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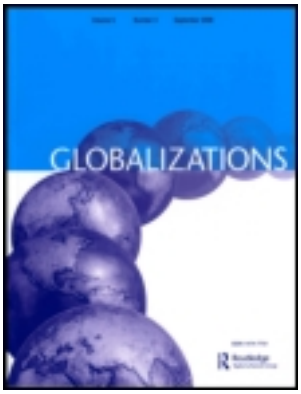

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The Global Street: Making the Political

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The Global Street: *Making* the Political

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ABSTRACT *This article explores key vectors in the uprisings of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region from an urban perspective. The aim is to open up a larger conceptual field to understand the complex interactions between power and powerlessness as they get shaped in urban space. I argue that the city makes visible the limits of superior military power and, most importantly, that cities enable powerlessness to become complex, not simply elementary. In this complexity lies the possibility of making history and remaking the political. The question of public space is central to giving the powerless rhetorical and operational openings. But that public space needs to be distinguished from the concept of public space in the European tradition. This leads me to the concept of The Global Street.*

Keywords: space, making, political, social, rituals, complexity of powerlessness

Street struggles and demonstrations are part of our global modernity. The uprisings in the Arab world, the daily neighborhood protests in China's major cities, Latin America's *piqueteros* and poor people demonstrating with pots and pans—all are vehicles for making social and political claims. We can add to these the very familiar anti-gentrification struggles and demonstrations against police brutality in US cities during the 1980s and in cities worldwide in the 1990s and continuing. Most recently, the over 100,000 people marching in Tel Aviv—a first for this city—not to bring down the government, but to ask for access to housing and jobs; part of the demonstration is Tel Aviv's tent city, housing mostly impoverished middle-class citizens. The *Indignados* in Spain have been demonstrating peacefully in Madrid and Barcelona for jobs and social services; they have now become a national movement with people from throughout Spain gathering to go on a very long march to EU headquarters in Brussels. These are also the claims of the 600,000 who went to the street in late August in several cities in Chile. These

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are among the diverse instances that together make me think of a concept that takes it beyond the empirics of each case—The Global Street.

In each of these cases, I would argue that the street, the urban street, as public space is to be differentiated from the classic European notion of the more ritualized spaces for public activity, with the piazza and the boulevard the emblematic European instances. I think of the space of 'the street', which of course includes squares and any available open space, as a rawer and less ritualized space. The Street can, thus, be conceived as a space where new forms of the social and the political can be *made*, rather than a space for enacting ritualized routines. With some conceptual stretching, we might say that politically, 'street and square' are marked differently from 'boulevard and piazza': The first signals action and the second, rituals.

Seen this way, there is an epochal quality to the current wave of street protests, no matter their enormous differences, i.e. from the extraordinary courage and determination of protesters in Syria to the flash crowds convoked via social media to invade a commercial street block for 10 minutes we have seen in cities in the US, the UK, and Chile. In this short article, I first examine some aspects of the uprisings in MENA. The effort is to situate these specifics in a larger conceptual frame: the focus is on dimensions of these diverse politics that have at least one strategic moment in the space that is the street—the urban street, not the rural or suburban street. The city is the larger space that enables some of this and also the lens that allows us to capture the history making qualities of these protests, subjects I explore in the second and third section. The larger background for these protests is a sharp slide into inequalities, expulsions from places and livelihoods, corrupt political classes, unfettered greed, and in the most significant of these struggles, extreme oppression—trends documented in a prior issue of this journal (*Globalizations*, 2010).

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When Powerlessness Becomes Complex

The city is a space where the powerless can make history. That is not to say it is the only space, but it is certainly a critical one. Becoming present, visible, to each other can alter the character of powerlessness. I make a distinction (Sassen, 2008, chs. 6 and 8) between different types of powerlessness. Powerlessness is not simply an absolute condition that can be flattened into the absence of power. Under certain conditions, powerlessness can become complex, by which I mean that it contains the possibility of making the political, or making the civic, or making history. There is a difference between powerlessness and invisibility/impotence. Many of the protest movements we have seen in North Africa and the Middle East are a case in point: these protesters may not have gained power, they are still powerless, but they are making a history and a politics. This then leads me to a second distinction, which contains a critique of the common notion that if something good happens to the powerless it signals empowerment. The notion that powerlessness can become complex can be used to characterize a condition that is not quite empowerment. Powerlessness can be complex even if there is no empowerment.

What is being engendered in the current uprisings in the cities of the MENA region is quite different from what it might have been in the medieval city of Weber. Weber identifies a set of practices that allowed the burghers to set up systems for owning and protecting property against more powerful actors, such as the king and the church, and to implement various immunities against despots of all sorts. Today's political practices, I would argue, have to do with the production of 'presence' by those without power and with a politics that claims rights to the city and to the country rather than protection of property. What the two situations share is the notion that through these practices new forms of the political (for Weber, citizenship) are being constituted 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 made.

We see this potential for the making of the civic across the centuries. Historically the overcoming of urban conflicts has often been the source for an expanded civicness. The cases that have become iconic in Western historiography are Augsburg and Moorish Spain. In both, a genuinely enlightened leadership and citizenry worked at constituting a shared civicness. But there are many other both old and new cases. Old Jerusalem's bazaar was a space of commercial and religious coexistence for long periods of time. Modern Baghdad, under the brutal leadership of Saddam Hussein, was a city where religious minorities (though not necessarily the majority, always a threat), such as Christian and Jews, lived in more relative peace than they do today. Outsiders in Europe's cities, notably immigrants, have experienced persecution for centuries; yet in many a case their successful claims for inclusion had the effect of expanding and strengthening the rights of citizens as well.

We see some of this capacity to override old hatreds, in its own specific forms, in Cairo's Tahrir Square. But also in Yemen's Saana, where once conflicting tribes have found a way to coalesce with each other and with the protesters against the existing regime. Tahrir Square has become the iconic case, partly because key features of the process became visible as they stretched over time: the discipline of the protesters, the mechanisms for communicating, the vast diversity of ages, politics, religions, cultures, and the struggle's extraordinary trajectory. But in fact we now know that these features are also at work in other sites. Yemen's protest movements have been intent on being peaceful and unarmed, and indeed many members expressed distress when one tribe—a long-standing enemy of the regime for political and economic reasons—launched an armed attack. In a matter of weeks, the ethics of the protest movement and the complexity of the situation ensured a situation that allowed enemy tribes to find a system of trust in the city, for sharing the struggle against the regime. This was not a minor achievement.

The conditions and the mechanisms are specific to each of the several cases we have come to refer to as the Arab spring. Yet in all these cases the overcoming of conflicts has become the source for an expanded civicness. This is not urban per se, but the conflicts and the civicness assume particularly strong and legible forms in major cities. Further, we see an enabling of the powerless: urban space makes their powerlessness complex, and in that complexity lies the possibility of making the political, making the civic.

Other cases in the region augment these features and add yet another dimension: the limits of superior military force. The rebels in Benghazi took full possession of the territory of the city and launched a veritable experiment in civicness. The superior military power of the Gaddafi regime could not prevent this—even before NATO's intervention. As I discuss later, Israel's superior military power has not achieved what it wants from Gaza. Nor has Syria's massive military deployment stopped the unarmed protesters. These diverse cases point to the capacities of the city to function as a sort of weak regime: it cannot destroy superior military force but it can obstruct it. People versus armed gunmen in an open field are a different condition from people in a dense urban setting versus such gunmen.

These are issues I examine in the next two sections.

The City: its Return as a Lens onto Major World Events

In the global era, the city has emerged as a strategic site for understanding some of the major new trends reconfiguring the social order. The city and the metropolitan region are one of the locations where major macro and global trends, even when not urban, materialize; it is, then,

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a space that can give us knowledge about developments that are not urban per se. The city might be just one moment in what can be complex multi-sited trajectories, but it is a strategic moment.

The city has long been a site for the exploration of many major subjects confronting society. But it has not always been a heuristic space—a space capable of producing knowledge about some of the major transformations of an epoch. In the first half of the twentieth century, the study of cities was at the heart of sociology. This is evident in the work of Simmel, Weber, Benjamin, Lefebvre, and most prominently the Chicago School, especially Park and Wirth, both deeply influenced by German thinkers. They all confronted massive processes—industrialization, urbanization, alienation, a new cultural formation they called 'urbanity'. Studying the city was not simply studying the urban. It was about studying the major social processes of an era. Since then the study of the city gradually lost this privileged role as a lens for the discipline and as producer of key analytic categories. There are many reasons for this, most important among which are questions of the particular developments of method and data in the social sciences. Critical was the fact that the city ceased being the fulcrum for epochal transformations and hence a strategic site for research about non-urban processes. The study of the city became increasingly the study of what came to be called 'social problems'.

Today's resurgence of the city as a site for research on major contemporary dynamics is evident in multiple disciplines—sociology, anthropology, economic geography, cultural studies, and literary criticism. In the global era, economists have begun to address the urban and regional economy in their analyses in ways that go beyond older forms of urban economics. Globalization has given rise to new information technologies, the intensifying of transnational and translocal dynamics, and the strengthening presence and voice of sociocultural diversity. All of these are at the cutting edge of change. These trends do not encompass the majority of social conditions; on the contrary, most social reality probably corresponds to older continuing and familiar trends. Yet, although these trends involve only parts of the urban condition and cannot be confined to the urban, they are strategic in that they mark the urban condition in novel ways and make it, in turn, a key research site for major urban and non-urban trends.

The Social Physics of the City: Making Visible the Limits of Military Force

Cities have long been sites of conflicts—racisms, religious hatreds, expulsions of the poor. At the same time, cities have historically evinced a capacity to triage conflict through commerce and civic activity; this contrasts with the history of the modern national state, which has historically tended to militarize conflict.

Major developments in the current global era are making cities the sites for a whole range of new types of conflicts. Religion is one such critical vector for conflicts in cities—both as a 'cause' and as a consequence. These are not urban conflicts per se, even though the city is a key site for the materializing of religious sentiment into actual conflict.

This raises a question as to whether cities are losing this capacity to triage conflict through commerce and the civic and to avoid militarizing conflict. Large cities at the intersection of vast migrations and expulsions often were the spaces that could accommodate enormous diversity of religions, ethnicities, cultures, and income. These cities were also spaces of a kind of peaceful coexistence for long stretches of times.

Hence, conflict does not inhere in these differences as such but rather in a larger systemic condition, within which the city can then switch from a space that makes possible fruitful coexistence to a space that contributes to conflict and hatreds. In both cases specific capabilities of the city get mobilized: being neighbors can go in both directions, and so can the fact of

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neighborhood life. The same individuals can experience both conditions and even enact that switch. Dense urban spaces can deliver a sort of collective learning about diversity, or they can become the sites of murderous attacks. The city as complex system could lead to the transformation of a disease into an epidemic, or it could generate 'positive epidemics' as became evident in the so-called 2011 Arab spring.

Here we can see a critical dimension that shows us that cities can function as a type of weak regime: killing civilians in a city is a different type of horror from killing people—far more people—in the jungle and in villages. In that sense, the urbanizing of war and armed conflict points to the limits of superior armed power and, perhaps, the weight of weak orders such as the human rights regime.

The countries with the most powerful conventional armies today cannot afford to repeat Dresden with firebombs or Hiroshima with an atomic bomb—whether in Baghdad, Gaza, or the Swat valley. They could engage in a series of activities, such as rendition, torture, assassinations of leaders they find problematic, excessive bombing of civilian areas, and so on, in a history of brutality that can no longer be hidden and seems to have escalated the violence against civilian populations. Yet, superior military powers stop from pulverizing a city, even when they have the weapons to do so. The US could have pulverized Baghdad, and Israel could have pulverized Gaza. But they did not. It seems to me that the reason was not respect for life or the fact that killing civilians is illegal according to international law—they do this all the time.

Rather, I would posit that pulverizing a city is a specific type of crime, one which causes horror, or, an ontological insecurity, that people dying from malaria does not. The mix of people and buildings—in a way, the social physics of the city—has acquired the capacity to temper destruction, not to stop it, but to temper it. What makes this possible? It is the combination of 'non-urban' deaths in a city and a sticky web of constraints consisting of a mix of law, reciprocal agreements, and the informal global court of public opinion (Sassen, 2010). And it is the collective making that is a city, especially in its civic components. Ontological insecurity was also part of the response to the bombings in New York, Mumbai, Madrid, London, and other cities

Again and again, history points to the limits of power. Unilateral decisions by the greater power are not the only source of restraint. Multiple interdependencies act as restraints. To this, I add the city as a weak regime that can obstruct and temper the destructive capacity of the superior military power, yet another component for systemic survival in a world where several countries have the capacity to destroy the planet (Sassen, 2010 and Sassen, 2008, ch. 8).

Under these conditions the city is both a technology for containing conventional military powers and a technology of resistance for armed insurgencies. The social physics of the city, its material and human features, are an obstacle for conventional armies—an obstacle wired into urban space itself. Would Gaza have been completely, rather than partially, destroyed if it was not densely populated, but was occupied only by Palestinian-owned factories and warehouses?

The Limits of the Powerful Communication Technologies

Beyond complex questions of norms, the city also makes visible the limits and unrealized potential of communication technologies such as Facebook. Much has been written and debated about its role in the Egyptian mobilizing and protest organizing. In the US, there was much debate on the notion of a 'Facebook revolution' signaling that the protest movement was at the limit, a function of communication technologies, notably social media.

It seems to me a common type of conflation of a technology's capacities with a massive on the ground process which used the technology. In my research, I have found (Sassen, 2008, ch. 7;

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Latham and Sassen, 2005) that this type of conflation results from a confusion between the logics of the technology as designed by the engineer and the logics of the users. The two are not one and the same. The technical properties of electronic interactive domains deliver their utility through complex ecologies that include (a) non-technological variables (the social, the subjective, the political, material topographies), and (b) the particular cultures of use of different actors.

Thus, Facebook can be a factor in very diverse collective events—a flash mob, a friends' party, the uprising at Tahrir Square. But that is not the same as saying they all are achieved through Facebook. As we now know, if anything Al Jazeera was a more significant medium, and the network of mosques was the foundational communication network in the case of the Tahrir Square Friday mobilizations.

One synthetic image we can use is that these ecologies are partly shaped by the particular logics embedded in diverse domains (Latham and Sassen, 2005). Thus a Facebook group of friends doing financial investment aims at getting something through using the technical capability underlying Facebook that is quite different from the Cairo protestors organizing the next demonstration after Friday's mosque services. This difference is there even when the same technical capabilities are used by both, notably rapid communication to mobilize around one aim—going for an investment or going to Tahrir Square.

When we look at electronic interactive domains as part of these larger ecologies, rather than as a purely technical condition, we make conceptual and empirical room for the broad range of social logics driving users and the diverse cultures of use through which these technologies are used. Each of these logics and cultures of use activates an ecology (the 'typical' Facebook subscriber letting 'friends' know she will be at a new restaurant or party) or is activated by it (the protesters' struggle, which included as one element using Facebook to signal an upcoming action). The effect of taking this perspective is to position Facebook in a much larger world than the thing itself (Sassen, 2011).

In this way, we focus on the minimalist version of Facebook—not the internal world of Facebook with its vast numbers of subscribers, a billion and growing fast, but the *larger ecology* within which a Facebook action is situated. The protest movement in Tahrir Square also had the power to bring a new ecology into the use of Facebook and thereby showed both the limits of the current format and the capacity of collective action in the city to inscribe a technology.

Facebook space itself is today mostly described by experts as part of social life for a large majority of its subscribers. But the network capability involved clearly cannot be confined to this function. The shifts that become visible when we take into account the types of ecologies mobilized, rather point to a far larger range of uses/practices. The Tahrir Square protest movement embodies these shifts and relations. In Tahrir Square, Facebook space is not 'social life'. Rather, it is more akin to a tool. Social thickness can come about from this as well, but it is likely that in many cases it will not. *Toolness* rules. And what stands out, what gives us the dramatic entry of Facebook as 'actant', is the larger ecology that shapes the use of F-space in these cases.

The potential of digital media for immobile or place-centered activists concerned with local, not global, issues points to the making of larger ecologies that will be different from the ecologies of globally oriented users. For instance, the fact that specific types of local issues (jobs, oppression) recur in localities across the world engaging local, immobile activists in each place, can engender a kind of globality that does not depend on them *communicating*. This is also a feature of the current Arab spring—a recurrence of protests in very diverse places in the region that do not depend on direct communication across these different places, and yet, all together make for a larger and more complex formation than each individual struggle.

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This points to a kind of imaginary where the actual communications are a third point in a triangle—they are part of the enabling ecology of conditions but that ecology is not simply about communication among participants. This does invite us to ask: How can the new social media add to functions that go beyond mere communication and thereby contribute to a more complex and powerful condition/capability?

Conclusion

This article explored a few of the vectors at work in the uprisings of the MENA region, with the aim of opening up a larger conceptual field to understand the complex interactions between power and powerlessness. This exploration makes it possible to examine the heuristic potential of these events, in that they tell a larger story.

It situates this discussion in the larger question of the return of the city as a site for the making of political and civic changes, but also as a lens for understanding larger transformations of our times that may not be urban per se but find one strategic moment in cities, this is also the moment that makes these transformations visible. In this regard, I focused on two key features of the current period where cities are such a lens that helps us situate a larger process. One of these was what urban uprisings tell us about the limits of superior military force; I argued that the 'social physics' of the city can obstruct, though not destroy, superior armed power. Similarly, and on a very different subject, these urban uprisings show us both the limits and the potential of the new communications technologies, especially social media. The uprisings, particularly in Egypt where there was full access to these media, show both their limits—the mosques and Al Jazeera were more important in Cairo than Facebook—and, I argue, also their unrealized potential.

Some of the key features of a broad range of struggles happening in the MENA region but also, with their own specific features, in places as diverse as cities in China, Israel, Chile, Greece, Spain, the UK, and the US lead me to argue that the question of public space is central to giving the powerless rhetorical and operational openings. But this public space needs to be distinguished from the concept of public space in the European tradition. This leads me to the concept of The Global Street, a contrast to the piazza and the boulevard of the European tradition.

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