

Janine Di Giovanni - The Problem With Cities

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If the protests in Brazil are about any one thing, it's the agony of urban poverty. And it's not just Brazil. Janine di Giovanni on the looming crisis facing global cities.

Brazil is on fire, with hundreds of thousands of people hitting the streets to vent their anger and rage at corruption, the high cost of living, and proposed hikes in bus fares. Protests in Istanbul are still raging after nearly a month. Even Stockholm was raging in the recent weeks.

Welcome to the first truly urban century. It's not going to be pretty. Reasons for these protests are nearly impossible to define, even on a superficial level, but one through line is clear—these are cases of city dwellers being plain fed up.

In Brazil, bus fares and corruption were only superficial catalysts for the rage in the streets. The underlying cause is an urban nation that is split neatly between the haves and have-nots. In economic lingo, Brazil is one of the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China—a block of nations with rapidly advancing economies. But while the wealthy flaunt their excessive lifestyles in Rio and São Paulo, life in the *favelas*, or shantytowns, is murderously hard.

The *favelas*, founded by soldiers with nowhere else to go, have been around for hundreds of years. By the 1970s, as urbanization became a lifeline for impoverished Brazilians looking for work, they became breeding grounds for violent gangs, drug dealers, and dirty politics. The most realistic portrayal of life in the *favela* was Fernando Meirelles's extraordinarily graphic and disturbing 2002 film *City of God*. In it, Meirelles exposes the horrors of poverty—all while golden riches lay a few miles away.

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