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Against the Commons. A Radical History of Urban Planning, by Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 320 pp., \$29.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5179-1176-8.

There is no shortage of excellent book-length contributions – in English, but maybe even more in languages like Italian, Spanish, French – on the history of urban planning and, particularly, of Western urban planning. Yet, *Against the Commons* shows, there is ample room for extending, expanding and enriching (Western) urban planning history.

Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago has done just that. By focusing on the long-term relation of urban planning with the commons and commoning practices, *Against the Commons* does extend, expand and enrich its history in four rich chapters based on an extensive use of archival and secondary sources. The first chapter argues convincingly for conceptualising the process of British enclosure as an early form of urban planning, thereby extending the history of European urban planning before its commonly assumed birth in the emerging industrial city. The second and third chapters show the role of planning in jeopardising and countering commoning practices of migrant, working and (sub-)proletarian classes. Chapter two focuses on the commoning of public spaces in late 19th century and early 20th century New York and Chicago, while chapter three debates the struggles for centrality in Weimar Berlin. In so doing, they also provide a sort of pre-history of what would later on be called gentrification – one of the points of more specific interest for the housing studies community. The fourth chapter traces the spatial trajectories of *autonomia* in Milan and their capture in neoliberal times, thereby expanding on the theorisations of the ambivalent nature of urban capitalism (e.g., Rossi 2017) and the role of planning in mediating such ambivalence.

For Buitrago-Sevilla, capitalist urbanisation needs to be captured as a ‘dialectical spatiality, a site of struggle, where different agencies try to mediate the introduction and periodical negotiation of the boundaries (and hierarchies) delimiting the realms of production and reproduction’ (p. 208). It is in the building of a dialectical history – where commoning and its capture are intimately linked in shaping urban and social history – that *Against the Commons* is more original when compared to other radical planning histories, which tend to remain focused on criticising the side of institutional and economic power.

At the same time, it is in the way the introduction situates the contribution vis-à-vis other radical planning histories, and particularly critiques of the ‘dark side’ of planning (authors of the likes of Oren Yiftachel, Margo Huxley, Bent Flyvbjerg, June Manning Thomas, Leonie Sandercock), that I find some overclaim of originality. In the introduction it is argued that ‘the denunciation of a “dark” or “noir” side of planning in this tradition has a tendency to focus on particular aspects, orientations, sites, or procedures, implying that there is also a bright, genuinely progressive, nonguilty side to urban policy that remains unproblematised’ (p. 10). I honestly disagree that this tradition focuses on particular dimensions. Rather, the focus on the ‘dark side’ serves to emphasise how planning is a praxis with both obscure and empowering potentialities – something that Buitrago-Sevilla also admits in the conclusions.

Framing this history in opposition to ‘dark side’ accounts, Buitrago-Sevilla wants to ‘understand planning as an intrinsic element of spatial reproductive fixes under capitalism’ (p. 6). But, while *Against the Commons* does significantly expand and enrich the radical critique of planning, I am not so sure that it is as distinct from this tradition as the author claims. On the one hand, extending planning history and expanding it to the relation with the commons does not necessarily change the overall judgement of planning: it adds an often underappreciated dimension, which however does

not seem to me to be fundamentally different from what had previously been concluded with regards to, say, the role of planning in expulsions, exclusions, social engineering and so forth. On the other, because it focuses on planning in the geographic centre of capitalist development, this account is not necessarily generalisable to planning writ large – unless, that is, we equate planning with capitalist urbanisation.

In fact, it seems at times that this is precisely what the book does. And yet, after having indicted it in the introduction as being just another instrument for decommoning, Sevilla-Buitrago asks in the conclusions whether it can be ‘reappropriated and repurposed’ (p. 209); and eventually speculates on planning’s potential in supporting (post-capitalist) commoning. The question remains open as to whether planning is a capitalist formation or, rather, yet another expression of creativity that capitalism has co-opted.

As I see it, the political problem with planning – and indeed the limit of much of existing critique – has always been its rigid normativity, planning as the search for the ‘common good’. In this sense, what we need may not be a new, and redemptive, form of planning, which may end up being captured and repurposed once again; rather a planning project open to the dialectical relationships of urbanisation that *Against the Commons* so powerfully unravels.

Against the Commons is a truly ground-breaking work, which both deepens our understanding of the genealogies of urban planning and opens up several avenues for discussion and critique – I find much food for thought even where I disagree with Buitrago-Sevilla’s argument. And, though it is not a direct contribution to housing studies, I would absolutely recommend it to any housing scholar, and not only because planning (and the critical dimensions therein) is a fundamental space for housing policy/politics. More poignantly, the problem with normativity, with which planning theory has been wrestling for a couple decades now, seems to me to not have entered the mainstream of housing scholarship yet – as the proliferation of critical/radical housing journals indirectly suggests. This is an endeavour, I believe, *Housing Studies* has recently engaged with, and this book provides much inspiration for it.

References

Rossi, U. (2017) *Cities in Global Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity).

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