

GLOBALIZATION AND URBAN INSECURITY: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

In most countries, the social question, relabelled the urban question and the management of risks, are currently at the top of the political agenda. The transformation of cities submitted to phenomena of globalization is indeed linked to global issues of conflicts and insecurity. Risk is such a powerful instrument of politics that all regimes are of necessity concerned with its management resorting to a precautionary principle.

But there has been little in-depth analysis of the social implications of urban globalization regarding risks for cities at various levels. There is indeed a theoretical gap between how problems generating insecurity - in particular regarding contentious dynamics in certain areas - are perceived and defined politically (for instance via the criminalization of high risk youth) and how they are understood socially and felt by residents and other citizens testing segregation, their lack of mobility and inequalities on a day-by-day basis. Theoretically, social order and disorder are deeply intertwined. There is not a single engine of urban change. The positive mutations brought by globalization are accompanied by additional forms of vulnerability in global cities. I refer here to terrorist attacks, gang wars over illicit traffics, high rates of homicides, no go areas, as to some of the visible signs of urban dysfunctions, not to mention persisting poverty, demographic instability, social deprivation and daily delinquency. What is new is that disorders hitting cities are both an opening and a happening. They reveal what is ignored by the political discourse, that is emotions like injustice, absence and omission. Urban violence gives globalization its politically conflictual dimension without resorting to political claims. It is my assumption that cities which have so much to lose are in the frontline to experiment solutions and bypass states far too slow, bureaucratic and disassembled to be efficient.

The paper deals with three types of urban regimes in America, Europe and developing countries which have experienced recurrent forms of urban disorders in the last quarter of the 20th century. The nature, the mutations and the dynamics of such disorders reveal divergences. Deconstructing 'urban violence' allows to grasp how it fits in a whole set of discourses and practices. The relationship between macro-financial and economic changes, policies, local mechanisms of control and potential disturbances is best understood in a comparative approach. While there is a convergence of social and economic forces at work due to globalization and the production of inequalities, dynamic trends of violence and their management vary from country to country, region to region, city to city. Attention is paid to elusive terms which look alike but actually hide more than they reveal.

Then, the paper looks at different forms of adjustments to socio-economic polarization, modes of segregation and redefinition of culture in global cities. Types of contenders and sites of unrest and different logics of context are examined, all of which are not static but have their own dynamics, according to circumstances, outer forces and interactions on various scales. It examines threats and conflicts in the cities of the global South (Mumbai and Sao Paulo) and forms of urban violence in European cities (in UK and France) also showing that over the last thirty years, mutations have occurred in the nature and evolution of repressive interventions during violent interactions. In brief, cross-national studies reveal to what extent resilient cities are ahead of states to deal with challenges and conflicts.

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