In a Moment: On Glocal Mobilities and the Terrorised City


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“Each new conflagration pushes at the limits of the humanly tolerable”

Peter Lang (1996, 5)

Amidst the flurry of emails speculating on the urban dimensions of the apocalyptic events of September 11th, one, for me, stood out. Andy Beveridge wrote to the Urban Geography list serv (URBGEOG@LISTSERV.ARIZONA.EDU) quoting a piece called “Here is New York” in the Essays of E.B. White published in 1948. Contemplating nuclear attacks, White’s words nevertheless seem eerily prescient. "The subtest change in New York”, he wrote:

“is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, the black headlines of the latest edition. All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all targets, New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer who might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm

The events of September 11th were a macabre yet subtle exploitation of the multiple and interconnected mobilities, continuously telescoping between the local and global, that sustain global urban capitalism: mobilities of people and machines; mobilities of images and media; mobilities of electronic finance and capital. They provided the latest in a long line of dawning realisations that urban modernity, despite its promises of absolute
technological and material progress, is actually utterly interwoven with fragility and vulnerability. This runs from H.G. Wells’ speculations about the devastation that aerial bombing could wreak on cities in the 1920s; through analyses, such as White’s, of the urban effects of nuclear armageddon during the cold war; to contemporary analyses of the potential chaos brought by mass urban terrorism or internicine urban war (see Lang, 1995, Picon, 1996).

Whilst the world is urbanising faster than ever before this very process, and the multiple mobilities that sustain it, is saturating the world with the very technologies and techniques that can be harnessed to destroy the urban. On September 11th previous attacks and urban terrorism outrages were eclipsed by a few orders of magnitude. The old defensive responses to them – CCTV, road blocks, heavily controlled street spaces, immigration controls – seem almost comically irrelevant in this new age of threat. These practices concentrated either on the micro spaces and practices of the street and averting the car or suicide bomb, or on the macro-scale of international migration controls and geopolitical espionage focused on stopping terrorists from moving around the world. But no one bothered with the middle scale – the relatively free and unpoliced mobilities within nation states.

Thus, once again, we realise that the strategic urban site, as throughout urban and military history, is an overwhelmingly tempting target in war. Even before September 11th, Martin Pawley wrote that "fear of the dislocation of urban services on a massive scale is now endemic in the populations of all great cities" (Pawley, 1997; 162). Now such fear threatens to be pathological and paralysing. This is especially so in North America where popular culture has long perpetuated the myth that war, risks and instant urban devastation were the domains of the rest of the planet, not the blessed continent with its 'manifest destiny' of prosperity peace and superiority. Even Pearl Harbor – the event so often compared with these attacks -- was importantly at the very margins of US geopolitical space. In contrast September 11th ate away at the very iconic and geographic cores of US economic and military hegemony. As Newsweek reported “September 11th
ended the illusion that Americans could somehow float above the hatreds of the world” (Extra Edition, 16th September, p. 28).

Deepening fears of the inherent vulnerability of strategic cities, of course, are fed by the attacks themselves. They are fuelled by a media culture which endlessly analyses and dissects such risk (at least to the privileged populations of the cities of the Global North; those facing populations in the majority world tend to be ignored or downplayed). But such fears are also growing because the technological mobilities that cross-cut cities – of machines, people, computer communications, and potential biological pathogens -- now threaten apparently unopposable carnage at any instant, at any turn. As Paul Virilio has repeatedly reminded us, urban walls, whether physical, electronic, electromagnetic or psychological, are no longer tenable. “From here on”, he writes (1991, 15), “urban architecture has to work with the opening of a new ‘technological space-time’” based on unstoppable flow, unpredictable mobility, and the risk of these enormously complex technological systems being perverted to disrupt, destroy and kill. Here we have to contend not just with mass airline coercion. We must also face strategic the computer hacking and IT viruses of ‘cyberwar’, potential mass water poisoning, and possible terrorist use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

**Mass Urban Terrorism : Understanding the Pre-Conditions**

The attacks of September 11th were the result of three pre-existing conditions.

*Exploiting The Inherent Fragilities of Urban Technological Mobilities*

First, the fragile and subtle mobilities and technologies that underpin and sustain global urban capitalism were forcibly redirected, perverted, and turned in on themselves. The strikes therefore mocked the political fantasies of the Bush regime that suggested – until September 11th – that major urban catastrophes could be kept at bay through Defensive Missile Shields laid out along Cold War, geopolitical, lines. Instead of ‘rogue states’ aping the superpowers and acquiring intercontinental nuclear, biological or chemical
weapons, the equivalent of a nuclear impact was produced by the simple expedient of a few ‘stone age’ knives.

In retrospect it seems astonishing that no one had actually taken one of the ubiquitous airlines that, by definition, saturate the space around all strategic urban targets -- there are, or at least were, 300,000 people in the air above the USA at any one time -- and, transformed it, by the flick of a joystick, into an fuel-laden, mass, forced kamikaze. Cruise missiles, we have now learnt, are all around us and our cities; many of us ride on them all the time. They are far more potent and easily acquired than any the US have just started launching from thousands of miles away at Afghanistan as I write (8th October 2001).

Offering Choreographies of Carnage for Global Media

Second, in this age of televised urban war, the mass appropriation of airliners within poorly-protected US domestic airspace allowed events to be timetabled, with sickening logic, as precisely as any conventional airliner or television schedule, to have maximum global impact. This allowed the iconic and unforgettable moments of mass murder and urban devastation to be beamed live to a terrified, but transfixed, global TV audience, many of whom were brought up on the staples of hypereal video games, science fiction urban dystopias and disaster movies. One of the most common responses, either amongst those that lived through and saw the horror first hand, or those that watched on TV, was “it was just like in a movie”.

As Martin Amis wrote in the Guardian on 18th September, the four planes were carefully coordinated so that “the first [plane] would crash into the northern tower just as the working day hit full stride. Then a pause for 15 minutes, to give the world time to gather round its TV sets. With that attention secured, the second plane would crash into the south tower, and in that instant America’s youth would turn into age” (pages 3-4). The actual implementation of a million simulations of urban devastation perfectly mocked the urban culture in the West which endlessly recycles images of its own destruction. In
fact the events were a kind of carefully staged reverse hypereality: they enacted events which had been endlessly simulated before but which had never actually happened.

Of course the choice of New York - arguably the world’s media capital – meant that the entire world would hear of little else for months. The western media complex will inevitably be obsessed by carnage and devastation within its own back yard. It has been shown countless times, though, that, at the same time, it systematically ignores or downgrades the much higher casualty figures of many on-going wars and crises in the global South (Sudan, Colombia, Indonesia, Somalia, Rwanda, the Congo, Sierra Leone, and, yes, Afghanistan). It has been endlessly demonstrated that the huge numbers of avoidable deaths, directly implicating the United States and its allies, through Iraqi sanctions or global structural adjustment programmes, merit barely a line in even the most high-brow newspapers. And it has been proven beyond doubt that the Western media operates on an informal and unwritten system of valuing human beings, and their deaths, extremely unequally: affluent employees of the global financial services industry in New York are near the top and the global majority in the so-called developing world – including the huge numbers likely to starve in Afghanistan this winter as a result of the global crisis -- are near the bottom. The mass murder on September 11th was heinous. But, if annual deaths are spread evenly across the year, 24,000 people will have died of hunger across the world on that same day; 6,020 children will have died of diarrhoea; and 2,700 children will have died of measles (New Internationalist 340, November 2001, pp. 19).

Thus yet another irony of the September 11th attacks is that the perpetrators chose their targets to directly demonstrate the huge asymmetries and biases in global media and representational power that accompany the processes of economic and cultural globalisation that they are trying to undermine and destroy.

It has also been alleged that the co-ordination of events surrounding the attacks also stretched to the more bizarre manipulation of the other key mobility system underpinning global urban capitalism: the electronic financial system (which, ironically,
provided the very rationale for the World trade Center’s construction). Considerable evidence is now emerging that the terrorist network behind the attacks participated in a major series of insider trading deals by using their knowledge of forthcoming events to make millions of dollars exploiting the inevitable volatilities that resulted in airline, insurance, gold and oil stock values and commodity prices.

Exploiting the Concentrating Logics of Global City Development

The third and final facilitating factor, of course, was the intense concentrating logic of global city development. The world’s most strategic urban sites -- global city cores like lower Manhattan -- have grown ever-more concentrated over the last thirty years as they take advantage of the economic spin-offs of global economic liberalisation, the explosion of financial markets and the remote control capabilities of information and communications technologies.

The iconic power of the skyscraper - a symbol of urban ‘progress’ and modernisation for a century (Cohen, 1995) – has been instantly reversed. From icon of power, progress and the dynamism of urban America it has been transmuted into a symbol of fragility which builds deep vulnerability into the cityscape. Thus one or two precision strikes can bring down two of the worlds tallest buildings and kill over 6,000 people whilst a plane hitting the relatively low-level Pentagon killed less than 200. Incredibly, the New York impacts have meant that the entire fragile apparatus of the global capitalist system has been pushed over the brink into deep recession. Some of the world’s largest and most powerful companies have been brought to the brink of bankruptcy. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have already been lost. A possibly fatal blow has been delivered to many of the companies that profit from global mobilities (tourism operators and, especially, airlines). And a new era of global geopolitics has been ushered in.

Urban Responses and Implications

So what of the urban responses and implications? I would point to at least two.
Changes in Urban Form and Structure

First, we are likely to see accepted notions of urban form revised and debated. Early reports are already emerging of skyscraper projects being paused in mid-build in Frankfurt. James Howard Kunstler and Nikos A. Salingaros, writing on the urban geography listserv on September 17th, are “convinced that the age of skyscrapers is at an end. It must now be considered an experimental building typology that has failed”. They “predict that no new megatowers will be built, and existing ones are destined to be dismantled.”. The attacks will also certainly accelerate urban sprawl. They will deepen the ambient fear that surrounds life in highly concentrated and iconic urban centres, especially in Western cities. They will undermine efforts to build obvious, iconic urban structures rather than featureless, generic urban landscapes. And they will support the massive growth of relatively anonymous, low-level, fortress business spaces that are heavily networked by multiple data infrastructures. The purpose-built disaster recovery sites in New Jersey that were hastily colonised by WTC firms after the attacks may provide a model for longer term development solutions here.

Some firms that decentralise temporarily to such sites may find that, with the improved capabilities of telecommunications, they are able to stay away from the cores of urban financial districts for good. However, we are unlikely to see the mass emptying out of central cities. As Clay Shirky argued on the Open P2P web site on 25th September:

“cities are not cause but effect. Cities are not isolated things so much as the large-scale intersection of countless small forces, forces which in aggregate give cities the kind of homeostasis and adaptability that have made them such surprisingly long-lived features of human life. In fact, cities exist because of decentralization, not in spite of it […] Buildings are technologies, their residents are users, and cities are an emergent property of myriad overlapping choices about the placement and use of those buildings. […] New York is big because over time more people came than left, because millions of uncoordinated actors decided independently to move to New York. The population is not a single variable, it is the sum of these countless decisions.”

Second, we will see an acceleration of existing processes of the militarisation of civil society (see Gold and Revill, 2000). The surveillance, tracking and correctional industries will deepen and intensify their colonisation of urban civil society as resistance movements face being undermined and marginalised. Civil liberties legislation will no doubt be eroded and withdrawn and new digital enclosures and techniques of control will begin to compromise free and open mobilities within and between cities. In a classic example of the “functional creep” of surveillance systems during times of crisis, the UK is already considering steam-rolling civil liberties opposition by bringing in a national ID card scheme utilising smart card technologies which give the potential for real time human tracking and locating. At a more extreme level the CIA is to regain its powers of global extra-judicial killing and assassination.

In the medium term it is possible that the language of rights of access and movement may even be replaced by one of provisional mobility where people need to demonstrate in detail why movement and access is necessary on a continuous basis. The techniques of biometrics will be explored much more seriously as means of access control and tracking. National and international systems of individual tracking, linking databases to face recognition and CCTV are likely to become a real possibility because they allow the local tactical management of strategic sites and throughputs to be linked instantly and continuously with global, geopolitics strategies of attempted control.

Finally, we are likely to see the deepening of the urbanisation of the military, a process already underway in response to intensifying civil unrest (the Los Angeles riots…), rising social polarisation and urban segmentation, the growth of essentially urban post Cold War military conflicts (Sarajevo, Grosny…), and the intensification of staged urban resistance to globalisation (Seattle, Genoa, Washington, London, Prague…). Thus, military doctrine and strategy will become more and more closely geared to the tactical and strategic protection of the political and economic key sites, zones and spaces of the global capitalist system (see Graham and Marvin, 2001). This will occur through new
surveillance and control systems and, as at the recent Genoa WTO meeting, through the much more widespread sitting of air defence missile systems around strategic urban sites. Already, the US military machine is already starting to focus its efforts on defending domestic urban space. Aircraft carries and combat air patrols will now be renewed feature of the New Work and Washington and Californian urban landscapes. Major western cities are thus emerging as more or less permanent war zones. Already, several generals have been given the power to shoot down civilian airlines in the event of future attacks. And five AWACS surveillance planes have been moved from Bosnia to the US to act as aerial anti-terrorism surveillance platforms over the continental USA.

**References**


