

Urbicide: The politics of urban destruction, Martin Coward. Routledge, 2008. 176 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-46131-3. £75.00 (hardback)

Originating in the 1970s to describe the brutal clearances deemed necessary to accommodate large-scale regeneration, the term *urbicide* is today used to describe the widespread and deliberate destruction of the built environment as an element of warfare. Here, in an impressively detailed and predominantly conceptual treatment of the term, Martin Coward draws attention to the *rationale* of urbicide, as well as its implications for contemporary political and ethnic conflict.

Although the book primarily draws upon political concepts and theories, it also provides a brief synthesis of recent examples of urbicide. One such instance, detailed at the outset of the book and returned to intermittently throughout, involves the destruction of the 'Old Bridge' – or the *Stari Most* – at Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Standing at this point for over 400 years, the bridge was shelled to destruction in November 1993 becoming, as it crumbled into the river below, a frequently invoked semiotic representation of 'Balkanisation'; the fragmentation of the wider region into smaller, disparate and increasingly exclusive communities. In this act, the book remarks, an indicator of cultural heritage, of co-existence and of common humanity, became an icon of savagery.

This instance of urbicide is used by Martin Coward to stimulate a lengthy and forensic interpretation of urbicide. In Chapter One, Coward establishes a pretext for his theoretical position by outlining three conventional explanations for the destruction of the built environment: out of military necessity, as an affront to cultural heritage, or as a form of metaphorical attack. The author critiques the limited explanatory power of these assessments, presenting, the book asserts, only a partial account of urban violence. Rather, the chapter concludes, such acts of urbicide are a form of violence *in their own right*, and therefore require further analysis.

Chapter Two responds to this challenge by proposing that urbicide has a 'logic'. The conceptual contours of urbicide are introduced, particularly how it

undermines the conditions of heterogeneity. Buildings, Coward asserts throughout the text, provide a 'substrate' for plurality, thus providing a rationale for destruction. A discursive comparison is drawn to genocide, although the book is clear that urbicide contains important distinctions.

Chapters Three and Four build upon this premise, essentially providing the intellectual nucleus of the book. Chapter Three uses the work of Martin Heidegger to detail how the built environment generates the conditions for a shared spatiality – or a 'heterogeneous existence'. Yet it is this very condition, the book stipulates, that is threatened by urbicide. Chapter Four proceeds to use Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation of community (referred to as the notion of 'being-with' or 'being-in-common') to articulate how identity is formed, marked by shared boundaries. Such heterogeneity is attacked through urbicide, again underlining how it forms a distinct form of violence.

Chapters Five and Six examine the stakes – both political and conceptual - of urbicide. Chapter Five reasserts how urbicide creates depoliticised confrontation – whereby groups are forced to live in adjacent - though critically not common - spaces. A number of recent empirical examples are detailed, namely: house burning in post-war Bosnia; the demolition of Palestinian homes by Israeli authorities; and the second Russian assault on the Chechen capital, Grozny. With regard to this latter example, Coward notes that such 'urban annihilation' – the infinite ruination of the urban fabric – may be a natural 'end-point' of urbicide. The penultimate chapter, Chapter Six, details the conceptual stakes of urbicide, particularly drawing attention to elements of anthropocentrism at risk, most notably the potential for urbicide to inscribe assumptions that underwrite hegemony.

The book concludes with a helpful review of its key points, clarifying some and outlining the limits of several. The book also briefly provides an insight into the response to urbicide – attempts to heal places wounded through conflict. It remarks upon the challenge of reconstruction, highlighting how it is not merely a technical exploit of restoring housing stock and repairing infrastructure, and in doing so offers a warning against depoliticisation of such efforts. Rather

depressingly, the book reminds us how threats to urbanity will become more frequent in our increasingly globalising and urbanising era.

Urbicide is a relatively new phrase that explains an old – in fact an ancient – activity. Cities have been targets throughout history. This book, however, places the issue of urbicide into contemporary context. Moreover, it provides the conduct with a significant degree of conceptual clarity by specifying how it undermines the conditions for heterogeneity (the conditions required for the construction of identity), therefore robustly constituting it as a distinct form of violence.

Urbicide will be of interest to a wide range of academics and researchers across numerous disciplines – not least international relations, politics, geography and sociology to name just a few. The book contains extensive footnotes and a lengthy reference list, underwriting the attention to detail, thoroughness and wealth of experience Martin Coward brings to this area of study. It presents a detailed anatomy of attacks on urbanity, assisting in explaining instances of urban conflict by essentially asking: what is destroyed when the built environment is destroyed and what does it reveal about the political and conceptual entailments of such attacks (page 33).

The book undoubtedly realises its desire to broaden the agenda of studies of violence, and it does so with considerable originality. That said, there is little doubt that *Urbicide*, as part of a series in International Relations and Global Politics, will be of particular interest to those working in similar such fields. With this in mind, and given the abstract nature of elements of the book, it may be unsurprising that those dealing with the practicalities of urbicide – and other forms of urban conflict - may find the book somewhat frustrating. For instance, more effort could have been made to relate some of the abstract assessments made in the book to a more practical level – broadening the potential audience of the book to incorporate administrators and those involved in redressing urbicide. Reflecting this, to my mind, more consideration could also have been drawn toward how destruction is treated by redevelopment and regeneration *after* places have been ravaged.

I believe it is also important to recognise that heterogeneity is not only undermined by urban *destruction*. As the book states: “as public artefacts, buildings constitute the condition of possibility for such sharing precisely by holding open the possibility of others existing in the same spaces and places that they constitute” (p. 92). However, buildings, walls, barriers, and even seemingly banal and benign urban features such as roads and culverts, may also be deployed with a view to suppressing interaction and to promote homogeneity. Such acts are perhaps all the more disturbing given their subtlety and embeddedness within the built environment. Similarly, the book could perhaps also have acknowledged that homogeneity and singularity can itself be confronted by attacks on the urban environment – for instance through iconoclasm, sabotage or ‘terrorism’. But these are merely asides. *Urbicide: The politics of urban destruction* is an admirable academic effort and will stand for years to come as an authoritative piece of work on this lamentable facet of contemporary global politics and conflict.

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