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

Review by Sara Fregonese

When confronted with information about the blockade of building materials into Gaza, or the attacks to houses in Osh's sectarian conflict, it becomes clear how timely this book is. It is so, because it expands the implications of international politics beyond the elite level and populates it with the everyday: bodies, things, but above all: buildings.

Urbicide: The politics of urban destruction collects and integrates the numerous essays Martin Coward has published since the early 2000s and proposes ways to understand “the politics of destroying buildings” (xii). The term *urbicide*, incepted during the 1960s' urban restructuring of North American cities, was reused to indicate attacks against the material fabric of cities during the 1990s Balkan conflicts, and eventually revived, mainly by Coward, within the Anglo-Saxon scholarship on the implications of cities in contemporary global politics and conflict.

At least two aspects make this book needed as well as an intriguing read. First, it outlines a philosophy about why anything material and built is relevant to a conflict. In so doing, it widens the traditional field of reflection on political violence towards a “non anthropocentric humanism” (121) that includes the material surroundings of community life and heterogeneity as part of targets of violence. Second, it provides thinking tools for understanding these material elements of conflict as political, by delineating “an ecology in which the constitutive role played by things in political subjectivity is acknowledged” (136).

There are also at least four themes for critical reflection and that point to further avenues of possible enquiry.

Firstly, the book genesis outlined in the acknowledgments positions *Urbicide* within a growing inter-disciplinary interest among critical IR as well as political geography for “the little things” (Thrift 2000) and the everyday sphere (Megoran 2006; Pain and Smith 2008) of global politics: the mundane, bodily and material dynamics of conflict and most importantly the complex and non linear connections between ‘wider’ geopolitical trends and the everyday lives of communities around the world. Coward deems the material ecology of conflict and international politics necessary in the post-cold war world where intra-state conflicts are soaring and which is “defined by the ubiquity of the built environment” (136) due to the growth of slums and the concentration of war in cities.

These disciplinary trends prompt a second observation about the geopolitical nature of this ubiquity. Coward notes how “the destruction of the built environment in intra-state conflict has captured the attention of international observers” (9) and as it “seem to represent a particularly vicious, form of warfare that had novel distinguishing features” (37), we therefore need to understand “the assault on buildings, logistics networks and communications infrastructure” to understand the post-cold war world (121). The soaring of intra-state and ethnic conflicts is undoubted even before the end of the Cold War (Gurr 1994). It remains to see whether the increase of intra-state and urban conflicts around the world coincides with the appearance of an extended and wilful destruction of cities. The nature of this novelty of urbicide is not simple to determine. Thus, largely unexplored remain also attacks to built environments prior the end of the cold war (however, see Bevan 2006) or even pre-1945. Among familiar examples are the Christian quarters in Damascus ravaged in 1860 (Tarazi-Fawaz 1994) and the several houses, groves, wells and representative buildings attacked and/or burnt down during fresh sectarian fighting in the mixed villages at the border of the two Druze and Christian provinces in what was to become Lebanon in the 1840s (Makdisi 2000). Whether and how these and similar events – and their strong colonial implications – should be interpreted as past urbicides, remains a large window for enquiry.

This leads to a third, methodological reflection about the importance of case studies and fieldwork for understanding the politics of place and connecting the comprehensive urbicide philosophy to particular everyday consequences and memory of present and past conflict. Coward clarifies that the book is not purely a collection of empirical evidence, but constitutes a theoretical engagement with an idea, in order to be able to adapt its tenets to different contexts. However, the author also states that the book “considers several well-documented cases of widespread and deliberate destruction of the built environment: Yugoslavia, Chechnya and Israel/Palestine...to illustrate a set of conceptual reflections on the nature of such destruction” (xiii). The treatment of these case studies is, however, brief and comes at a rather advanced point in the book. The issue of the relationship between theory and empirical cases is a crucial one and could be strengthened by the theoretical bases of the book. Coward’s purpose of opening up research in international relations and studies of political violence to “the role played by materiality in political subjectivity and thus in political violence” (137), 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,

Far from being a blank canvas where battles unfold or a local context waiting for the top-down application of wider geopolitical codes, the city then shows itself as a geopolitical machine in need of investigation. This leads to a fourth item for reflection about its applicability to various types of built environment that relate to the city, but are – at least legally and biopolitically – not part of the city. In Coward’s words “buildings are constitutive of heterogeneity insofar as they are constitutive of a fundamentally public spatiality” (54) therefore they are destroyed. This idea deserves to be expanded and integrated by reflections on other ‘destroyable spaces’ like refugee

camps, blockaded areas, informal settlements and other sorts of demonised urban or non urban areas.

Finally, urbicide poses deep geopolitical questions about the role of cities, their materiality and built environment in assembling the connections between global discourses and specific, grounded practices of territorial and political contestation. In Coward's words, "the space established by buildings would be the crucible of politics, the place in which a plurality of identities negotiate the multiple boundaries of self and other" (48). The importance of this crucible, the other-than-symbolic links between 'elite' geopolitics and everyday consequences of conflict is one that this book starts to tackle valuably and certainly deserves expanding.

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