, religious and cultural identifications.

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