

Cities under Siege: The New Urban Militarism

by Stephen Graham

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As a historian who spends far too little time focusing on the here and now, but with a strong historical interest in the use of city and space in representations of authority, I was intrigued and excited at the opportunity to read Stephen Graham's exposé on the modern cities and new urban militarism, particularly since the back cover acclamations promised 'a rigorously, pioneering book'. Although the book is indeed interesting and opened my eyes to a number of things, unfortunately, there are a number of disappointments in store for readers.

The book is long, and with over 400 pages of text to plough through it gives the average historical monograph a run for its money, even though as an academic field we are known for weighty door-stop volumes! Graham breaks the information down into ten chapters plus an introduction and the chapters are subsequently divided into shorter, more approachable sections. The introduction gives some key features of urban militarism/ military urbanism – most useful to a more general reader – as well as a breakdown of his approach and central goal: to reconcile the current split in the study of cities, which is divided between discussions of security, international

politics, and issues of urban security, and the debates regarding the impact of change on urban life studied in geography, architecture and anthropology.

Of the ten chapters, the first three chapters are thematic, laying the groundwork for understanding the ‘case-studies’ in the rest of the book. The third chapter claims to illustrate how this brand of militarism differs from that experienced previously. Of the seven ‘new dimensions’ of militarism he discusses there are those that live up to this claim and the degree to which these trends are advancing is quite often startling. However, there seems to be some lack of understanding of the past: the author does not recognise and explain the roots of these movements, particularly when he refers to things such as Hausmann’s destruction and restructuring of nineteenth-century Paris in the introduction and then has one of the seven new dimensions as ‘New States of Space of Violence’ where new military urbanism ‘uses power of the state to violent[ly] reconfigure or erase urban space’. This may not be a historical book, but Graham gives a strong grounding in the historical context of the topic in his introduction; unfortunately, this is then shaky throughout the following chapters. A discussion of James C. Scott’s influential *Seeing Like a State* is also notably absent, despite the relevance of high modernism to Graham’s subject.

The proceeding chapters cover a wide range of themes and examples central to Graham’s topic, from high-tech surveillance to military robotics, devastating urbicide to the attacks on urban infrastructure that fall outside all humanitarian law. He furthers discussions on ‘ubiquitous borders’ – from the ever increasing gated communities of the ‘Western World’ shutting out

‘the Other’ to the more extreme violent bordering of the West Bank and Gaza, that illustrate the ‘paranoia and neurosis’ that has become ‘embedded in geographies’– and the SUV culture (particularly in the US) that has driven the wars and scrabbling for the world’s dwindling natural resources. He looks at the frightening blurring of military and civilian spaces across the spectrum of his themes. Ranging from the use of Playstation-style controls for unmanned military robots and vehicles to make them ‘user-friendly’ to the ‘Western’ desire for security that pushes us to ever more encapsulated world, while the citizens of the ‘Global South’ and even just the ‘Others’ of Western society become increasingly disposable in a ‘never ending war’.

Within these chapters Graham effectively utilises a wide range of images (particularly advertising campaign posters – some of which hammer home the bleak realities he proposes brilliantly), tabular information and graphs. These at times feel like light relief from the text itself which is extremely dense with a frustratingly heavy-handed use of jargon and stock phrases. There is an overwhelming focus upon the US, London, Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan, with only occasional mentions of other countries and cities. This imbalance opens up a question of reasonable comparisons and diversity in the discussion; it also leads to some repetition. In addition, despite what I would consider limited knowledge of modern day urban and military politics and geography, I had the feeling that much of what I was reading had been said before. It is worth noting here that some of the material had been published previously in different forms as separate

mediums between 2003 and 2009. In the fast moving world, that Graham does indeed expose a number of startling and unnerving trends, the fact that work in this book was being drawn together over such a relatively long time period may account for the fact that there was a certain amount of information within the work that seemed ‘old news’ for a pioneering work, especially one being read well over a year after publication. Graham synthesises the material of others rather than providing new personal research on the whole and often seems to string together vast swathes of quotations and paraphrasing. Although the book has been footnoted clearly, it lacks a comprehensive bibliography which would have proved quite useful.

The final chapter, which looks at ‘counter-geographies’ to the rather depressing and fear-inspiring whole, pertains to give some hope to challenging the status quo – through ‘exposure’ (something the book itself could essentially be categorised as?), ‘juxtaposition’, ‘appropriation’, ‘jamming’, ‘satire’ and ‘collaboration’ to give a voice to the silent receivers of urban violence. Unfortunately, the main crusaders of these appear to be artists at this stage and Graham warns that vocalisation of change needs to be made on a broader scale to truly make any marked difference. His final hope that the book ‘has succeeded in delineating the scale of the challenge a diversified movement will need to face’ is definitely fulfilled, for despite its limitations, *Cities under Siege* relays an array of eye-opening and stark facts to push the most sensible of reader to the point of nervous paranoia.

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