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Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction by Martin Coward

Review by Selina H. Stenberg

When I agreed to review *Urbicide*, I thought I would be well suited to the task, having a background in both International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies. At first glance, I understood *Urbicide* to be intended as a means of examining and highlighting an often underestimated and neglected aspect of modern conflicts. However, it soon became apparent that the book is more a philosophical and, to a certain extent, existential justification for the author's Heideggerian definition of the concept of urbicide as the material destruction of the possibility for heterogeneity.

The book begins with a discussion of the link between the concepts of genocide – the deliberate destruction of a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group - and urbicide – the deliberate destruction of an urban environment. Coward argues that, although beneficial to understandings of the logic of urbicide, the relationship between the two forms of violence is not direct. Other writers on the subject, such as Shaw, argue that urbicide is integral to genocide as, by destroying buildings, the aggressor destroys the basis of a people's livelihood. Coward rejects the 'anthropocentrism' of this view, claiming that it is not humans, but buildings, which are at the centre of (the motivation for) urbicide. For Coward, buildings are important because they represent the material foundations of heterogeneity:

> With respect to the crude stereotyping of violence against cities such as Mostar and Sarajevo as a 'revenge of the countryside', it is important to note my comments with regard to Shaw's confusion of the target of urbicide. In my account of the logics of urbicide, it is the built environment that is the target, not any specific form of urban life. Thus, if urbicide is a condemnation of anything, it is a condemnation of the destruction of buildings. (p. 51)

Coward appeals to Heidegger's concepts of time, space, being (*Dasein*) and dwelling to demonstrate why the city is in essence heterogeneous. Just as the individual is characterised by an existential quality of 'being' – existing in the moment (*Dasein*) – buildings represent a way of 'being with' in relation to other *Dasein*. For this reason,

> Spatiality must be understood not as a medium, but rather as a way of being. Spatiality is thus not something into which either *Dasein* or the objects it encounters are placed, but rather a way in which such entities exist. It is to an

> explication of this way of existing, predicated upon the em-placed nature of *Dasein*. (p. 57)

As urban life predicates, people share their spaces with other *Dasein*, and must, therefore, be heterogeneous. Since buildings and spaces between buildings are, according to Coward, ultimately shared spaces, they are also public. As he puts it, 'The town is not a private map, but a public horizon that makes the locations of all the places within it (and the equipmental wholes that occupy these places) available to all' (p. 61). Thus, for Coward, an attack on these spaces is an attack on heterogeneity itself. For this reason, 'The destruction of the built environment is an end in itself' (p. 48). This end, according to Coward, is characterised by the creation of homogenised enclaves which, in the case of Mostar and Sarajevo, was based on ethnicity. This interpretation seems, however, empirically contentious. The Allied destruction of German cities in World War II was, in a very real sense, an attack on homogenising forces. By destroying the very cities in which Nazism had arisen, the Allies created the conditions for heterogeneity. This suggests that socio-political forces are, as much as buildings, responsible for the possibility of heterogeneity in urban spaces.

This example leads into a more general problem with Coward's presumption of heterogeneity, with much of the definitional work excluding what appear, *prima facie*, to be important aspects or interpretations of the city and urban life. Cities are often systematically divided into homogenized enclaves based on such factors as socio-economic status and ethno-cultural affiliation. They are, or become, exclusive, privatised spaces. Coward's equation of dwelling with being neglects, in particular, the socio-economic foundations of that being, such that, ontologically, all residents of a city are seen to have equal status as part of a heterogeneous region:

> A built environment can be seen as both a region and an equipmental whole. On the one hand, as a region the buildings comprise the environment that orients all possible places or things within it: a public horizon that gives intelligibility to a variety of equipmental wholes. (p. 61)

This appears to be counter-intuitive. Although inhabiting the same city, the wealthy ultimately dwell/'be' in radically different ways than, for example, homeless people. The former are far more able than the latter to exercise control over their space within the region. Coward does not appear to have any meta-ethical grounds for objecting to this disparity. Normative assessment is, though, essential, especially with regard to the nature of relations.

For Coward (p. 98), 'space is not an abstract medium, or universal substance, but a set of relations established by the everyday concerns of being in the world'. In his scheme, these relations are in their urban form, pre-urbicide, characterized by their agonistic qualities which, post-urbicide, become antagonistic. However, gang warfare based on location, ethnicity and socio-economic status is a real phenomenon in many major, heterogeneous cities such as London and Paris. It is far from clear that our main objection to urbicide should be the loss of heterogeneity, when there are such pressing concerns as disparity, asymmetry or violence which may affect, much more directly, apparently innate human interests. The mere existence of heterogeneity does not ensure that human relationships are healthy or mutually beneficial.

Another, more practical, concern is Coward's critique of anthropocentrism. The core of this argument appears to be the rejection of the notion that human dwelling and being is prior to the built environment. He states that,

> In what follows I will, through an analysis of the destruction of built environment look beyond the anthropocentric horizons of contemporary understandings of political violence in order to address this fundamental political question of being-with-others. I will show that it is only if we understand the manner in which the material, built environment is that which constitutes the possibility of community, or being-with-others, that we understand the reason for its destruction: to eradicate such being-with-others in favour of being homogenous enclaves. (p. 14)

For Coward, moral objection to the destruction of cities must, necessarily, be grounded in concern for the maintenance of the conditions of heterogeneity. This is grounded in two presumptions: 1) that heterogeneity is necessarily valuable and 2) that buildings have a value independent of their contribution to human wellbeing. However, without humans, there is potential neither for cities nor heterogeneous human figurations. His 'anthropocentric' argument also appears to be full of internal contradictions in its relationship with Heidegger's *Dasein*. Ultimately, *being* and *being with* represent human relations and aspirations. By emphasising the ontological priority of human beings to assessments of human conditions we may come to challenge Coward's related claim that

> anthropocentrism cannot admit that, in each and every case of destruction of buildings, the conditions of heterogeneity are under attack. Rather it is limited to assessing each case of destruction in order to determine whether some person or group has suffered an assault on their identity through the destruction of cherished buildings. It is precisely in this way that no one mourns the loss of ugly buildings, since their loss is not thought of as important for any person's or group's identity. (p. 113)

Might we interpret apathy towards, or support for, the destruction of ugly buildings, not in terms of categorical concern for identities but, rather, in terms of normative accounts of the way in which humans should dwell and be? Operating under the materialist premise that heterogeneity of buildings provides the basis for desired heterogeneity of forms of dwelling and being, Coward fails adequately to address the quality of those forms. Ugly buildings are seen to produce ugly forms of life – their destruction is seen as a form of emancipation.

A final thought concerns style. From the perspective of someone with very little knowledge of Heideggerian thought, the existentialist abstraction inherent in this type of monograph seems both unnecessary and exclusionary. Instead of opening up a subject Coward regards as politically neglected, his focus on asserting a particular, existential definition of urbicide appears as an attempt to suppress debate and to employ esotericism in order to score points off those other academics engaged in the topic. In addition to the esoteric, jargon-heavy style found in many post-structuralist and post-modern works, the attempts to impose definitions appear somewhat

dictatorial, leaving the reader alienated from the debate and, ultimately, the monograph. A clearer, more engaging style would do much to improve the appeal of the monograph and awareness of this neglected topic.