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Planning in and against the urban commons

Johan Pries

Review: Planning in and against the urban commons

Johan Pries

Against the commons: a radical history of urban planning, Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2022. 318 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5179-1176-8, 29 USD (paperback)

Scholars of urbanism, architecture, landscape and related themes often have an uneasy relationship with planning. Many of us teach future urban planners at some point in our career, which means we have to know a lot about planning. Yet, few of us have worked in the planning profession or make it our core research agenda. And when we seek to inspire our students with a critical sensibility about their future work, the critique we offer often comes from the outside rather than being immanent to planning practice. Our discussions with students tend to circle back to our own research, and how planners need to get better at gauging those particular issues. This makes Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago's outstanding *Against the Commons*, which indeed does try to rethink planning historically and conceptually from the inside out and bottom up, a very welcome contribution to both urban theory and planning research.

The argument running through Sevilla-Buitrago's analysis is that spatial planning as a form of expertise cannot be untethered from capitalist urbanization, but that planning also must be related to urban commons, conceptualized as the actually existing self-management of resources in opposition to capital. The book's four case studies are used all in an argument contending that planning must 'neutralize, erode, or subsume' commons to make urban life more compatible with capitalist relations. From the enclosures of the London's rural hinterlands, Olmsted's grand plans for Central Park in New York, the ultimately ill-fated social democratic compromises on housing developments in Weimar Berlin and late 20th century radical activism in Milan, the book demonstrates that planning has a tendency to 'decommonize' cities and prepare the ground for capital accumulation. Planning in this understanding tends to align with capital and against the commons, yet Sevilla-Buitrago also suggests that this is not the entire picture. Capital and commons might be competing and antagonistic ways to organize social relationships around resources as either commodities to be traded or communal assets to be shared, but planning is seldom fully and only allied with capital. To Sevilla-Buitrago (2022, 17), planning is both a way that the capitalist commodity form historically has expanded its reach and 'a dynamic site and means of spatial struggle' where this process has been resisted.

Unsurprisingly, Sevilla-Buitrago's focus on capitalist urbanization draws on the Marxian tradition, but not necessarily in the most conventional sense. Rather than centering struggles around wages and work conditions related to the creation and extraction of surplus value that Marx detailed in *Capital's* first volume, the book focuses on cities as sites of social reproduction. Labor power does not appear out of nowhere ready to be put to use in commodity production. Workers have to be cajoled, press-ganged, disciplined and made dependent on the capitalist economy and its systems of rewards and punishments for there ever to be possible a labor process which can extract surplus value through the circulation of commodities. The production of labor power that can be put at the disposal of capital is a process that requires constant attention, and therefore constant planning. This process is also profoundly spatial in how it plays out at scales stretching from the most intimate of the home's family formations to world-spanning migration routes and forced labor regimes. Yet, the results of the process are not guaranteed. Just like any other field of power relations, resistance courses through capitalism's social reproduction of laborers and labor power. Spaces planned to reproduce labor power can be transformed into self-managed commons where care work is directed at communal well-being, rather than the efficient creation of the human raw materials needed for capital accumulation.

In theorizing social reproduction, Sevilla-Buitrago borrows from several Marxian currents. The autonomist Marxist tradition looms large in this regard, for decades having focused on how the production of labor power historically has been riddled by struggle. While this theoretical project emerged in postwar Italy's huge factories and initially focused on charting everyday resistance on the shop floor of these formal and male dominated spaces, key concepts were quickly redeployed in other capitalist locations and dynamics. Mass struggles led by migrants, in particular from Italy's South, forced the autonomists to not only shift scale, but think about the social situations which produced different forms of relationships and kinds of contentious practices. A feminist strand of the movement, associated with scholars such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, shifted attention to communities, homes, and other sites of social reproduction as spaces of everyday struggles with dynamics similar to that of the factory floor.

The relationship between workers' struggles within social reproduction and the autonomists' demands for more self-managed forms of life made commons a core concern. Commons became theorized as arrangements of care-work in opposition to the production of labor power as a capitalist commodity, and a crucial term to which much scholarship inspired by the autonomists has turned since. These links between commons and struggle for autonomy are succinctly summarized in the book's introduction and is revisited throughout the case studies. In the final chapter, commons are again discussed in a more theoretical fashion, highlighting the political potential of commoning as a model to radically transform actually-existing planning.

Interestingly, the autonomist perspective and its emphasis on bottom-up struggles and self-management is from the start connected to a range of other theories of space, cities and the social. A key reference in this regard is Nancy Fraser, whose feminist scholarship on social reproduction and its boundary struggles suggests that the very distinctions, such as those between social reproduction and productive labor, which we make between different sectors are political and the object of power and contestation. *Against the commons* also brings the autonomist discussion of commoning and social reproduction into relation with well-known urban theorists like Manuel Castells and Henri Lefebvre. Rather than merely applying an autonomist perspective to urban planning, the book builds multiple links between urban theory and the autonomists' emphasis on struggles and self-management, constructing a complex and persuasive conceptual framework.

Not only the attention to commoning, but also the autonomist Marxists' emphasis on how subaltern struggles for autonomy create new relationships and subjectivities can be seen throughout the book's analytical chapters. Rather than being hapless victims rescued by well-meaning technocratic planners, Sevilla-Buitrago demonstrates that ordinary people through their struggles are creative makers of their own spaces in common and deeply shape the trajectory of cities. As these self-made and self-managed common spaces are rendered problematic and targeted for slum clearance, urban renewal, or some other form of planned integration efforts, struggles over who controls both actual city blocks and the tools to plan social reproduction are unleashed. It is this contentious dynamic of subalterns dodging or confronting social reproduction to escape their confines which the book again and again returns to, as an unavoidable contradiction of planning in a capitalist world.

Both the social reproduction thesis and the struggle thesis around which *Against the Commons* pivots are enticing propositions worth taking seriously, even for those who have doubts about the conceptual range of Marxism in planning theory. In particular, the attention to everyday contradictions makes the book a necessary read for students about to become planners, urbanists, and architects to balance the mainstreamed heroic, great-men narratives of planning.

Yet, sometimes I wonder if the autonomist emphasis on the subaltern struggles for the right to self-management by commoning, despite making for a dramatic narrative of bottom-up struggles, tells the entire story of urban planning? Is the distinction between the subjugated and the elite whose power subalterns seek to escape necessarily so straightforward? As Gramsci reminds us, hegemonic ideology also frames the very cultural coordinates of the subjugated who seek to undo the reigning order. Or, to borrow Spivak's reading of the same problem, what defines the subaltern is that they are put in a position where their very act of dissent is compromised by discourses not of their own making, discourses which frame the very desires that both inspire and limit subaltern struggles. May not the urban poor's self-made commons, much like urban planning, be seen as a variation to the capitalist social reproduction of labor power equally

limited by hegemonic ideologies of capitalist accumulation? And, if we instead are to follow the autonomist impulse to its radical conclusion and see proletarian struggles as the driving force of history, are not the planners' plans also shaped by the urban poor's everyday appropriations of space which force class contradictions into the very architecture of expert knowledge used in the capitalist social reproduction of labor power?

The book's pioneering theoretical contribution is thus only partly to highlight the creation and claiming of urban commons as an integral aspect of urban planning's history. It also illustrates how a sharp distinction between planning and autonomy, and between social reproduction and commons, has limits that require us to rethink the prospects of the autonomist position. The packed Berlin tenements built in the Bismarckian era which Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago convincingly portrays as sites of entrenched working-class commons created from below, and targeted for renewal by interwar planners, had too been designed from above as efficient machines for the reproduction of labor power. And the social housing estates built in the interwar, and even more so postwar, era to reorder working-class life in less threatening manners by providing a range of amenities to the poor, and which today are targeted as dangerous slums to be redeveloped, have in many cases become locations of intense working-class commoning. Commons and planning, as well as the very notion of bottom-up and top-down, help set the stakes of urban struggles today, but these distinctions are also constantly being re-negotiated. Furthermore, commons cannot be located fully outside the hegemonic ideology of capitalist accumulation and its need for cities that reproduce labor power. Just as planning might have other effects than the reproduction of labor power as a commodity, commons too might be harnessed as machines of social reproduction for the labor market.

To be sure, these are not questions completely avoided by Sevilla-Buitrago. Drawing on some of the key contributions in radical planning theory from the 1980s onward, one section of the book's concluding chapters identifies these very tensions as a productive space of scholarship that requires more attention from new perspectives at the interstices of expert planning and subaltern commoning. This issue is most pointedly formulated in a brief passage of the conclusion citing Amanda Huron's (2018) work on housing co-ops and their relationship to the market, where the complex and contradictory relationships between commons and state begin to be fleshed out. Yet, the potentials of commons to be integrated in commodity production and planning to be something other than a social engine of capitalist urbanization is something I think many planning students, at least, would have wanted to read more about.

As someone who also has been thinking about planning from the same autonomist coordinates it seems to me that there perhaps is something about this approach itself that makes these important issues so difficult to grasp. If the great contribution of this book, and it is indeed great, is putting some of the conceptual tools of the autonomist theoretical experiments, like commoning,

into contact with other work on social reproduction, urban theory and planning scholarship, this in turn brings some of the autonomists' unsolved issues to planning theory. The assumed clear division between commoning subalterns and planners socially reproducing labor power is the most important among these issues. Sevilla-Buitrago has with *Against the Commons* taken the autonomist perspective on planning further, showcasing the immense usefulness of this theoretical debate for planning scholarship, and indeed also for planning practice. The question the book leaves me with, however, is whether an autonomist approach to planning theory can be pushed beyond the conceptual boundaries which Sevilla-Buitrago's book so clearly comes up against.