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**Urbicide:
The Politics of Urban Destruction
by Martin Coward**

Review by Antoine Bousquet¹

When major war returned to the European continent for the first time since 1945, it took a somewhat surprising form. Not of the expected inter-state conflict between Eastern and Western blocs but, rather, of the protracted ethnic strife of the soon-to-be-former Yugoslavia. The resulting shock and bewilderment was not only that of the policy-makers who struggled to formulate a coherent or effective response but also that of scholars, who until then, mostly fixated on superpower confrontation. New categories and lenses of analysis were summoned to account for the specificities of the conflict such as the widely popularised notion of “new wars.” The widespread destruction of the urban environment, notably during the lengthy siege of Sarajevo, also prompted talk of “urbicide” as a deliberate policy enacted by combatants. However, to my knowledge, the term has up till now received only limited and passing scholarly attention. This is likely to change with the publication of the present volume and what must be considered a major theoretical contribution to the understanding of this form of political violence.

Martin Coward develops in *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* a sophisticated philosophically-informed account of what he calls the “logic of urbicide”. This is understood as “the destruction of the conditions of possibility of heterogeneity” (p. 43). His reflection on urban destruction evidently has its roots in the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s and particularly that of Bosnia-Herzegovina since this forms both the springboard and the main evidence base for his study. The emblematic destruction of the *Stari Most* bridge in Mostar in 1993 opens the book and recurs throughout as a model case of the urban destruction that the work seeks to grasp. Coward is particularly keen to understand urbicide as an attack on the built environment as that which made a multi-ethnic Bosnia possible while consciously departing from accounts that treat such destruction according to merely symbolic or logistical considerations. This ultimately entails a conceptual displacement of “the individual as the principle figure of political analysis” (p. 126). In its place it allows an engagement with buildings as constitutive of human subjectivity and social collectivity, the required heavy theoretical lifting being attempted through a reading of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

Coward departs from an anthropocentric understanding of being that, at the very least implicitly, conceive of humans as pre-existing the world in which they are situated is salutary and I would largely follow him here. Writing in a different vein, Bruno Latour has persuasively argued that our modes of social existence are produced

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and stabilised by the networks of objects that orient and frame our interactions and act as so many distributed sites of agency.² Greater attention to the role of all these objects, while eschewing any return to crude technological or material determinisms, is one of the tasks that still urgently awaits social and political theory today. Coward makes his own contribution to this endeavour by flexing all his Heideggerian muscles to show us how the built environment reveals the world to us, rather than simply straddling it. The work is to be commended, accordingly for its sophisticated reframing of political violence.

Yet it is also in this respect that I find myself raising my main objection to the thesis articulated therein. In defining urbicide, Coward tells us that it is “the destruction of buildings as a condition of possibility of being-with-others” (p. 14), conferring to the built environment the peculiar quality of always enabling such a mode of being. Indeed he tells us that “it is possible to assert that since the spaces constituted by building(s) are already public and shared, the urban environment is a site of ineluctable heterogeneity” (p. 70). I accept the broad association of urbanity with heterogeneous collectives and recognise, in accordance with the above discussion, the important role of buildings (among other objects) in enabling such forms of existence. However, I am much more circumspect about the assertion that the built environment is necessarily an agent of heterogeneity.

If public spaces and sites of interaction created by the arrangement of buildings and networks of roads, bridges and other thoroughfares can be seen as constitutive of social and political heterogeneity, is the built environment not also liable to select, segment and isolate individuals and communities? What are we to make of walls, fences and other enclosures, whether they be in Berlin, Gaza or at any number of international borders? Are both ghettos and gated communities not instances of architecturally-enabled homogenisation and rejections of alterity? Can even the most seemingly anodyne features of urban design not be insidiously recruited to keep undesirables at bay?³

Indeed we already have significant scholarly resources that illuminate the myriad ways in which the built environment can be a conduit for power and an apparatus of domination. Foucault’s celebrated analysis of the Panopticon revealed how arrangements of masonry and light could serve to exert persistent and uniform surveillance and disciplining of the carceral population and thereby regulate and restrict interaction between its members.⁴ In his remarkable *Hollow Land*, Eyal Weizman has discussed the political and security roles of architecture in Israel. He explored the layout and placement of the settlements erected in the occupied territories or of ensuring an erasure of the heterogeneous make-up of East Jerusalem.⁵ Heidegger himself seems to argue that different buildings enter into distinct relations with the world when he contrasts a wooden bridge spanning the Rhine with a hydroelectric plant drawing power from the same river.⁶ Is any assessment of whether the built environment is a source of heterogeneity therefore not ultimately an

² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ The artist collective *Survival Group* has documented a variety of arrangements of the urban environment designed to prevent loitering or rough sleeping (<http://www.survivalgroup.org/anti-site.html>).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Penguin, 1991).

⁵ Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (Verso, 2007).

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1949).

empirical question that needs to be answered for each and every case? Should we really see urbicide and assaults on heterogeneity every time the built environment is attacked, including when the structures targeted appear to be supporting exclusionary or segregative practices?

I suspect the likely line of defence to these objections will be that, regardless of the uses that buildings are put to (and of course these are to a certain extent open and liable to being contested and subverted), buildings are nevertheless always shared by virtue of the irreducibly heterogeneous character of being.⁷ I am however sceptical of what is gained by such an argument beyond an injection of circular reasoning. For one, if heterogeneity is indeed a fundamental ontological feature of being, it is unclear why buildings should be afforded such an exclusive and automatic privilege in revealing it. Coward argues that buildings play a particularly important role in orienting our understandings of space (p. 129) but this merely begs the question of why all such spatialities should necessarily be open to heterogeneity. More importantly perhaps, the suturing of buildings and heterogeneity provides little by way of explanation of the different ways in which the latter does (or does not as the case may be) come to be instantiated – after all, ethnic cleansers and *génocidaires* live in houses and cities too.

It may ultimately be that the case study that so obviously stimulated this rich theorisation of the nature and logic of urbicide is also constitutive of its limitations. The analysis offered does appear particularly apposite to the events that took place in Bosnia in the 1990s where a diverse multi-ethnic society had to be unmade to make way for ethno-nationalist fantasies of purity. Coward makes important inroads into a fuller understanding of the ways in which violence was exerted in the effort to achieve this. This is in itself no small achievement. How widely the notion of urbicide thus theorised can be applied to less paradigmatic instances is more uncertain.⁸ Although arguably this is a difficulty shared with the appellation of genocide, which has not prevented the latter's widespread currency and enshrinement in international law. Of greatest concern to this reviewer is that, in seeking to indict urbicide, we end up taking such a benign and monolithic view of the built environment that we deprive ourselves of the tools of analysis necessary to fully apprehend the multifarious ways in which such structures are constitutive of individual and collective modes of existence. Perhaps buildings are heterogeneous too.

⁷ Indeed Coward states that “regardless of the presence of the built environment, Being-in-the-world is always already constituted in relation to things [...] and these things always entail a constitutive relation to alterity.” (p. 128).

⁸ The briefly discussed cases of Palestine and Grozny would merit further consideration.