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

Author's Reply by Martin Coward¹

Introduction

I would like to thank the reviewers for taking the time amidst the multiple competing pressures of their academic lives to read *Urbicide* and provide thought-provoking responses. I have greatly enjoyed reflecting on and responding to their critical provocations. I cannot do justice to the richness of their comments in the space available to me here. Rather I will pick out and respond to what I perceive to be themes or points of particular interest. This may make for a slightly disjointed response. I also apologise in advance if I fail to address some of the more searching questions raised.

On Heterogeneity

Broadly speaking the principle critique raised by both Antoine Bousquet and Selina Stenberg revolves around the priority accorded to 'heterogeneity' in my argument. Bousquet questions whether 'the urban environment is necessarily an agent of heterogeneity', while Stenberg notes that '[c]ities are often systematically divided into homogenised enclaves'. Bousquet's supposition that I have a 'likely line of defence' for these comments rightly anticipates that this is a familiar response to *Urbicide*. The argument that buildings are constitutive of heterogeneity seems at first glance to be contested by the various forces of homogenisation and exclusion that characterise our contemporary experience of the city (e.g., privately guarded shopping malls, gated communities, peace lines). Indeed, I take it that this is what Stenberg is indicating when she notes the 'disparity' between different modes of experiencing the urban fabric. Of course, the experience of the city is often one of exclusion in which areas of the city become homogenised and various mechanisms of control seek to prevent access to buildings. As such this experience appears to contradict the contention in *Urbicide* that the city is characterised by heterogeneity.

However, if we look further, I would suggest that we will find that the contradiction is apparent rather than real. In the first place, we should ask why such

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effort is put into homogenising and controlling the urban environment. My suggestion would be that such effort is only necessary because a) buildings are fundamentally shared objects and b) such sharing entails an agonistic heterogeneity, a constant provocation. Let me expand.

Bousquet reverses my argument when he supposes that I regard buildings as being ‘shared by virtue of the heterogeneous character of being’. This reverses the priority between being and buildings. It is not that buildings are shared because being is heterogeneous, but that being is heterogeneous by virtue of sharing buildings. Why is this important? Firstly, *Urbicide* does not conceive of buildings as things that can be wholly possessed by an individual. Indeed, I describe buildings as surfaces or points from which relations unfold. In this sense the building is never yours, mine or anyone’s property. Rather it is a point around which relations are gathered. This understanding originates in Heidegger’s idea of horizon but is ultimately shaped by Jean-Luc Nancy’s understanding of the constitution of political subjectivity.² For Nancy, identity is not something that arises out of a relation across open space between I and you, us and them. Rather identity unfolds precisely where I and you share a common boundary. This sense of identity and difference unfolding from a shared boundary is provocative not least because it suggests that what we share can neither be owned nor denied by either one of us exclusively. However much I think my identity is secure, I can never ignore the boundaries (however stable they are) where I am differentiated from my other. Because these boundaries are shared, the other is always with me and there is always the possibility that the boundary will be renegotiated. As such identity is always with alterity, or heterogeneous. More importantly, that alterity is *agonistic*. Its constant presence incites us – as Foucault noted – to attempt to draw the boundary tighter, to control the unruly other. Identities thus do all kinds of things to try and rid themselves of their other, some of them violent. But underlying this is the ontological priority of a provocative, agonistic heterogeneity. While that heterogeneity might be successfully denied, the effort put into such a denial is only made because of a pre-existing agonistic provocation.

How does this relate to buildings? Buildings are precisely a common boundary, a shared line where my world and its spatial relations and your world and its spatial relations both meet and are differentiated. While there are of course all kinds of ways in which identities can be formed, one of the key aspects of urban identity is spatial orientation – where I am. My inhabiting of the city gets meaning from not being yours. And my inhabiting of the city consists in the ways in which my triangulation of myself in relation to various urban coordinates is different to yours. And I encounter that difference in the possibility that someone else might take the building to be a coordinate in a very different form of life. As such the building is both fundamentally shared (and thus existence is heterogeneous) as well as provocative (insofar as it always suggests the possible presence of other forms of life). It is for this reason that vast efforts – culminating in destruction – are undertaken to

² Indeed, as I note in *Urbicide* (p.67), Heidegger argues that “‘Horizon’ should be understood in the Greek sense of *horismos*, not as something at which an entity ends but, rather, as a point from which something *unfolds* (Heidegger 1993, 356)’.

control the possible ways in which the other might constitute themselves in relation to buildings.

As such then I think that Bousquet's critique is understandable, but fails to grasp the ontological priority, and agonistic nature, of heterogeneity. I also think that setting out the relation between sharing and agonism disputes (though may not fully dispel) the charge of circular reasoning. Buildings are shared points of reference in the city. And sharing means that they are ineluctably open to alterity (thus establishing urban life as heterogeneous). It is worth noting two things: 1) buildings are not privileged *per se*, but since the question is 'what is distinctive the role of buildings in urban life' they are accorded a certain priority; and 2) Bousquet is right, this point 'provides little by way of explanation of the different ways in which [heterogeneity] ...come[s] to be instantiated'. But then again this was not the question asked by this enquiry. The question was: what is the role played by the destruction of buildings in a political formation such as ethnic nationalism? As such this project did not set out to detail how heterogeneity is empirically instantiated, nor the micro-politics of exclusion. Rather it set out to understand why massive force is deployed against urban fabric to unmake extant plurality. In this sense it is ultimately inductive, taking ethnic-nationalism's homogenising character as a clue to why buildings might be attacked and then asking how we might see buildings as a force for heterogeneity such that homogenisers might attack them. Whether this mode of thought is circular would require a longer examination of method in the social sciences (which often inductively take empirical detail as the provocation for deductive reasoning) which I do not have space for here.

Excursus

Three other issues related to the theme of heterogeneity are also worth responding to at this point. Firstly, contra to Bousquet's supposition, the city need not become monolithic when refracted through my account of urbicide. Indeed, I make much effort to move away from talking about 'the city' (see *Urbicide*, pages 49-53). I am interested in sketching out an 'urbanity' that pertains to built environments. Beyond that it is for others to sketch out how that urbanity plays itself out in empirical contexts.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this understanding of urbanity does not valorise heterogeneity for its own sake in the manner supposed by Stenberg. Indeed, I do not suggest that heterogeneity is valuable in itself. Rather – to follow Derrida – it simply 'is the case'.³ No more, no less. There are myriad ways in which heterogeneity is disavowed, but these stem from the fact that – according to my analysis – it is, ontologically, the case. Whether heterogeneity is valuable *per se* is not discussed, nor is it a question that in the abstract seems to me to have much promise. That said, I do argue that since heterogeneity is the case, attempts to disavow it will

³ Here I am echoing Derrida's observation that; 'Deconstruction is neither a theory nor a philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method. It is not even a discourse, nor an act, nor a practice. It is what happens, what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth. Deconstruction is the case' (Derrida 1990, 85)

be violent. This does not intrinsically value heterogeneity, it says, rather, that trying to elide it is a form of violence. Whether heterogeneity is valuable *per se* and whether disavowal of heterogeneity is a form of violence are, thus, separate issues. We do not have to value heterogeneity over all else in order to acknowledge that diminishing heterogeneity is always – in some form or another – violence.

Of course, there are grades of such violence. In *Urbicide* I note that it would be a mistake to argue that all attacks on buildings comprise urbicide.⁴ It would be a conservative gesture to protect all buildings *qua* buildings. This is why I stress that urbicide is *widespread and deliberate*. Other forms of violence against the urban fabric may not share this defining characteristic. It is, of course, possible that some forms of violence might even be valuable – for example the destruction of poorly constructed social housing to make way for better quality accommodation. But I cannot agree with Stenberg's notion that '[u]gly buildings...produce ugly forms of life', nor that the loss of such buildings is 'a form of emancipation'. I would contend that the residents of architecturally unremarkable blocks of apartments in Sarajevo, Grozny and Gaza neither led ugly lives nor felt particularly emancipated when their homes were destroyed.

I would add, finally, that I find it difficult to agree with Stenberg's suggestion that 'Allied destruction of German cities in World War II...created the conditions for heterogeneity'. While I skirt around the nature of attacks such as that on Dresden in *Urbicide*, I don't see it as giving rise to heterogeneity if we understand the latter as arising through the shared nature of buildings. The analysis is complicated because of the strategic logic also operative in attacks on cities (as logistical centres) in World War II. However, the attack on Dresden (and other cities) seems to be an attempt not to allow otherness to flourish on the European continent, but to annihilate the enemy by killing large numbers of civilians. I take it that this is why the logics of area bombing and genocide are seen by some authors to be difficult to disentangle.⁵ I am afraid, therefore, that it is too much of a stretch of my imagination to see the immolation of thousands of civilians as generating heterogeneity. It seems on the contrary that the loss of the urban fabric and those that inhabit it is a decrease of difference.

On Method

The other principle theme in the reviews is one of method. Here there seem to be two issues at stake: style and the role of empirical cases. Stenberg's final comments raise several points that are worth briefly responding to. On the one hand, it is worth pointing out, again, that *Urbicide* is at heart a *provocation* to think the destruction of

⁴ Cf p. 131: the 'logic [or urbicide] cannot, to my mind, be extended to cover the demolition of buildings that occurs as part of the everyday renewal of the city. For renewal to become urbicide, destruction must be widespread and deliberate and accomplish the territorialisation of an antagonism. Urban development projects such as the original construction of the World Trade Center might decisively alter the aesthetic, social or economic patterns of the city...but they do not comprise the disavowal of agonistic heterogeneity. As such, although my argument expands the field of instances that could be considered 'urban', it retains the concept of urbicide for a specific type of violence.'

⁵ See in this regard Markusen & Kopf (1995).

cities otherwise than extant understandings allow. Moreover, it is a contribution to political philosophy and, as such, is embedded in the latter's conceptual and linguistic economy. Though conceptual elucidation might be, as Weber once said, tedious, it is nonetheless necessary if we are to recognise and give due weight to phenomena that are otherwise overlooked.⁶ Moreover, complex ideas will often require complex terminology. That said, I am sure I could streamline some of the prose. However, Stenberg's accusation of a dictatorial definitionism seems to me worth contesting. Ironically the accusation that the style of *Urbicide* 'suppress[es] debate' is immediately followed by the dismissal of 'many post-structuralist and post-modern works' for being 'esoteric [and] jargon-heavy'. This casual dismissal of approaches to political thought that are perceived as conceptually and linguistically dense entails its own suppression of debate. Moreover, despite decrying the definitionism of *Urbicide*, there is no concrete, positive suggestion from Stenberg regarding how we might think through the meaning or consequences of assaults on urban fabric in the contemporary period. It is this lack of what William Connolly (2008, 5) would call 'generosity' at the heart of Stenberg's closing comments that I find troubling. Beyond Stenberg's own 'points scoring' over style, the question still remains: how are we to understand this violence and respond to it? On that point, her review is simply silent, ending the discussion not participating in it.

With respect to the question of the role of empirical cases in *Urbicide* I am grateful to both Bousquet and Fregonese for some very perceptive critical comments. Bousquet is right that the empirical material afforded by the Bosnian case study profoundly influenced the development of the conceptual argument. In that sense it is valid to critique the inductive method at the heart of the project. That said, I think it is possible to generate similar ideas from observations of other empirical material – Grozny and Gaza are two that come to mind. As such, I am not convinced that urbicide is limited to Bosnia. That said, I do think that it is possible that urbicide is limited to political formations with similar dynamics to those exhibited by ethnic nationalism. I find it harder to generate the same conceptual framework for consideration of forms of violence against the city that do not share the homogenising dynamics at the heart of ethnic nationalism. For example, I would not find it easy to generate this theory of urbicide from observations of US urban operations in Iraq. As such then urbicide might be linked to a very specific form of politics. That said, genocide is linked to a specific form of politics (a form of annihilatory nationalism) without blunting its conceptual or juridical utility.

Fregonese makes a more intriguing point: specifically that *Urbicide* 'needs to also lead to methods useful to identify the grounded mechanisms of destruction and address the questions that a non-anthropocentric perspective opens on the material and the mundane'. In other words, insufficient weight is given in *Urbicide* to the empirical material and thus my professed concern with 'materiality' is undercut. This is a provocative comment and raises a question I am currently concerned with: how do we give materiality a voice, how do we know it other than in discourse? I have no particular answer here, but accept that the question is one that needs urgent

⁶ Weber quoted in Shaw (2007, p.x12)

engagement if a non-anthropocentric theory is to avoid simply failing back on the rationality of *anthropos* as its primary discourse.

Questions for the Future

Finally, by way of conclusion, let me turn to Fregonese's final question regarding 'other 'destroyable spaces' like refugee camps, blockaded areas, informal settlements and other sorts of...urban or non urban areas'. This is, I think, a very interesting question in an era where urbanity is proliferating. The composition of such urbanity is plural from global cities to favelas. *Urbicide* largely concentrates on assaults on a very particular form of metropolitan urbanity. Can we extend its observations to slums, favelas, and the informal zones of the megacities that are increasingly the urban future of the global south? Here I am not sure I have an answer. Perhaps this is where Bousquet is right: *Urbicide* tells us little of the different ways in which we build urban areas. As such then, its main contribution would be a provocation to think urban violence otherwise – to recognise it and the ontological priority of heterogeneity it implies. However, that provocation would require that we then take up Fregonese's challenge and begin to examine the various empirical ways in which particular buildings constitute particular existences.

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