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

Author's Introduction by Martin Coward¹

Introduction: Thinking Otherwise about Violence against Cities

It is a great pleasure to have been invited by the editors of *Global Discourse* to participate in this discussion of my recent book *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (Routledge, 2009). I would like to thank them for all their efforts. The opportunity to reflect on a manuscript I completed in the spring of 2008 from the vantage of two further years of research and thought has been simultaneously enjoyable and uncomfortable. Like all books, it represents a snapshot (albeit one with a long exposure time) of thought at a particular moment. There is thus much that I would change were I to recompose the argument now. Interestingly, though, there is much I would not change, much that retains an essential fidelity to the intellectual impulses that gave rise to the argument in the first place. Perhaps, then, by way of introduction to this discussion of *Urbicide*, it is worth sketching out these initial impulses so that readers can better understand the basic outline of my enquiry into the widespread and deliberate destruction of urban fabric.

The basic problematic of *Urbicide* was conceived in the context of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. In the course of the violent unmaking of Yugoslavian political and social life, the violence against cities was particularly striking. From the assaults on Vukovar and Dubrovnik to the sieges of Sarajevo and Mostar, the urban fabric of the former Yugoslavia was subject to a sustained attack. Reflecting on this violence I discerned two interrelated questions that required further thought: how is violence against material objects (such as buildings) integral to a political formation such as ethnic nationalism?; and what consequences would any answer have for our wider understanding of political violence? These questions are derived from three inter-related provocations arising out of my observation of the assault on Yugoslavian urban fabric.

Firstly, the violence against cities such as Sarajevo or Mostar demonstrated a pattern of widespread and deliberate destruction of urban fabric. Though I hesitate – for reasons discussed in *Urbicide* (pp. 44-46) – to use the term ‘intentional’, the

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destruction of buildings was both deliberate and not confined to certain iconic cases. Beyond the mosques, churches, museums and bridges, the mundane architecture of Bosnia was widely and deliberately targeted. That this is the case can be discerned from the patterns of violence catalogued by reports compiled by, for example, The Association of Architects of Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993). Understanding that this destruction was both widespread and deliberate served as a provocation to consider what kind of violence it might comprise.

Secondly, this widespread and deliberate destruction could not properly be comprehended according to extant understandings of political violence: as assaults on cultural heritage, as collateral damage, as a symbol of wider cultural formations, or as a component of genocide. The partial ways in which the destruction of some buildings were understood according to these schema meant that the widespread destruction of mundane architecture was overlooked. That is to say partial treatments of aspects of urban destruction effectively elided the totality of the widespread and deliberate destruction, preventing the scale and nature of that violence from adequately appearing. Contesting this elision meant, to my mind, acknowledging attacks on urban fabric as a distinct form of violence beyond the existing categories available. Hence, my interest in the term ‘urbicide’ which directs our attention precisely to the destruction of the urban as a distinct form of violence.

It is worth noting here that I have never suggested that we should focus on urban destruction to the detriment of understanding violence against persons (i.e., that we should focus on urbicide not genocide). On the contrary, it seemed to me to be an error to regard attacks on buildings and attacks on persons as in some way separate (and to prioritise one over the other, the latter over the former).² The assault on the urban fabric of Yugoslavia seemed – in its widespread and deliberate nature – to be an assault on the communities of Bosnia. Concentrating solely on violence against the person, however, neglects this violence (or reduces it to a subordinate status). Thus it appeared to me that academic discussions of such violence could only have a partial understanding of the political violence witnessed in the dissolution of Yugoslavia if they neglected the widespread and deliberate destruction of urban fabric. Since understandings of this violence feed into wider understandings of political violence *per se*, neglecting the urban dimension means impoverished understandings of political violence. This will have an impact on discussions and understandings of other extant and emerging cases in which political violence had a significant urban dimension.³

² See my comment in *Urbicide* on this matter (p.47): ‘urbicide is not counterposed to genocide... Identifying the destruction of the built environment as urbicide does not preclude identification of the simultaneous occurrence of genocide. Insofar as instances of political violence are...complex, many forms of violence (not to mention other forms of social relation) might co-exist together.’

³ Here I echo Shaw (2007, 170) when he notes - with regard to genocide - that ‘[i]f a broader, more sociologically coherent conception becomes accepted not just in academia, but in public debate, then decisions about intervention...will be less easily avoided’. The converse, I take it, is also true – partial conceptions in academia will resonate with partial conceptions in public debate, allowing evasion of full understandings of, and responses to, political violence.

The recognition of the failure of extant schemas to comprehend the widespread, deliberate nature of urban destruction gave rise to a third provocation: specifically, to think through what the urban fabric comprises such that targeting it represents a distinctive form of violence. This could be summed up as a series of interrelated, but basic, questions: why attack buildings?; what role do buildings play politically that make them worth destroying?; and what is lost when buildings are gone? Put differently, the question could be phrased as ‘why do buildings so offend certain attackers that they deploy massive violence against them?’ As already noted, present accounts of urban destruction seemed unsatisfactory. In particular none of these explanations saw urban destruction as a problematic in its own right. Rather each saw this destruction as a subsidiary part of another kind of violence, a means to another end.⁴ This suggested that I had, therefore, to think the destruction of the city *otherwise than it had previously been thought*. As such, the investigation of the nature of urbicide is a conceptual problem, not an empirical one. It is not a case of cataloguing violence, but rather thinking through the conceptual contours of an understanding of what the extant record tells us about why buildings might be a target as well as what this tells us about the role of materiality in political violence. As such this is a political-philosophical problem.

Briefly put, *Urbicide* outlines two responses to this political-philosophical problem. On the one hand I argue (via the early work of Martin Heidegger) that buildings are the condition of possibility of a shared spatiality. That is, existence is ineluctably plural because of the way in which it is gathered by/around buildings. Destruction of buildings is thus a destruction of the conditions of possibility of the heterogeneity of existence. It is a form of violence deployed by homogenising political formations such as ethnic nationalism in order to disavow such plurality. The consequence of understanding existence in this manner is that we note that what it is to ‘be human’ (i.e., to exist, plural, in the world) is bound up with the non-human.⁵ The latter is not merely equipment for living, but constitutive of the nature of life.

On the other hand, this gives rise to a contestation of two key dimensions of much extant political philosophy. Firstly, the argument that buildings are constitutive of an existential heterogeneity contests the idea prevalent in much political theory – especially that referred to as ‘liberal’ – that plurality is a secondary or ancillary aspect of existence forced on individuals as a consequence of having to share the world with others. My understanding of the role played by buildings in constituting existence as always already heterogeneous means that we must think of plurality as primary. Secondly, my argument provides tools for contesting the anthropocentrism of much thinking about violence.⁶ Instead of regarding the destruction of buildings as a regrettable, but replaceable, loss we must consider it to be integral to the destruction

⁴ For a full account of the problems with extant accounts of violence against urban fabric see *Urbicide*, pages 17-34.

⁵ This conception of ‘what it is to be human’ is heavily influenced by the other thinker central to *Urbicide*: Jean-Luc Nancy. Specifically, it draws on his notion of ‘being singular plural’ (See Nancy 2000).

⁶ My thinking regarding anthropocentrism owes much to Sekinelgin (2006)

of human communities. My argument is, therefore, that we cannot have a full understanding of the violence done to human existence without understanding the role played by buildings in constituting that existence. The two (buildings and the human) are thus ineluctably bound up. Anthropocentric accounts of political violence fail to understand this and view the two as largely separable.⁷ Overall, then *Urbicide* is a philosophical account of the manner in which buildings are constitutive of heterogeneous existence and the way in which recognising this should bring us to question anthropocentrism.

In concluding this introductory overview, it is worth saying two further things. Firstly, thinking violence against the city otherwise than it is already (mis)understood leads to certain counter-intuitive proposals. I make no apologies for this. As scholars we have to begin from the premise that our intuitions (which are only the product of sedimented social habit) are not necessarily correct. Sometimes to see a problem anew requires us to grasp the counter-intuitive. Secondly, any conceptual (or philosophical) enquiry requires a specialised vocabulary. As Martin Shaw remarks in *What is Genocide?*, ‘serious concepts must be used coherently’ and thus require substantial elaboration (Shaw 2007, 12). That said, as Eltringham (2004, 7) notes, concepts are only an ‘approximation’ of reality. The point of offering a conceptual account of *Urbicide* is not – as I note in the preface - to dictate how reality must be viewed, but rather to provoke others to think otherwise than they were already doing about the destruction of urban fabric. That they might come to other conclusions than I do is, I hope, a very real possibility. Given the centrality of heterogeneity to my formulation, it would be inconsistent to expect that conversation to consist solely of agreement with my analysis. As such then, *Urbicide* is a provocation to further – heterogeneous – thought about the role of materiality in political violence. I hope, therefore, that my conceptual account of urbicide is part of a wider conversation about the problem of the destruction of urban fabric: a type of political violence that demands urgent attention as we move into the ‘urban millennium’ (UNHABITAT 2006, 4).

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⁷ A misunderstanding Stenberg perpetuates in her review of *Urbicide* when she wrongly argues that my argument rests on the presumption that ‘buildings have a value independent of their contribution to human well-being’. That Stenberg’s reading of *Urbicide* is mistaken can be seen by noting my argument that ‘contestation of the ‘anthropocentric bias’...does not represent a turning away from concerns with the well-being and security of those affected by urbicide’ (*Urbicide* p. 120). On the contrary, noting that ‘there is more to humanity than humanism can comprehend’ *Urbicide* argues that buildings are constitutive of, and hence inseparable from, human existence. This is something anthropocentrism fails to understand since it sees things as mere ephemera and judges the only proper focus for questions of well-being and security to be the individual human. As such it cannot comprehend the complex ecology of human and non-human that is constitutive of a political subjectivity such as ‘individual human’.



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