
Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago’s Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning belongs to the collection of books that manage to offer a rich contribution to several subfields (in urban studies, geography, and planning), while also bringing a powerful source of political inspiration (and formative material) for those who are actively engaged in the issues that it addresses. The book provides a historical reading of the conflictual relations between planning and the commons, telling stories that follow a timeline that switches between different urban and historical contexts, each presenting a specific set of issues and advancing a new form of conceptual understanding of the interactions between the state planning elements of the hegemonic assemblages that produce urban spaces, and the violent restrictions and demolitions of the commons that are constructed through autonomous, popular spatial practices.

The first of these histories applies the concept of “extended urbanisation” to frame the primitive accumulation and enclosures of the commons in the English countryside as an urban process, related to an early form of territorial planning of the capitalist state. Chapter Two travels to New York City and Chicago in the late 19th century and the pre-World War I period, looking at the developments of urban regulation of public space, clarifying and revealing its disciplinary character, which restricts the commons in its spatial practices engendered in and through everyday life in the city. The third chapter moves back to Europe in Weimar Berlin, exploring the politics of class struggle in the dynamic appropriation and democratic construction of centralities in conflict with its management following vested interests in the production of urban space. The final chapter shifts to 1970s and 1980s Milan, for a brilliant analysis of the pre-histories of urban neoliberalism and its early clashes with autonomist social movements, in a context that is often overlooked by accounts that focus on such preliminary histories in Britain and North America. The author connects urban history with critical urban theory and planning, developing important novel perspectives on the conflictual relations between planning and the commons, advancing theoretical approaches
while providing rich empirical accounts of the stories that support the narrative unfolding throughout the book.

The connections between primitive accumulation—as an ongoing, mutative, and multi-sited dynamic conducted by the capitalist state—and the limitations to emancipatory experiences based on the common(s) are frequently understood as limited to distant geohistories in the origins of the currently hegemonic economic system. Detailed mappings of the many forms of limitations and barriers to autonomous democratic experiences are of utmost importance, both for advancing our critical social perspectives and for better-informed political action and practice. Contemporary social movements in a wide variety of contexts and forms of struggle face daily challenges whose genealogies are clarified and identified in the book, which brings such histories forward as inputs for current political urban practice and the critical thinking that it always performs and develops.

The book can be inserted in many different intellectual and political lineages and contributes to them with original and politically powerful material, which is not restricted to contemporary conditions but also develops reinterpretations of geohistories situated in different contexts. One of these trajectories of politics and scholarship is a refinement of the understanding of primitive accumulation and its inner workings, which brings important contributions both to new forms of theorising and to empirical research on the subject.

The geohistory of enclosures is a fundamental pillar in the construction and development of the capitalist state, and the book’s proposal of repositioning the genesis of modern territorial planning in that process involves many consequences for contemporary issues—while also delineating a research agenda that can travel to other contexts. There are several important bridges to contemporary issues of spatial politics in this approach, concerning a wide variety of dynamics that link the state’s actions (and modes of reasoning) on the territories that it manages to the political intentions concerning the communities and populations that depend on building and nurturing their own relations to such spaces. The attention to empirical and conceptual details captures many relevant stories, as in the genealogies of manipulating participation—which is of utmost importance in the critical research on participative methods in planning, usually portrayed as novel, innovative democratic techniques, in perspectives that frequently miss the enclosure of the commons in the picture of planning histories.
Extended urbanisation is a fundamental theoretical element for the author’s proposal of placing the enclosures as linked to the historical urbanisation of the countryside, which also highlights the importance of a historical research agenda related to the concept (of the extended urban). Moreover, this historical perspective is productively worked in contact with a view of the extensions that never loses sight of the notion of centrality (an important spatial focus of the book). The potentialities of thinking the common through the reconnections between urban and rural social spaces—a relational spatial politics that has been showing key developments in current Latin American social movements—are also present, in the critique of the hegemonic formations that depend on producing heteronomous and socially regressive forms of urban–rural relations.

However, the pre-enclosure commons are a remnant of a previous mode of production, and a product of the long-term transition that followed its demise. The theorisation and problematisation of this period of transformation are fundamental for the spatial histories of the commons. Such histories could also be better connected to longer-term historical perspectives, which may contribute to widening, strengthening, and pluralising the imaginaries concerning the common—along with myriad other collective practices, as in Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) work.

Sevilla-Buitrago contributes to an agenda of remaking crucial links between critical geography and urban studies with the academic and professional fields of urban and regional planning (also stretching to many issues that have been covered in depth almost exclusively by architecture scholars), that seems to have been weakening. This is a critical move for those of us who see planning as a vital field of dispute: if critique is weakened (both inside the discipline itself and in its connections to other epistemological arenas), the conservative convergences between urban technocracy, neoliberalism, and entrepreneurialism will have freedom to work at ease. The author also promotes new dialogues between critical geography and different approaches to designing, creating, and advancing new spatial proposals for cities and urban dynamics, which appears explicitly in the book’s conclusion. The importance of these interfaces could hardly be overestimated, as it promotes connections with a mode of activism aimed at occupying the spaces of debate related to propositions, and to the politics of “what is to be done”. Moreover, the engagement with planning from the standpoint of the commons is an essential political task, to which Sevilla-Buitrago contributes substantially.
Among several other reasons and objectives involved in the interactions between these two domains, the struggle for the right to the common—in its autonomous constructions—is unavoidable. Otherwise, it will keep being attacked, hollowed out, and undermined by hegemonic assemblages.

The book’s cosmopolitan approach, aptly conducted through the trips between places studied in different historical periods, shows the strength of research practices that travel between different contexts. However, the paths travelled are limited to portions of the main global centres, and the idea of the majority world invoked in the conclusion brings up another mode of understanding the largest missing piece in the book: the urban of the Global South. On the one hand, it is not a pretension of theoretical universalism that allows the research material in the book to be used as a reference in studies of similar processes in other contexts, but rather its originality in the identification of relations between dynamics that are not restricted to the locations that the author examines in the detailed textures of its localised particularities. On the other hand, to fully examine the formation of state modes of managing social space—and relations between modern states, planning, and the common(s)—even in Europe, the colonial experience is indispensable. The territorial power dynamics created through slavery and colonisation—whose political descendants are still in action—are fundamental in the histories of the very sociospatial processes covered in the book: the creation of common social spaces in the interstices and breaches of hegemonic spatial formations, that are eventually repressed, as in the huge historical geographies of Brazilian quilombola communities.

Although the restriction to Northern geographies will be seen in some places as the clearest weak spot of the book, the theoretical and methodological material it provides is left open for contributions that can bring the approach to the South, providing a powerful critical framework for a potentially rich research field in similar geohistories of the Southern urban. As such, it provides essential reference points for the refined and detailed mapping of genealogies that the research agenda on neoliberal urbanisation and urban policy could equivocally see as historically novel features of the contemporary urban condition.

Against the Commons is a vital contribution to contemporary urban research and politics. As in so many important interventions, the book provides many openings that are left for others to deepen and follow the paths that the author identifies. As such, it also works as a
fertile soil for new (academic and political) work to emerge, and as a rich space for new encounters and dialogues in urban research and action.

Reference


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