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## Power and Powerlessness in Global Cities

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► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Body-Gendrot. Power and Powerlessness in Global Cities. OpenDemocratie.net, 2011, 7 février, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/sophie-body-gendrot/power-and-powerlessness-in-global-cities>. hal-00738031

**HAL Id: hal-00738031**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00738031>**

Submitted on 3 Oct 2012

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## Power and powerlessness in global cities

[Sophie Body-Gendrot](#) [1], 7 February 2011

*How does today's globalization transform our perceptions of urban inequality and how do we respond to it? Inequality is a powerful social divider but also, in some circumstances, a unifier*

The mutations generated by globalization precipitate extreme forms of vulnerability in world cities. We don't only refer here to terrorist threats, gang wars over illicit traffics, high rates of homicides, no go areas, etc. as visible signs of urban dysfunctions. We also refer to urban space as enabling and making visible expressions of resistance to conservative regimes that may trigger in return violent forms of repression. Powerlessness can become complex in cities, enabling the powerless to obstruct, even though not destroy, superior military power (Sassen 2010), as recent struggles in Tunis and Cairo make visible.

Several questions come to mind. How visible or obvious are the linkages between globalization, inequalities and urban violence (such as crime, terrorism, riots, violent protest)? In other words, does the current globalization phase promote and accommodate unbearable inequalities, which in turn generate social tensions and dissent, thereby hampering the economic, political and social well-being of [cities](#) [10]? If so, are global cities in less developed countries more vulnerable? Convergences regarding fears and feelings of insecurity are observed in most global cities, North and South, yet the types of violence and disorders that they confront differ from one another and so do their responses. History, institutions and culture intervene in the range of explanations as can be seen currently in Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, etc. More broadly, while globalization tends to homogenize modes of thinking via flows of images, information and communication, this does not hold for the actual forms of dissent, conflicts and violence and the public and private responses that they generate - these vary greatly.



*Paris, February sans-papiers demo, 2010 - Demotix / Rick Alarcon. All rights reserved.*

### Inequalities

When examining urban inequalities, we should not simply focus on their extent as they certainly were more pronounced one hundred years ago. The focus should be on how today's globalization transforms our perceptions of inequality and how we respond to it. First, due to the interdependence of the world and to the instant information and communication reaching everyone, diverse inequalities are fully exhibited and foster a feeling of injustice in numerous countries. In a poll carried in April 2010 among 7200 people in twelve countries, respondents evinced similar concerns regarding inequalities. In nine out of twelve countries, a majority of respondents perceive their society as unjust. This held for over 70% of those polled in China, Italy, Germany and most of all in Brazil.

Europeans (Germans in particular) think that inequalities have increased in the last ten years. Strangely, in a country with extreme inequalities such as the U.S., most Americans do not.

In a global world largely devoid of in-betweens and interactions, we can indeed see the coexistence of isolated elites dwelling in a small sphere restricted to their own references, spokesmen, and power-holders, along with the disenchantment and anger of massive populations, especially of youth, feeling abandoned and disrespected by those elites.

What is new then is that disorders hitting cities and modes of protest using urban spaces and new modes of communication can make highly visible precisely that which is ignored in the public discourse of elites - injustice and emotions. These disorders and protests connect the global and the local. In cities, they give globalization its politically conflictual dimension, yet without necessarily resorting to political claims.

### **Urban violence as the expression of the disempowered**

Disorders and protest are a mode of social expression and cities are both the material support and the symbolic stake that disorders and protest need. Disorders reveal issues which have no political legitimacy, which are not on the agenda, which belong to non-decision-making. Lots of them have no world echo, yet they resonate in the imaginaries, not in the communication, of youth cultures. But sometimes, as in Tunis and Cairo, disempowered masses measure up their strength via the convergences that cities allow. There may consequently be a correlation between macro-economic developments, rising inequalities and the dialectics of order and disorder. Where income differentiation is high, so is social stratification and distrust. Inequality is a powerful social divider but also, in some circumstances, a unifier.



*Tunis, January, 2011 - Demotix / hamideddine Bouali. All rights reserved.*

### **The limits of power in urban space**

Is the established order threatened by such forms of opposition to its modes of operation? It would appear not, particularly since the attack on 9/11 has enabled most governments to set in place technologies of surveillance, identification and repression; further it has strengthened internationally-coordinated commands to confront threats in western countries and their allies.

Is there an alternative suggested by the Left? And which Left? It seems that although cities try to be on the frontline, the Left differentiates itself from the Right only incrementally in its mode of urban and political management. This is partly due to its limited leverage and lack of power to influence financial and economic decisions.

Currently, most mayors express a consensus relative to the principle of precaution regarding 'risks'. The measures they take frequently cut across the usual left-right divide, making strange political bedfellows. Yet, diverse cases show that although the Left is weak and powerless at containing liberal financial abuse, it may nonetheless act as a lever or as a watchdog to force institutions to respect elementary principles of justice.

All is not rosy in global cities where inequalities reach record levels and put such cities at risk. There may consequently be more cycles of disorder and violence if the financial and economic sectors continue to dominate the cities' agendas. Disorders are then an attempt to break the silence, to make forgotten residents from deprived neighbourhoods visible, at a time when politics no longer mediates between them and the political and financial decision-makers.

For fuller development of the issues raised:

Bertho A. [Le temps des émeutes](#) [11], Paris, Bayard, 2009.

Body-Gendrot S. These thoughts are part of a larger project (S. Body-Gendrot 'Uneven Landscapes' in R. Burdett and D. Sudjic *The Endless City II*, London Phaidon, 2011).

- (also forthcoming) *Globalization and Insecurity. The challenges of cities North and South*, Palgrave.

Sassen, Saskia 2010. "[When the City Itself Becomes a Technology of War](#) [12]" *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27(6): 33-50. ()

Wilkinson R., Pickett K. 2010 [The Spirit Level](#) [13], Penguin.



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[12] <http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/27/6/33.abstract>

[13] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/14/the-spirit-level-equality-thinktanks>

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