EMPIRE AND THE GLOBAL CITY: PERSPECTIVES OF URBANISM AFTER 9/11

Roger Keil

Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.

– Giorgio Agamben

Introduction Matthew Sparke has recently reviewed the literature about the new political geography of globalization under the aspect of dominance, and has asked how political geographies in these times of “exploitation, brutality, anxiety, desperation, and too often too limited efforts at resistance” can revive their traditional categories of territoriality, scale, region, space, and place. Sparke concludes his exhaustive review of the subdiscipline with the following quote by Arundhati Roy:

So here we are, the people of the world, confronted with an empire armed with a mandate from heaven (and, as added insurance, the most formidable arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in history). Here we are, confronted with an empire that has conferred upon itself the right to war at will, and the right to deliver people from corrupting ideologies, from religious fundamentalists, dictators, sexism and poverty by the age-old, tried-and-tested practice of extermination. Empire is on the move, and democracy is its sly new war cry. Democracy home-delivered to your doorstep by daisy-cutters. Death is a small price to pay for the privilege of sampling this new product: Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (bring to a boil, add oil, then bomb).

This world, which is characterized by an American-dominated but not American-centred empire, is the subject of this essay. My view is directed not towards the entire empire, but one aspect: the urban. The urban is now the generalized way of life of the postindustrial period of capitalism. The “world city” has no externality left because it encompasses everything.
Urbanization is also a moment of “complexification” in the relationships of everyday life, universalization/modernization,\(^5\) and a constitutive dimension of empire. It contains both the possibility of the realization of the imperial dream and the danger of the destruction of structures of imperial power. This essay discusses the imbrications of urbanization and empire as they emerge today. The discussion starts by proposing an initial operative concept of empire. The hypothesis that empire now has a new meaning can inter alia be retraced to Toni Negri and Michael Hardt:

The concept of Empire is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries: Empire’s rule has no limits. First and foremost, then, the concept of Empire posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire “civilized” world. No territorial boundaries limit its reign. Second, the concept of Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity. From the perspective of Empire, this is the way things will always be and the way they were always meant to be …. Third, the rule of Empire operates on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits. It not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature. The object of its rule is social life in its entirety, and thus Empire presents the paradigmatic form of biopower. Finally, although the practice of Empire is continually bathed in blood, the concept of Empire is always dedicated to peace — a perpetual and universal peace outside of history.\(^6\)

The essay explores themes of “boundarylessness,” spatial totality, extension of empire to all registers of the social world, and the notion of biopower, all with regards to the extension of urbanization as a globalized phenomenon under American dominance. I argue that urbanization itself is a key element of the cohesion and ultimate vulnerability of the empire that America built. This argument is built on real and intellectual developments since 11 September 2001 (commonly referred to as 9/11), when the leading economic (New York) and political (Washington) global cities of the American empire suffered a violent terrorist attack. I discuss these developments in light of newer debates on urban geographies. This essay concludes with a few reflec-
tions on the meaning of urbanization in the United States proper, as highlighted in the disastrous events that took place in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in the late summer of 2005.

For many Americans, the insight that the city is at the core of their circumferential world power was not plausible before 9/11. Most of them live in suburbs that, although thoroughly urbanized, are designed in such a way that any association with the city is avoided. Moreover, because this suburban way of life is idealized as the American way of life, it allows no reference to a world outside of the United States; for many Americans, the world, which constitutes their existence in a global economy of empire, remains outside of their experience. What, then, were the consequences of the events of 9/11 that destroyed the image of isolation? What measures were taken in cities in order to deal with the new situation? Whether the American city has now experienced a fundamental shift to paying more attention to public safety, order, and protection, or whether a certain normalization has set in will be clear only in the future when historical distance will allow us to judge.

The American dream is cordoned off from reality.  

– Neil Smith

The End of the Innocence (Again) In his fascinating novel *Antoine Bloyé*, Paul Nizan traces the evolution and fall of imperial France in view of the country’s strident railway construction and industrialization in the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. A particularly impressive passage describes the shift from peace to war in August 1914. Nizan unveils the innocence and “everydayness” of the imperial peace as a horrific mass sublimation. In the “beautiful July 1914,” as the arrival of comet Halley had been announced, the French thought about all manner of things, except for war:

Look at this, the damned comet! One never gets left alone!... so, this is our last evening .... Perhaps we will be dead when we wake up tomorrow. The journalists are inventing everything these days. Is the end of the world really possible? Just so, all of a sudden? Well, then, see you tomorrow, if we are still
alive … but we have a beautiful night to go from life to death …. And they laughed, and they didn’t know that the war was already much closer than any comets and that the end of their world was near.\textsuperscript{7}

The August of 2001 was equally beautiful. Although they were alerted by their secret services, as subsequent reports disclosed, Americans drifted through a summer of barbecues and bathing, and only when the planes fell from the steel-blue September sky the “beautiful August” was over and answers to previously never-posed questions were sought.

In the words of Neil Smith, the bombings of 9/11 were “highly local events yet at the same time utterly global.”\textsuperscript{9} Certainly, in the minds of most Americans the local aspects seem to supersede the global ones. New York was presented as the innocent victim while the global relationships that constituted that specific global city were caricaturized on the level of Fox television and the communiqués of the Washington neoconservatives.\textsuperscript{10} In the end, only victims and no perpetrators were located in New York City. Like the petty bourgeois French in 1914, the inhabitants of American cities and suburbs did not experience the constitution of their everyday lives as being dependent on global economic and political events. Of course, the American public had been warned (just as the French public had been warned in 1914 by an attentive Left, which predicted WWI). Since earlier attacks on New York City (1993, also targeting the World Trade Center), Oklahoma City (1995), and Atlanta (1996), terrorism had ceased being un-American; the politics of globalization had flickered into American living rooms via the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in late 1999. But the terrorist threat to American cities continued to be relegated to the fantasy world of the movie Independence Day.

“Nine-eleven” was undeniably a break, and the popular and scientific publics worldwide have been trying to make sense of its implications ever since. Two wars — Afghanistan and Iraq — have been waged (and have turned into quagmires of biblical proportions). Both wars were part of what the Bush Administration views as an “eternal” war on terror and have had the explicit goal of keeping terror away from American cities. In the course of this strategic action, bellicose acts and terror were distributed to numerous
other cities in many parts of the world. Inside the American nation, the reaction to the terror led to the re-election of a president, one who had come into office in 2000 with a minority of the popular vote. People in the United States (particularly those without American citizenship) and travellers to the United States have since experienced the most severe limitations of their citizenship rights since slavery, the Indian Wars, and the segregationist Jim Crow legislation. It is doubtlessly possible to say that the end of the innocence has come, and (almost) nothing appears as it was before.

Like the war of 1914–18, however, the break from prewar to postwar is only one moment in the understanding of the reality. On one hand, there is the continuity: during the long 1990s, the United States had developed from a self-centred world power into an imperial power that — despite isolationist tendencies, particularly of its Right-wing elites — now saw its political imperative expressly in reordering the world. The more or less victorious campaign against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and the interventions at the Horn of Africa and in Yugoslavia during the 1990s demonstrated an American government willing to intervene. Surgical and carpet bombing became the trademark of the now sole superpower, and ground troops were kept out of the melee wherever possible. Under George W. Bush, the American government moved away from the neoliberal, incremental global politics of consensus and the multilateralism of the Clinton years, and established a unilateral, militarily grounded, and implemented neoconservative and perhaps “superimperialist” foreign policy.

The negative copy of the interventionist politics of the last decade was the Americans’ increasing certainty that their expansionist policies would lead to resistance and opposition abroad (in Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, the Middle East, Indonesia, and parts of Africa), on the streets of friendly states in Europe and Canada, and, ultimately, at home (for example, in Seattle, Los Angeles, Washington, New York, and Miami). After 9/11, America’s government quickly squandered the moral credit it had around the world; for example, when former German chancellor Schröder, a future opponent of Washington’s bellicosity, announced that we were all Americans now, that America’s imperial ambition was fundamentally nationalist, that hence American nationalism rests on global goals. This made the nation and its
government the target of criticism from around the world. In that, the classical and correct distinction between the American people and its ruling classes (economic, military, and political) was blurred. On the other hand, the distinction between the global fascination with the open immigrant country and the often surprisingly polarized social reality in its cities and rural poverty areas became more pronounced.

It is possible to summarize, in Smith’s words, that “American imperial ambition is not new either with the neocons or the post-cold war world but that it has been episodic throughout US history.” And we should add that the military interventions specifically directed at the Muslim world — Afghanistan and Iraq — that we experienced after 2001 can be inserted into a complex line of strategies that have been emergent since the end of the Vietnam War and most definitely since the end of the Cold War. These strategies saw Muslim fighters, clerics, governments, nations, and movements sometimes as allies and sometimes as opponents of American interests in the world.

Empire and Geographical Complexity The classical institutionalist social sciences tend to analyze processes like the constitution of empire, neoliberalization, and globalization as merely political (state), economic (market), and social (civil society). Space continues to be caricaturized as an appendix, a consequence, and an afterthought. Yet, the necessary turn towards a spatialized view allows us to see the complexity of today’s capitalist empire, which has no singular centre (like the British empire) but bears hegemonic features (because the American formation of globalized neoliberalism/neoconservatism prevails in a conflictual environment of violence and consensus, unilateralness and multilateralness).

The “overextension and overreach” of empires is an important aspect of the imperial expansion. Under the leadership of Donald Rumsfeld, the Pentagon articulated the strategic goal of “full-spectrum dominance” — the complete domination of land, air, sea, and space — in the twenty-first century. But despite all attempts at achieving “rapid reaction, mobility and flexibility of forces,” it is not likely (as was demonstrated through the Iraq
war) that the American empire can be sustained simply by force or threat of force,¹⁹ nor that order can be created in such a way in “the ‘outer suburbs’ of the world.”²⁰

Spatialized complexity increases because the dispersion of the informal American empire is not achieved just through state entities.²¹ Much more, there are now new spatial and political constellations through which empire finds its realization.²² In the first instance, this has to do with the rescaling of the world economy.²³ Supranational and subnational state and economic relationships are especially relevant in neoliberal capitalism.²⁴

In *The New Imperialism*, David Harvey demonstrates that the “capitalist imperialism” of the present, which is so strongly identified with the United States, rests on a specific dialectical combination of capitalist and territorial power. Based on Giovanni Arrighi, Harvey notes a central contradiction of the current imperial reality, which is torn between a political, territorialized project and an economic, deterritorialized project.²⁵ Primarily the “molecular processes” of capitalist transactions in the complex multidimensional space of global capitalism differ from the rather formalized political processes in the capitalist state and between states.²⁶ “Uneven geographical conditions,” especially “[s]ub-national political entities, such as metropolitan or regional governments” are reinforced by the imperial tendency.²⁷ “Metropolitanization” in particular becomes the central track through which state restructuring strategies and corporate accumulation strategies are deployed.²⁸ Virilio has argued:

> Today, with the new policy of trade globalization, the city is foregrounded once more. As one of humanity’s major historic forms, the metropolis provides a focus for the vitality of the nations of the globe. But this local city is now only a district, one borough among others of the invisible world meta-city whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere.²⁹

In the specific category of world cities or global cities,³⁰ new sociospatial entities emerge that, as Sassen has shown, are particularly important for the current global economy (next to free trade zones and regional economic districts).³¹ The new relationships of urban systems and empire have been theorized in a variety of ways spanning from rigid, scalar economic hierar-
Influenced by Actor Network Theory (ANT), nonrepresentational theory, and other poststructuralist approaches, Richard Smith, for example, has proposed a new ontology for the geography of empire, wherein global cities (and hence the entire imperial capitalist urban network) are places produced by the multifarious, interwoven individual dynamics of globalized agents. Virilio now sees as decisive the omnipresent and unavoidable vulnerability of the world city in an age of speed, and notes the intrinsic danger for cities in a world of rescaled geopolitics where cities become the front(ier) that needs to be governed and defended. “[T]he decline in the GEOPOLITICS [sic] of nations to the benefit of an administrative METROPOLITICS that restricts the way urban spaces are populated.”

So far, we have developed the idea that the current capitalist imperialism under American hegemony brings with it complex structures of domination, which contradict simplistic notions of a one-headed imperialist centre. Globalized urbanization is simultaneously subnational and supranational spatialization of empire. It distributes the American way of life and the American style of capitalism (but rarely their regulation and gouvernementalité) through specific flows of commodities and cultural discourses throughout the world. This entails the danger, however, that it contributes to the overextension of the American empire by creating cultural, political, and economic satellites around the world, which equally become competitors in the territorial and capitalist arenas and potential hearths of violent conflict.

**Urbanization and Empire: Americanization** The informal American empire sustains itself through social processes that can be exported, be it through the promise of the American dream, the reality of Marshall Plans, or the aggressiveness of American enterprises. Similarly, one can list the processes of urbanization of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as examples of the successful march of Americanization. Although in many ways, the twentieth century American model of urbanization represents a catastrophic failure, particularly in respect to ecological and social matters, at the beginning of the twenty-first century American urbanism has retained model status with the homeowners and city builders of the world — at least
those who can afford it (homeowners in the economic sense; builders in
the political sense). From Brazil to India, from South Africa to China,
American suburbanization acts as the model for the urban middle classes and
elites. The fact that, in most countries, this model can be realized only in
the form of gated communities is not a break with that tradition, but perhaps
its most perfect fulfillment: privacy and exclusivity are generalized democ-
ratically, at least for those who live on the inside of the gates and walls.

Privatized consumption is central for the nexus of empire and city. The
power of the United States rests on the imbrication of its sociohistorical
idiosyncrasies with the general command functions of world capitalism,
and on the “attractive power of US models of production and culture …
increasingly unified in the sphere of consumption.” Panitch and Gindin
explain that:

Coming together here were, on the one hand, the invention in the US of
the modern corporate form, ‘scientific management’ of the labour process,
and assembly-line mass production; and, on the other, Hollywood-style
‘narrative and visual schemas stripped to their most abstract,’ appealing to and
aggregating waves of immigrants through ‘dramatic simplification and
repetition.’

The American urban or, even better, suburban lifestyle (i.e., the wasteful
use of land and resources, suburbanization, and urban sprawl character-
istic of the American empire) is itself at the centre of today’s global conflicts
because its defense (as George Bush Sr. declared as early as the United
Nations’ 1992 environment conference in Rio) was a strategic goal of
American politics. The figures are well known by now: with only five
percent of the world’s population, the United States contributes almost
one third of the world’s social product and similarly high rates of emission
and energy use. Inside the United States, this complex of suburban urban
living in the American way enjoys unfettered popular support. This support
is also reflected in the growing popularity of sport utility vehicles (SUVs),
minivans, and pickup trucks, which together make up more than half of
new car sales in the country. The aggressive — and, in the cases of Jeep and
Hummer vehicles, militarily connoted — image of SUVs is an important
piece in the puzzle of the homeland security sensibilities of a nation that is ready not only to go to war to secure petroleum access, but also to heat up even more demand for the resource.  

Neoliberalization had its roots in the playground of urban America (and partly the United Kingdom under Thatcher). Urban enterprise zones and free trade zones in urban centres created ideal laboratories for metropolitan neoliberalism in the 1980s. Not accidentally, the Manhattan Institute (and other neoliberal think tanks at the core of the turn to markets and privatization in public affairs) had their guns trained on the big cities and their alleged social welfarist wastefulness early on. Neoliberal urban think tanks have influenced American municipal politics, from New York in the 1990s to the aftermath of Katrina, by pushing policies of the penal state, opening up the city for new waves of accumulation and gentrification.

Neoliberalization and imperial expansion of the American model are by no means just consequences of fast policy transfers and think tank activities. America’s expansionist capitalist growth dynamic is one of the enticing moments of the American model and the basis of the country’s Fordist and post-Fordist global cultural hegemony. Following Alan Latham, the “expansionist, absorptionist aspect of American urban culture,” the “merciless commercialization … [is] the source of urban America’s monstrous energy.” Moreover, says Latham, American urbanism with its ideals of individual consumerism represents to many the model for “a new (increasingly universal) vision and understanding of the good life.” The pervasiveness of the hegemonic model of individualist, automobile-centred, suburban lifestyles consented to by the consuming citizens of the United States and beyond ultimately presents an obstacle to collective consumption-type safeguarding of urban communities (i.e., public transit, social housing, openly accessible environments, public health etc.). The search for the “good life” proves elusive even for many Americans these days, and not just in times of crisis and catastrophe. In New Orleans, for example, residents who did not have access to an individual car and could not save themselves were exposed to the Katrina floods with possibly lethal consequences. To the degree that it fails at home, the American urban model cannot be held up as a positive example to the world because it has not kept
its promise to make all American people more secure, more wealthy, and happier. Actually, the American urban model may be viewed as a failed urban model because it cannot sustainably defuse the most important social and ecological contradictions of urban life. These contradictions are mounting.\(^{43}\)

The tendency towards linking the everyday mainstream American patterns of production and consumption with the rest of the world are expressed in the pervasive “Walmartization,” which leads to lower wages and makes low prices possible, but also has as a consequence the dramatic indebtedness of the American working class.\(^{44}\) Indeed, the number of Americans living in poverty is rising steadily. This trend falls in line with a sequence of universal developments, which Gill describes as “global Brazilianization” i.e., the existence of “extreme inequality, racialization and stigmatization.”\(^{45}\)

The connection of massive and wasteful commodity production, urbanization, and empire is absolutely central. Yet the informal empire of the United States does not just “convince” the people inside and outside the country through consumptive excess, to which the dreams of millions worldwide are attracted, but also through the American government’s consistent resistance to alternative forms of urban change. The current neoliberalization under American hegemony leads to an “implosion of global and national politics into an urban world.”\(^{46}\) Together with the diffusion of the American capitalist models of consumption and urbanization in the wake of the establishment of the informal empire of the United States during the past fifteen years, many urban centres were degraded to war zones. This did not always happen with the direct participation of the United States, but the tendency is inherent in the trajectory of the American expansion since 1989. Worldwide, this tendency is linked to the global impoverishment of cities, which Mike Davis has captured under the title “Planet of Slums.”\(^{47}\) The recalibration of an inside-outside problematique from the point of view of the United States is full of explosive contradictions. A “mutually exclusive binary — a securitized ‘inside’ enclosing the urban places of the US Empire’s ‘homeland,’ and an urbanizing ‘outside’ where US military power can preemptively attack places deemed sources of ‘terrorist’ threats — are … inevitably ambivalent.”\(^{48}\) Not surprisingly, the long-term tendency of empire-
building by controlling urban space inside and outside of the United States has been ratcheted up through the Bush administration’s policies directed at urban place at home (homeland) and abroad (target). Cities are made the lynchpins of geopolitical strategy.\textsuperscript{49}

This tendency has led to an increase in postcolonial urban conflicts. There is now a homefront for the war against terror and a pattern of the persecution of diaspora populations through measures such as ethnic profiling as well as various forms of everyday racism.\textsuperscript{50} While cities become arenas of open warfare and latent control, the nation paradoxically regains ground as the scale of control while the security perimeter, with which the United States surrounds itself, allows the reimagination of the nation as a clearly delineated, organized space.\textsuperscript{51} But the geography of repression, evoked through the concerted efforts of homeland security, articulates itself directly with the extant urban patterns of segregation when, for example, Arab-American neighbourhoods such as Dearborn in Detroit are made the target of ethnic profiling:

The ‘hybrid,’ transnational identities of many neighborhoods and communities in cities, shaped by generations of transnational migration and diasporic mixing, are thus becoming problematized. Inevitably, such places and groups are being ‘stretched’ across the resurgent ‘them and us’ or ‘home and foreign’ binaries that are being imposed.\textsuperscript{52}

The geopolitical evocation of the global state of emergency with the United States at its epicentre has a decidedly urban dimension. Mike Davis has noted that “‘security’… will become a full-fledged urban utility like water and power.”\textsuperscript{53} The allegedly or actually threatened technological and everyday connections of the new normal will become obvious in the urban centres, where the ubiquitous “intelligent” surveillance methods of the warring state meet the “complex, porous and multidimensional” realities of the urban, which are ultimately uncontrollable, not least because of the resistances that germinate everywhere.\textsuperscript{54}

**Rethinking the American City in a Period of Empire** These recent, real developments point to the need to reevaluate the way American cities are
sites of the spread of imperial hegemony. Mostly due to the overwhelming influence of the Chicago school of sociology, the twentieth century American city enjoyed model character around the world. As Elvin Wyly correctly states, this is a peculiar chance product, not just of American expansionism but of the isolationism of its urban research:

American urban geography has its own contested history of a self-styled, paradoxical exceptionalism: not long ago, many believed that a perspective forged in the laboratory of the 20th-century US city provided an exceptionally pure form of theory and policy, a reference point for interesting deviations elsewhere.  

This tendency was strengthened through the spatial and political exceptionalism of the United States. Building on Thrift, Wyly continues:

Too often, we assumed that the new cities created by new technologies, ways of tinkering, and structures of power were best studied in the tabula rasa of the United States either on an isotropic plain, a suitably Tieboutian suburban fringe, or a laissez-faire informational city hooking into global circuits.

For Wyly, this paradoxical history of American influence has been undermined only recently by the “material and discursive urbanism of globalization and transnationalization.” Still, this influence continues in the present, when the decentred urban reality of America — where planes fly into high rises and hurricanes that signify climate change bring catastrophic floods — is confronted with the “militant parochialism” of a “remilitarized American exceptionalism.” This leaves the historical alternative between “urban hierarchies shaped by multilateralism and hesitant quasiliberal attempts to create a more inclusive yet unavoidably polarizing capitalism, or a more confident, aggressive, unilateral New American Century of world cities shaped by surveillance, scapegoating, and shock-and-awe urbanization.”

When Los Angeles became the poster city of the globalized period of urbanization in the 1980s (before Dubai, Shanghai, and other world cities became iconic in their own right), it was partly because of the southern California metropolis’ extraordinary cultural diversity, which was viewed as both American to the core and global/alien. At the other edge of the conti-
nent, New York City played a similar role. In a period of world city formation, American cities themselves were under the spell of a mixed dynamics of continued national trajectories on one hand and new internationalizing trends on the other. Los Angeles and New York were American cities with the usual rifts of race and class, inner-city decay, suburbanization etc., but they were also something else: Los Angeles became the “capital of the Pacific Rim in the 21st century” and New York became “the capital of the world.” In contrast to earlier periods of immigration and internationalization, these metropolises were not seen as places in a national network of cities, but increasingly as nodes in a thoroughly globalized narrative of urbanization, in which New York was closer to London than to Chicago and Los Angeles was closer than Mexico City and Tokyo than to San Francisco.62

This emergence of a post-American, globalized type of city created the need to write American urbanization at least partly as postcolonial history. Under the postcolonial label, we can summarize approaches that — as demonstrated by authors such as Arjun Appadurai and Anthony King — dedicate their work to material practices and discursive formations “after the colonial.”63 Postcolonial theory, of course, does not only denote a periodic break, but evokes a new set of theoretical orientations that had hitherto either been undeveloped or contextualized in different theoretical traditions and trajectories.64 The construction of race and racism, for example, was now much less an intra-American narrative, but became part of a global, long-term development. Scholars in this area are interested in power and knowledge, agency, and particularly “representation of culture(s) under asymmetrical political and social conditions.”65 While there is a lively conversation in Canada about postcolonial urban debates,66 the term postcolonial, as Mona Domosh remarked recently, is more often associated with European urbanism, and even more specifically with the “afterlife” of the British empire, than with the United States:

To think of American cities as imperial requires an evaluation of American economic expansion as constituting an empire, a difficult task given the exceptionalist accounts of American history that until recently have dominated popular and academic narratives of national identity.67
Domosh conjugates the various intertwined dimensions of European imperialism — e.g., the official history of monuments and architecture, the everyday spaces and the imperial afterlife — and attempts to make these categories work as well for the American case. She observes that a presentist American urban research tradition rebels against a historically founded postcolonial view. But she succeeds in demonstrating how the history of the large American cities can be reread in this context. She concludes that America creates emblems as a commercial empire. One such emblem, the World Trade Center towers, which stood as the symbol of American dominance, now has to be replaced at all cost. She concludes:

[T]o ignore the discourse of empire in our analysis of the American city is to miss one of its defining elements: many of its forms, practices and representations were vital to, and constituted from, its role as the heart of a commercial empire. To think postcolonially about the American city is to understand the compelling discursive connections between today’s global cities and the late 19th century commercial empires in which they were formed.68

Target Homeland: Urbanization in Katrina’s Path The giant tropical storm Katrina, which hit the American Gulf Coast at the end of August 2005, was not impressed with the strategic separation in American imperial policy that had made homeland cities places to be protected and enemy cities places to be destroyed when necessary. The raging winds that pushed massive flood waves across the levies and into the neighbourhoods of New Orleans exposed the pathetic underpreparedness of the homeland security on one hand and the systemic spatial injustices inherent in the American urban system on the other. Ultimately, the American city is always characterized by its uniquely makeshift appearance and its peculiar continuities. The flood catastrophe of New Orleans showed mercilessly that the American city is not an instrument for regulating social inequalities in a social democratic or similarly egalitarian manner. Most of the thousands of dead and hundreds of thousands of homeless people left behind by Katrina were poor and old, many of them were people of colour and women.69

From the beginning of the industrialized urbanization in the United States, the poor have been the victims of catastrophes. The combination of
extreme urban density and brutal capitalist practices, for example, led to the death of 146 employees of a clothing factory in the Triangle Fire of 1911 in New York City: most were women and immigrants. This pattern of the poorest and mostly nonwhite population being most vulnerable to urban catastrophes was detailed convincingly by Mike Davis in his books *Ecology of Fear* and *Dead Cities*. In addition, the systematic analyses of the environmental justice movement in the United States have demonstrated huge differences in the vulnerability of various population groups to environmental risk. Continued social constructions of race pivot around exclusionary images and policies that marginalize African Americans as urban outlaws in an otherwise civil society. In a different context, Eric Klinenberg was able to show, in his detailed study on the consequences of the 1995 heat wave in Chicago, that a combination of macro- and microstructural changes in that city led to extremely high death rates among old and nonwhite people. It is noteworthy that Klinenberg exposed complex relationships of political, social, economic, and ecological developments that added up to a new political economy and political ecology of the city, and that resulted in a death sentence for the weakest members of the community.

On the other side of the nuanced microanalysis, the storm appears as a natural force. In an age of Actor Network Theory, we cannot but name Katrina as an agent of urbicide. But it is impossible to blame the hurricane: the structural inequities of a neoliberalized state and market killed the people on the Gulf, not the natural actant of gale force winds and flood waters. We, therefore, find ourselves instead in the neighbourhood of Giorgio Agamben, who wrote in *Homo Sacer* about the existence of the camp as a typical expression of state and social powers and the “bare life” of the *homo sacer* as the expression of human existence in the modern world. Agamben has argued that we should regard the camp (by which he, in the first instance, refers to the Nazi concentration camps) “not as a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past (even if still verifiable) but in some way as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living.” Agamben writes further:
If it is true that the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree, then the bare life of \textit{homo sacer} concerns us in a special way. Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as much moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually \textit{hominis sacrī}.\footnote{Keil / \textit{Empire and the Global City}}

American urban development during the 1990s has contributed much to corroborate Agamben’s idea that the camp and not the city/state is the biopolitical paradigm of the occident.\footnote{Keil / \textit{Empire and the Global City}} From the ubiquitous gated communities in the suburbs and the condominium to the delinked ghettos of the inner cities, the urban landscape of America has changed into a collection of armed \textit{laagers}.

Virilio calls this:

Another clinical sign of the \textit{GREAT HEMMING IN} \textit{[sic]} [in the United States], where several tens of millions of Americans have been locking themselves away for the last ten years in quest of the ultimate comfort, \textit{INTERNAL SECURITY}…. The \textit{cosmopolis}, the open city of the past gives way to this \textit{claustropolis} where foreclosure is intensified by exclusion of that stray, the outsider, what we might call a \textit{SOCIOCRUISER}.\footnote{Keil / \textit{Empire and the Global City}}

But the flood of New Orleans also exposed a more cruel picture: the biopolitical state in action. A witness report by two ambulance drivers, who happened to be in the city at the time of the flood, recalls the following:

By day 4 our hotels had run out of fuel and water. Sanitation was dangerously abysmal. As the desperation and despair increased, street crime as well as water levels began to rise. The hotels turned us out and locked their doors, telling us that the ‘officials’ told us to report to the convention center to wait for more buses. As we entered the center of the City, we finally encountered the National Guard. The Guards told us we would not be allowed into the Superdome as the City’s primary shelter had descended into a humanitarian and health hellhole. The guards further told us that the City’s only other shelter, the Convention Center, was also descending into chaos and squalor and that the police were not allowing anyone else in. Quite naturally, we asked, ‘If we can’t go to the only 2 shelters in the City, what was our
alternative?’ The guards told us that that was our problem, and no they did not have extra water to give to us. This would be the start of our numerous encounters with callous and hostile ‘law enforcement.’

Or consider this report, which clearly spells out the camp reality of life after Katrina:

In the refugee camp I just left, on the I-10 freeway near Causeway, thousands of people (at least 90% black and poor) stood and squatted in mud and trash behind metal barricades, under an unforgiving sun, with heavily armed soldiers standing guard over them. When a bus would come through, it would stop at a random spot, state police would open a gap in one of the barricades, and people would rush for the bus, with no information given about where the bus was going. Once inside (we were told) evacuees would be told where the bus was taking them — Baton Rouge, Houston, Arkansas, Dallas, or other locations. I was told that if you boarded a bus bound for Arkansas (for example), even people with family and a place to stay in Baton Rouge would not be allowed to get out of the bus as it passed through Baton Rouge.

You had no choice but to go to the shelter in Arkansas. If you had people willing to come to New Orleans to pick you up, they could not come within 17 miles of the camp. I traveled throughout the camp and spoke to Red Cross workers, Salvation Army workers, National Guard, and state police, and although they were friendly, no one could give me any details on when buses would arrive, how many, where they would go to, or any other information. I spoke to the several teams of journalists nearby, and asked if any of them had been able to get any information from any federal or state officials on any of these questions, and all of them, from Australian TV to local Fox affiliates complained of an unorganized, non-communicative, mess. One cameraman told me ‘as someone who’s been here in this camp for two days, the only information I can give you is this: get out by nightfall. You don’t want to be here at night.’ There was also no visible attempt by any of those running the camp to set up any sort of transparent and consistent system, for instance a line to get on buses, a way to register contact information or find family members, special needs services for children and infirm, phone services, treatment for possible disease exposure, nor even a single trash can.

The events of New Orleans tested the borderline between the primitive and civilization that Jennifer Robinson sees inscribed into urban theory:
It is possible to argue that without the primitive, the sketch of city life which they [Chicago school urbanists, R.K.] offered could not be sustained, or perhaps even generated. Would it be possible to have imagined cities as special sites of creativity and dynamism if the fiction of the primitive as static and unchanging had not cast this narrative into careful relief? If the primitive had not been available to hold in abeyance what theorists imagined the city not to be?

State failure in New Orleans, drastically illustrated in consecutive government reports, brought “primitiveness,” with all of its real dynamics and incalculable risks, back to the city when Katrina blew through New Orleans and the world was treated to shocking images of misery from the Bayou — primitiveness here as the postcolonial version of systematic underdevelopment. Only this time, it was not in the periphery but in the core. In classical American urban research, the route of the African Americans from the South along the Mississippi was depicted as a pathway of urbanization, modernization, and civilization. Katrina in New Orleans undermines this linear depiction and asks for a more complex theory of urbanization, not least because the process of civilization and urbanization can no longer be seen as an individual or collective process of maturation but as a contradictory social process of production, in which the market and the state have central and, as we could see in the state failure of crisis management, decisive roles.

It is clear that the call for the strong state rings empty when the goal is to effect progressive social and ecological goals in urban politics. Rather, it is important to scrutinize state policies thoroughly and to examine their social basis. We should not forget that the reactions of American states at all levels have had aspects of an authoritarian state after 9/11. But it is obvious — and this is demonstrated by Katrina — that a purely militarist action after a natural disaster can hardly be crowned with success when the comprehensive conditions of neoliberalization of the state are disregarded. This is why we have to agree with Bill Sites who writes about New York City: “Neoliberal policies, by actively disembedding social actors, undermine the capacity of society to engage responsibly with globalization and urban transformation.” Sites concludes from this that strengthening the
capacity of the state to react productively and democratically in the urban interest is a task of highest priority. 87

New Orleans is a global city, an American city, and a local “prison,” as Mike Davis told the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung after the flood. 88

In a careful and prescient analysis of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Kevin Fox Gotham had written only weeks before the catastrophe that:

Mardi Gras has become the linchpin of a burgeoning tourism industry, punctuated by the construction of new hotels, convention facilities, a Rouse riverfront, and gambling. A variety of public and private groups now ‘market’ and ‘thematize’ Mardi Gras using sophisticated advertising techniques of image production and distribution. Major corporations such as Bacardi rum, Southern Comfort, Coors beer, Kool cigarettes and other companies are increasingly attaching Mardi Gras symbols and motifs to their products to stimulate consumer demand. Entertainment Tonight, MTV, and the Playboy Channel telecast live reports from New Orleans every year, and camera crews from the BBC, Japan, the Travel Channel and other countries showcase the festivities to a worldwide audience. 89

Conclusion In a perceptive Toronto Star article (one that summarizes the chief arguments of his new book) at the occasion of the first anniversary of Katrina, Henry Giroux explains that the storm laid bare three fundamental developments of today’s global society: first, it is “symptomatic of a form of negative globalization” visible in any “city throughout the world” that privileges free market developments at the expense of the “social state”; second, Katrina “made perfectly clear [that] the challenges of a global world, especially its growing ecological challenges, are collective and not simply private”; and third, “the decline of the social state along with the rise of massive inequality increasingly bars whole populations from the rights and guarantees accorded to fully fledged citizens of the republic and increasingly renders them disposable, left to fend for themselves in the face of natural or man-made disasters.” 90

The point that Katrina decisively put on the narrative of American urbanism after 9/11 also allows us to reflect on the main themes of this essay. New Orleans became the stage for another show, one that was equally global but was played out as a national tragedy, while the consequences
were felt mostly by the local population. This show has symbolic significance beyond the Bayou. The drama of the American city as the metaphor of the new empire has developed in three overlapping tracks in the long term since the beginning of the 1990s, and in the short term in the context of the catastrophes of 9/11 and Katrina. First, through localization: the individual urban communities and individuals in these sites were exposed to new vulnerabilities by longitudinal processes of neoliberalization as well as dramatic events. Second, through globalization in a double sense: on one hand, the American urban landscape was rudely ripped from its isolation and cast into the turbulence of globalization, which the neoliberal policies of the Clinton administration had helped produce; on the other hand, the rapid development of the American urban model with its wasteful and unsustainable dimensions, urban sprawl etc. produced an environmental problem of global proportions in the 1990s. Third, through imperialism: the folding of the war at home (homeland security) into the war against terror and the imperial campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq made the American carceral city and the police state regulation of difference an export success in Baghdad and other cities. Coupled with the acceptance of activities by friendly states (like Israel in the Occupied Territories), American foreign policy, at least through its military dimension, functions as urbicide.

The temporal coincidence of the flood disaster with the fourth anniversary of 9/11 has led to a critical, even sardonic treatment of America in the world press. Despite all sympathy with the deceased and displaced, a wave of sarcasm and cynicism was set free; it speculated about the end of empire, or at least the end of Bush-style neoconservatism. It is unlikely that the end of empire is nigh, even though China arms itself and the decadence of the neoliberal/neoconservative project becomes stronger by the day. But important questions deserve to be asked: can the cities of the United States now enter a phase of development that does not continue to suggest that the American special path is the only model to be followed globally, and begins to view more internally peaceful, socially less polarized, less market-oriented, and more sustainable models in other parts of the world as worthy of consideration if not emulation? Research on the American city can play a role in
this necessary reorientation. Where would this research have to take us? The English critic John Berger wrote, vis-à-vis the neoimperial politics of the Bush regime at the time of the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, that we currently live in a tyranny that rests on a decentralized power structure ranging “from the 200 largest multinational corporations to the Pentagon.” For Berger, this imperial system rules in a style that is “interlocking yet diffuse, dictatorial yet anonymous, ubiquitous yet placeless,” and whose goal it is to “delocalize the entire world.”

From my perspective, research on globalizing cities offers an increasingly important methodology for understanding this “delocalized” urban world in the age of empire, which is profoundly incoherent and fundamentally authoritarian. I believe that, as Friedmann and Wolff’s original formulation had it, there are indeed a few lessons here for “research and action” for a better world through critical urbanism and radical practice. Taking up Berger’s interrelated themes of decentralization and concentration, tightening and loosening, authoritarian and nameless, all-apparent and rootless, we have the outlines of the script we can follow to redirect our thinking and activism into new tracks. The events following Katrina will not be the sole lever that can turn the hegemonic model of American urbanization. In some way there is, as Giroux seems to suggest, the confirmation of those elements of neoliberalism that have remade the world in the American image: as a place of individualized, racialized, and cut-throat competition in which resources are distributed along hardening lines of class, race, and gender and where the social state is in fast retreat. These lines are not just American in character; they increasingly reflect a globalized, scaled world of imperial oppression. To turn these relationships upside-down, to “make them dance” as Marx once said, can begin through the specific contradictions presented by American urbanism. We can imagine this in catastrophic terms by seeing them as the foreshadowing of larger problems of the global oil economy, which have been decried by scholars such as Bill Rees and have been portrayed in documentaries such as The End of Suburbia. The danger of this development, which is going to bring the global crisis of resource distribution to a previously largely impervious American public, is that it has a potentially explosive effect on the entire hegemonic construct
of empire. Most likely though, folding the global energy crisis into the American suburb will lead, like Katrina did, to the victimization of those who cannot afford alternatives.

Still, the coincidence of a disastrous global urbicidal strategy (as witnessed in Baghdad, the West Bank, and Beirut) and the generalized homeland insecurity (as witnessed in New Orleans) may lead to a more-than-episodic weakening of the American empire, and to some more fundamental cracks in which critical research and activism could take hold. The American student, civil rights, and Afro-American liberation movements, the women’s movement, and other radical upheavals of a generation ago led the way for a global politics of resistance that combined with socialist and labour movements in Europe (more than in the United States) and with anti-imperialist and liberationist struggles in the developing world for the kind of united front witnessed in consecutive World Social Forums and the antiwar movement of 2003. For research, this essay points us to the tightening of our agenda around questions of the imperial construction of American urbanism. As the contradictions of cities and suburbs, class and race continue to lay a grid of dynamic unevenness over the American metropolis, they must now be understood and investigated in their context at the global scale. To study and make apparent these globalized topologies of the urbanity of empire is part of the research agenda of critical urban studies today.

Notes
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3. Ibid., p. 789.
5. Ibid.
Panitch and C. Leys, (eds.), *Socialist Register 2004: The New Imperial Challenge* (London: Merlin Press, 2003), pp. 3–4. But implicitly, even Panitch and Gindin (p. 5) assign to the American imperial project an “informal” character because this project does not so much succeed through naked violence as through the pervasiveness of the American way of life. Moreover, “a global capitalist order is always a contingent social construct.”


10. One exception remained next to the traditional but severely shrunken partial public sphere of the Left — a wave of satirical intervention such as Bill Maher’s *When You Ride Alone You Ride with Bin Laden* (Beverly Hills, CA: New Millennium Press, 2002), the films of Michael Moore, and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.


26. Ibid., p. 29.

27. Ibid., p. 32.


35. Panitch and Gindin, “Global Capitalism....”
54. Graham, *Cities, War, and Terrorism*.
62. Although I cannot fully elaborate on this thought here, it should be noted that other post-Fordist landscapes besides the global city were also fashioned after the American pattern of development. For example, although the Third Italy was the model for the post-Fordist flexible production regions, the idea came back to Europe as an American — i.e., Californian — model in the literature on Orange County and Silicon Valley.
64. I am grateful to Katharine Rankin for pointing out this important fact to me in her review.
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68. Ibid., p. 752.
72. For example, see the following titles by R. Bullard: Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots (Boston: South End Press, 1993), Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994).
74. E. Klinenberg, Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). In her last book, the late great Jane Jacobs praises Klinenberg and describes impressively the social microprocesses that led to the disaster; J. Jacobs, Dark Age Ahead (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2004), p. 84.
78. Ibid., p. 166.
79. Ibid., pp. 114–115.
80. Ibid., p. 181. It may be interesting to note that the German translation of Agamben’s book uses “state” instead of “city” here: Agamben, Homo Sacer..., p. 190.
81. Flusty, De-Cocacolonization.
82. P. Virilio, City of Panic, pp. 67–68.
85. J. Robinson, “In the Tracks of Comparative Urbanism,” p. 713.
87. Ibid., p. 149.