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URBAN CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract / The article argues that conflict is inherent to urban life. With the increasing economic, political and cultural importance of cities, the management of urban conflict becomes essential to the well-being of the majority of the world's people. Communication in the sense of 'disarming conversation' can play a crucial role in preventing low-intensity disputes escalating towards violent and deeply damaging conflicts. A key element of the 'right to the city' should be the 'right to a communicative city'.

Keywords / communicative city / disarming conversation / right to the city / urban conflict

Cities are the collective future of humankind. (Kofi Annan)

The City and Conflict

As long as there have been cities, there has been urban conflict.

Early signs come from one of the world's oldest cities, Tell Brak in Syria, where in 2006 prehistoric mass graves were discovered. According to archaeologists the remains that were unearthed are the victims of a bloody urban massacre that took place almost 6000 years ago. Lead researcher Jason Ur, of Harvard University, comments that, 'Given Brak's status as one of the earliest cities in the Near East, it is not impossible that this violence was the result of growing internal social conflict brought about by the processes of urbanization, an entirely new phenomenon at this early date' (*National Geographic News*, 7 September 2007).

In the late Middle Ages, the cities of the Low Countries (among them Bruges and Ghent), which had grown rapidly, became the stages of much economic and political conflict. These conflicts found expression in the ways parties managed urban space to meet their partisan interests. New urban power holders, such as artisans and their guilds, developed impressive manifestations of their authority through such buildings as town halls and guild houses. Conflicts arose on such issues as the fiscal claims made by the governing princes and dukes against the claims the urban artisans made. The battles between nobility and artisans were about economic issues but also about political power (Boone, 2002). Many medieval towns have histories of discriminatory measures against immigrants from rural areas who became urban

outcasts or against minorities such as the Jews in Rome and Avignon who were confined to live in ghettos with severe constraints on their economic and social activities.

In 14th-century multicultural London, there were violent riots against foreigners (1381) and the city also saw in the 15th century many violent outbursts of xenophobia.

In November 2006, the city of Nairobi saw violent conflicts fought out by two gangs in the slum valley Mathare. The issue was control over the illegal brewing market in the slum. Eight people died, some 9000 were displaced. According to the UN Habitat report *Enhancing Urban Safety and Security: Global Report on Human Settlement 2007* – urban violence and crime is on the rise. As the report states, 'Over the past five years, 60 per cent of all urban residents in developing countries have been victims of crime' (UN Habitat, 2007). At the request of African mayors, UN Habitat launched its Safer Cities programmes in 1996.

The inherently conflictual nature of urban space is the result of several forces that reinforce each other.

- Cities confront their inhabitants with clearly visible disparities between the affluent and the losers. In particular, cities in developing countries show enormously big and very visible gaps between the rich and the poor. Most cities have a (globally networked) urban elite and an urban mass. It is not uncommon that the elite benefits from the disadvantaged position of the mass. The marginalized mass can be exploited for its cheap labour, for example. Fear of crime among the better-off reinforces segregation as the rich protect themselves by building gated communities, which causes socioeconomic exclusion and stigmatization for the urban losers. The resulting fragmentation of the city creates even more moments of violent and criminal conduct. Segregated spatial arrangements that are intended to enforce security can themselves become sources of high security risks.
- Cities have always been places where people emigrated to from impoverished rural areas or from war-torn regions. City administrations have always had to deal with 'alien politics'. They have had to address questions about which foreigners to welcome (usually the better-off), which ones to deport (usually the poor), which ones to grant local welfare services or even citizenship. The waves of migration throughout history from antiquity, middles ages, reformation and counter-reformation, through an 18th-century cosmopolitan Enlightenment to 20th-century mass labour and industrial migration, have always primarily affected the cities.
- Most cities face the problem of rapidly expanding populations while the provision of adequate infrastructures and services lags behind. Most big cities in developing countries have an 'illegal city' that is rapidly growing and that is characterized by poor living conditions, overcrowded houses, unemployment, lack of clean water, poor sanitation and violent crime.
- Cities are more competitive and more differentiated than rural areas, the heterogeneity of urban populations is much larger than among rural populations.
- The city is also the place of frustration. Those who migrate to the city dream of limitless opportunities that in reality are not offered by urban life. Life in the city

does not provide all city-dwellers with economic improvement. Cities are places of economic growth, employment opportunities and cultural creativity but also of poor shelter, unemployment, bad sanitation, air pollution and overcrowded public transportation (UN Habitat, 2006: 10).

- Evidence shows that the probability of being a victim of crime and violence is substantially higher in urban areas than in rural areas.
- Cities are crowded spaces that offer easy, soft targets for terrorist and insurgents groups. In an increasingly urbanized world, such groups, rather than seeking shelter within rural proletarian groups, are colonizing the world's burgeoning urban spaces (Graham, 2006: 151). Recent events in New York, Washington, Madrid, London, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are telling illustrations.
- There is an inherent tension and oversensitivity in movements of large numbers of people unknown to each other, insecure about the potential threats others pose, who interact anonymously but often very closely, almost intimately. Urban space where strangers interact with strangers easily breeds 'street rage'. The city is full of explosive places – an insignificant car collision may be like lighting a cigarette in an ammunition depot.

Cities Matter

Conflicts in cities matter because cities matter and increasingly so. Urbanity is the future form of life. As has been stated elsewhere in this issue, for the first time in history humans will become the 'urban species'. In the years to come some 70 percent of humanity will live in cities and many of these urban spaces will be mega-cities. This means that within these spaces people will have to find ways to live together and to deal with the conflicts this implies. The quality and sustainability of life in the city will largely depend upon the ways in which the urbanites manage to deal with their conflicts. As is argued later, the role of communication is critical in addressing urban conflict and a key question for urban futures is whether there is political willingness to build the capacity and facilities that render cities 'communicative spaces'.

Cities are the key hubs in global economic activity and key actors in current processes of globalization. The 28 January 2008 issue of *Time* magazine has a cover story about how three connected cities (New York, London and Hong Kong, aptly titled Nylonkong) drive the global economy. Their shared economic energy creates a powerful network that both illustrates and explains globalization. They are not only centres of money and high-finance, but also centres of culture! Cultural production and consumption has become an important element of the economy of the world's big cities and this has introduced new ways to use urban space for public cultural performances where a variety of cultural roles merge, such as those of spectatorship, tourism, performance and sales. The big cities have also become key places for all kinds of services, such as legal assistance, marketing, advertising and architecture (Sassen, 2001).

Types of Urban Conflicts

Urban Warfare

According to the Worldwatch Institute (www.worldwatch.org), urban unrest is likely to increase in the largest cities of the developing world as more and more people from diverse ethnic and religious groups increasingly come into close contact with each other. Although cities offer the opportunity for diverse interests to integrate, when resources are scarce, or when political interests collide, they can become the sites of warfare. Cities such as Los Angeles, Belfast, Sarajevo and Mogadishu have all suffered from one form of urban warfare or another.

High levels of urban crime and violence affect the social fabric of entire cities. They instil fear and suspicion in the lives of urban residents, often leading to residential fortification among the rich, who build higher walls around their homes and spend more on private security, in effect 'locking themselves' in enclaves that are physically separated from the rest of the city (UN Habitat, 2006: 145). The fear of crime leads in many big cities to the abandonment and stigmatization of certain neighbourhoods and the development of an 'architecture of fear' (UN Habitat, 2006: 145). Urban insecurity creates fragmented cities with securely protected 'gated communities' and 'no-go areas'. This insecurity threatens the social and economic development of cities because it hampers urban mobility and cohesion thus 'undermining the interchange, openness, flow and density that sustain cities in the first place' (Graham, 2006: 151).

Security

Security has always been a prime feature of city development. Their economic importance made cities prime targets for warfare and political struggle. Today's big cities seem obsessed with security and develop ever wider and more intrusive forms of surveillance over citizens. 'The universal consequence of the crusade to secure the city is the destruction of any truly democratic urban space' (Davis, 1992: 155). The proliferation of security measures, such as street surveillance, control of public areas and the curtailment of such civil liberties, as the freedom to associate or to express opinions, threatens the core of urban life.

Resources

There is worldwide a rapidly growing danger of violent conflict about natural resources as people face gross inequities in access to scarce resources. There are – certainly in the cities of poor countries – urban conflicts about the access to water, the quality of water (pollution of ground water, sanitation issues), pricing and management of the distribution of water (private vs public) and the access to electricity and food.

Youth

In South Asian cities, there is an explosive potential for violent conflict as the youth population grows and urban poverty deepens. South Africa's big cities face today a generation of young people that even at a very early age use violence very easily and as a matter of course. The 'youth bulge' is a particularly explosive ingredient, particularly in the slums where almost 50 percent are under 20. In the Kenyan city Nairobi, most violent crimes are committed by youths belonging to the Mungiki movement that numbers some 2 million members.

The youth who spoke out during and after the riots in Paris (2005) protested vehemently over two questions employers consistently asked during job interviews: the applicants' ethnic origins and their address. Employers were known to discriminate against those who lived in stigmatized suburbs. A similar study in Rio de Janeiro found that living in a favela appeared to be a bigger barrier to gaining employment than being dark skinned or female (UN Habitat, 2006: 123).

Religion

Illustrative of religion-related conflicts are the mosque conflicts in European cities. The construction of mosques in European cities raises concerns about the Islamicization of urban, public space. In many European cities, like Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin or London, one finds now sizeable Muslim immigrant communities. 'The mosque not only expresses the presence of a local Muslim community, it also represents the evolution of Islam from the private to the public sphere' (Cesari, 2005: 1018). This is by and large resented by the local community at large.

Ethnicity

Around the world, ethnic groups are in conflict about real or perceived forms of discrimination, denials of their identities, disrespect for their otherness and lack of social and economic opportunities. Ethnic-communal conflicts are widespread in Third World cities, such as Karachi and Ahmedabad. Urban ethnic diversity is an essential element of urban life and the global city (Sassen, 2001) reinforces ethnic differences and ethnic segregation.

Segregation

In many cities, one finds safe pedestrian quarters, with lavish fountains and piazzas and comfortable benches, whereas at a short distance, where poverty reigns, the city administration does nothing to keep streets liveable. The world has close to 1 billion slum dwellers who live in the city but are excluded from the key urban infrastructures and services. The vast majority of slums – more than 90 percent – are located in cities of the developing world.

The 'dual' city reflects the broader asymmetrical world order that is characterized by division and exclusion. In many cities, one finds the two parallel processes of Disneyfication (the city as 'theme park' [Sorkin, 1992]) and Bronxification (the

city as place of violence and crime). In the Disneyfied urban space, conflict is denied. There is no trouble in Disneyland, where everything is predictable and controlled (Wasko, 2001). The 'reality' of Disneyland is one-dimensional. And thus the city has to be regularly cleansed of unwanted persons. The poor sometimes intrude upon the city centre and city administrators design plans to deport the 'deviants' to places where they cannot be seen by decent city dwellers. When the losers try to survive on the streets, many city governments engage in civil war against them.

In the Bronxified urban space, conflict easily escalates towards lethal violence. Here, just like in the world arena, poor people are the likely victims of other poor people perpetrating acts of violence.

Environment

Here the type of urban conflict focuses upon clashes between environmentalists, labour, business and city administrations over issues of economic growth vs ecological safety.

The tendency to develop cities at the expense of the natural environment is increasingly challenged by the recent excitement about planning 'green cities' and thus different visions on city management and its spatial planning collide.

Management of Urban Conflict and Communication

Conflict is not inherently negative. All processes of change involve conflict. In past decades, a whole industry has developed that addresses conflict prevention or conflict resolution.

All this activity seems to ignore that conflict is a constituent part of human life, that conflict may be very positive and necessary (for example, in a system of political democracy, or in the arts and science, or in child development). The real focus should therefore be on identifying creative forms of conflict management that keep the inevitable conflict within a safety zone. The danger is not in the conflict itself but in its escalation to dangerous and violent levels. In conflict management, preventive action is essential. Too often interventions and mediations take place when it is much too late and when too much damage has been done. The key question therefore is: how to prevent the escalation from low-intensity urban conflict to high-intensity urban conflict? A provisional answer may be found in addressing the quality of urban communication. If it is proposed that communication may be critical to urban conflict management, this primarily refers to non-communication or to distorted communication as prime causes of urban conflict. A lack of communication may even be helpful to the de-escalation of conflicts. It is sometimes better not to communicate in order to keep peace. Distorted communication may lead to misunderstandings and although these may be very awkward, they are not necessarily the cause of violent conflict.

Often communication is understood as the provision of information and this is undoubtedly very important. Certainly, in democratically governed cities citizens need to be well informed about urban matters. Moreover, citizens need to be regularly

consulted through the voting polls, local referenda or public hearings (Castells, 1991). However, even if this is all done in very satisfactory ways, the city would not necessarily be a 'communicative city'. In this article, the 'communicative city' is understood as a place that invites its inhabitants and its guests to interact with each other in 'disarming conversation'. This type of urban conversation is essential to the prevention of the escalation of conflictual encounters (disputes, collision of interests, incompatible views on matters) into violent conflicts. 'Disarming conversation' is an approach to human interaction that keeps the spiral of violence under control.

In urban space, people interact in myriad ways, often fleetingly, often anonymously, non-verbally. Such encounters can be inspirational (stimulating our fantasies, 'What if I had said something to her?'), absolutely insignificant, comforting (the consolatory effect of a friendly smile, or the familiarity of a person one routinely sees), irritating, unnerving and even intimidating. Some interactions have an intended or unintended physical component that can be desired or undesirable. One form of human interaction is conversation. This could take many different forms. Conversation can be an informative exchange, such as a simple Q&A session about where to find the post office. It can be small talk about the weather or the misery of public transportation while waiting for the bus. It can also be the nasty dispute about perceived misconduct of other users of urban space.

The type of interaction that would seem crucial to conflict management could be described as 'disarming conversation'. This concept has been chosen since many people enter urban space heavily armed with what Goffman called 'civil inattention' (Goffman, 1963). People are prepared to avoid others through a body language that keeps others at a distance. They glance at others, but see no faces (much like in dreams). They often bring expanded egos (this is my space) or fearful minds to urban interactivity. They are ready for combat. They may want peace, but follow the old Roman dictum that advises if you want peace, prepare for war (Si vis pacem, para bellum). They have not yet learnt the lesson from the peace movement that if you want peace you should prepare for peace (Si vis pacem, para pacem!). In order to engage in peaceful urban interaction, or at least to prevent encounters spiralling into violence, city dwellers need to prepare for 'disarming conversation'. This is the kind of exchange in which people feel that they are taken seriously, in which they see the other as a 'face', accept the 'alterity' of the other as non-threatening, learn from the encounter, and experience the joy of co-creative 'out-of-the-box' thinking where conflicts become opportunities, with many more options than the limited choices that initially restrained the interacting parties. Most disputes people engage in take the form of the classical dilemma: a difficult, sometimes impossible choice between two options. In the 'disarming conversation', people discover that most conflictual situations offer in fact choices among a surprisingly large number of options.

It is obviously important that people learn how to converse in a disarming way and it would be tempting to offer a menu of courses, seminar and books on this communicative skill. Much like it is done in such books as *Communicating Effectively for Dummies* (Brounstein, 2001), or in training manuals on cross-cultural communication competence or in seminars on non-violent communication (Rosenberg,

2003). All these efforts focus on the improvement of communication skills. This is undoubtedly all terribly important and much needed.

However, the first priority should be the creation of the conditions under which people will at all be inspired or seduced into the disarming conversation! Under what conditions does urban space offer an environment that is conducive to this type of interaction?

A guiding consideration in dealing with this question may be that both too much communality and too much diversity make meaningful human communication difficult, if not impossible.

If urban space is too homogenized, like in the increasingly popular shopping mall, diversity tends to be negated. In the mall we are all the same: fun-shoppers having a good time. What is there to converse about? 'Mallization' of the city does not provide optimal conditions for the communicative city. In addition to its Disney-park-type homogenizatiom, in the private space of the mall, there are serious limits to the freedom of speech and little, if any privacy.

If urban space is too differentiated the urbanites may also have nothing to converse about.

The gated communities and the Bronx districts have little to talk about! The 'fortress city' obviously obstructs a communicative environment. It destroys the possibility to communicate about the perceptions, the expectations, the grievances, the humiliations, the hatred that people may harbour.

The communicative conditions that are essential for the management of urban conflict are the collective responsibility of the urbanites to develop the communicative city.

The Communicative City

The notion of the communicative city is the embodiment of a fundamental human right. It represents the entitlement to an urban environment where architectural, spatial, psychological, topological and time-related conditions invite people to impart, seek, receive and exchange information, ideas and opinions, to listen to each other and learn from each other in an ambiance where their autonomy, security and freedom is optimally guaranteed. Actually, the right to the communicative city brings together a whole set of other human rights, such as the right to free association, to privacy and to participation in cultural life. In addition to the earlier concept of the right to the city that was developed by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1968) in his book *Le Droit à la ville*, the 'human right to a communicative city' should be developed. The right to the city was inspired by the basic belief that decision-making processes in the cities should be reframed so that all urban dwellers have a right to participate in urban politics and the shaping of their environment. The right to the city has been explored by researchers in cities such as Rome, Paris, Toronto and Sydney. Much work has focused on access to public space, urban citizenship, marginalization, exclusion and women's right to the city. Communication as conversation is so far not among the topics for research. In the literature on the right to the city there are references to access to public information and to the right to

expression but not to interactive urban communication as conversation. In the World Charter on the Right to the City,[1] the notion of interactive communication does not appear and a revision of the charter should include the right to a communicative city!

Without trying to be exhaustive, some of the conditions that create an urban space that invites disarming conversation can be provisionally listed.

- Public space. Does the city – despite the processes of privatization – have enough public space left for people to meet?
- Privatized public space. Does the city have places that although privately owned function as public meeting places (your favourite pub)?
- Freedom. Do meeting places provide for 'free speech', can people express opinions and ideas without the risk of intervention?
- Trust. Can people communicate without being under 24/7 surveillance?[2]
- Time. Are there time constraints on access to public meeting places, such as closing hours of public parks?
- Sites of wonder. Does the city offer views that inspire people to converse with others?
- Outdoor activities. Are there lots of small markets and myriad cultural events?
- Reflexivity. Are there places where people can withdraw for inner conversation with themselves?
- Flexibility. Does the city have a good balance between large, open spaces and small, intimate spaces?
- Diversity. Is there a variety of architectural structures and socioeconomic functions like in the world's great streets (Jacobs,1993)?
- Human scale. Do city dwellers feel that their urban space has human proportions?
- Comfort. Are places where people can sit and rest, like benches in parks, sufficiently comfortable?
- Playgrounds. Are there enough playgrounds for kids or 'jeu de boules' places for adults?

An important question that inevitably comes up is whether the communicative city is an unrealistic proposition.

Much of the thinking about communicative behaviour of city people has been influenced by a classic article on urban sociology by Louis Wirth, titled 'Urbanism as a Way of Life'. According to Wirth, the city is characterized by the size of its population, the density of life and the heterogeneity. As a result, urbanites develop a modality of coexistence that is impersonal, fleeting and one-dimensional (Wirth, 1938: 12). Most contacts in the city have a business-like, one-dimensional character. Critics of this observation have pointed out that cities are more complex and multilayered and consist of different domains and spaces in which people relate to each other in a variety of ways. The communicative city is inspired by those urban sociologists, like Müller, whose work demonstrates that urban social life in the public domain can be 'warm'. Interactions among people in the city's public space can be personal and intimate and not necessarily anonymous, fleeting and cold (Müller, 2002).

Müller's findings – based upon his research in Amsterdam – indicate that 'urbanites make the public realm meaningful by wilfully and playfully interacting with others in this realm' (Müller, 2002: 189).[3]

The Project

The importance of the 'communicative city' can be promoted by an annual award given to a city that according to the judgement of an international jury with renowned urban designers, planners, architects, urban sociologists and communication experts, offers optimal opportunities and stimuli for people to engage in disarming conversation.

The award event should be combined with an academic symposium on urbanism and communicative lifestyles. The symposium should stimulate empirical research on the de-escalating potential of urban conversation. Worldwide publicity through magazine covers, editorials and articles, television news, documentaries and internet sites would help to render the communicative dimension of urban life a core political and sociocultural issue. Through a very attractive and easily accessible website, the largest possible number of worldwide urbanites and city visitors should be invited to share their communicative experiences through stories and images. The 'communicative city' annual award should be a cooperative project involving such an organization as the United Cities and Local Governments organization (sometimes referred to as the United Nations of Cities) launched in May 2004.[4]

A second global award should be developed for young urban planners and city architects to honour best design practices for the building of future communicative cities. An interesting option here would be to use the popular SimCity Societies computer game, which enables players to design their own city. The existing game makes it possible to combine six different social energies: productivity, affluence, authority, knowledge, spirituality and creativity. The nature of the city that players build is defined by combining these energies in different ways. It would be possible to add to these variables the energy of disarming conversation and design a city that offers the conditions for its realization.

Conclusion

If indeed cities are the collective future of humankind, there is an urgent need to find creative approaches to the management of urban conflicts. One such possible approach is the development of urban space in ways that facilitate 'disarming conversation'. This kind of urban interaction recognizes the reality of urban conflict and offers a tool to prevent conflicts moving safety zones into danger zones.

Notes

1. The charter was elaborated at the Social Forum of the Americas (Quit, July 2004), the World Urban Forum (Barcelona, October 2004) and the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre, January 2005).

2. People easily converse with each other in one of the happiest cities in the world (so judged by its citizens), Ringkobing in Denmark, because people experience trust and security. Data from the happiness project directed by Ruut Veenhoven at Erasmus University in Rotterdam are at: worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl
3. It would seem to me as an inhabitant of Amsterdam that this city combines the 'hostile city' with the 'warm city' in a balance that is very precarious. Problems around issues of incitement to ethnic hatred and concerns about Islamicization could easily tip the balance into a high danger zone. This would be very unfortunate for a city that is nicknamed 'Mokum' after the Hebrew word *Maqum*, which means the place where everyone can go and feel welcome.
4. At: www.cities-localgovernments.org

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