

THE URBAN BATTLEGROUNDS: EXPLAINING CONFLICT IN GLOBAL CITIES

Samantha Hammer

Cities and Sovereignty: Identity Politics in Urban Spaces

Diane E. Davis and Nora Libertun de Duren, editors

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 264 pages.

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, people across the Arab world identified with him, a person trying to make a decent life for himself but hobbled by a repressive government. As Tunisia erupted into a successful revolution, citizens throughout the Middle East and North Africa were inspired to follow. Over the course of the uprisings, images of protesters fiercely battling government forces in reclaimed city squares exemplified the importance of urban spaces as arenas for power struggles that can redefine national sovereignty.

Cities and Sovereignty: Identity Politics in Urban Spaces, published in early 2011, was timed perfectly to lead the conversation about these urban uprisings, which have demonstrated both the salience of identity politics in conflict and the role of cities in negotiations between social groups. The volume's editors, political sociologist Diane E. Davis and urban planner Nora Libertun de Duren, argue that, contrary to scholarship suggesting that cities can breed tolerance, cities are and will continue to be incubators of identity-based conflict as globalization heightens their diversity. According to Davis and Duren, these conflicts have important implications for the authority of nation-states vis-à-vis international influences, local governments and interest groups. In their discussion, they modify the traditional definition of sovereignty, "supreme authority within a territory," to highlight the presence of "nested" sovereignties present within a given area.¹ The book's nine chapters present conditions under which, the editors believe, urban identity-based conflict will arise in the future and shift sovereignty arrangements by examining the relationship between identities, seats of power and the urban environment. These predictions are based on evaluations of conflicts in cities ruled by different types of regimes and case studies from the past 150 years, spanning geographically from Bilbao, Spain to Hanoi, Vietnam.


The volume's consistent emphasis on the built environment keeps disparate topics in discussions of conflict—nation-state sovereignty, identity formation and modes of governance—unified, if not simplified. The volume argues that the urban

environment is not just a stage but also an actor in conflicts. While some chapters fall short of proving their claims that the built environment either instigated or assuaged violence, others point to noteworthy relationships between urban space and violent power struggles.

Agnès Deboulet and Mona Fawaz illuminate this relationship most effectively in their chapter on Beirut's highway expansion projects. The chapter shows how an urban transformation in which the losers are suburban, Shiite residents loyal to Hezbollah represents questions of national sovereignty and identity politics. Drawing on original research, the authors uncover complex interactions between national authorities, rival national leadership, local political parties, marginalized social groups and pressure from international elites. Protracted identity-based tensions are heightened by changes in the urban environment; this conflict is channeled in context-specific ways through political structures available in the limited democracy. Pressure from elites to make Beirut a hub of global commerce drives expansion, while it delegitimizes these elites in the eyes of locals. As a result, suburb dwellers' identities of victimhood are strengthened and easily manipulated by local sectarian-based political parties offering recourse to residents. Most importantly, the chapter demonstrates how identity conflicts are part of everyday urban life—they are not just the explosive conflicts we most often hear about.

The book's contributors consistently find that sovereignty struggles, rather than diversity itself, are at the root of conflict and suggest that democracy is the system of governance best able to make and keep peace between groups jockeying for authority at different levels. As the Arab Spring countries seek to establish new democracies, this finding is particularly timely. Importantly, the book concludes that democracy is not necessarily peaceful—rather, it is the arrangement of different sovereignties at different levels that that makes for peace. Anne Raffin shows how France's introduction of democracy to its colonial holding of Pondicherry, India inflamed violent conflict between castes because it disrupted an established hierarchy. Deboulet and Fawaz explain that in Beirut, because residents do not have legitimate options for representation, they turn to identity groups for information, protection and benefits, entrenching divisive mentalities in the process. Libertun de Duren, in her chapter on Jerusalem during the end-days of Ottoman rule, writes that the complex, proto-democratic system of legal and ad-hoc regulations defining authority flexible, yet defined enough to sustain peace between different interest groups, in different situations.

Ultimately, *Cities and Sovereignty* encourages creative thinking about the roots, triggers and representations of conflict among identity groups. Addressing complicated interactions in a limited space, it complements previous work by Saskia Sassen on the sociology of globalization and by Scott Bollens on governance in

divided cities. However, it falls a step short of providing a firm set of conditions with which to assess potential conflicts or find actionable solutions to identity-based conflicts. While some chapters illuminate causal pathways between identity politics, sovereignty and urban space, the conclusions of other chapters feel rushed, incomplete or too abstract to be useful. For example Lawrence J. Vale's chapter on the representation of nationalism in capital cities asserts that the planning and architectural design of capital cities can exacerbate tensions between dominant identity groups and minorities, but does not actually track the development of conflict as it relates to the built environment. Nor does Vale discuss the long-term effect of these conflicts on the nation-state's authority over identity groups. *Cities and Sovereignty* is a useful beginning for expanding our understanding of the relationship between the physical urban environment and the social and political forces competing within it, but it is only a beginning. 

NOTES

¹ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), s.v. "Sovereignty," by Dan Philpott.