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# Presupposition/Medium/ Result: Reading Álvaro Sevilla- Buitrago's *Against the Commons*

We do not inherit a world of our choosing. There are many ways to frame this simple fact, but few would contest it. For Marx, it is distilled in the observation that “men make their own history,” but “they do not make it just as they please.”[1] For Henri Lefebvre, it is present in the remark that “nothing disappears completely,” precisely because “what came earlier continues to underpin what follows.”[2] And for Frantz Fanon, it is implied in the contention that authentic disalienation will come for those “who refuse to let themselves be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past.”[3] Each of these formulations has its merits, to be sure, demonstrating how the weight of the past endures, conditioning life in the present. Of late, however, I’ve come to prefer the language offered by the geographer Edward Soja in his landmark 1989 work *Postmodern Geographies*. In that text, Soja offers a profoundly spatialized take on that foundational idea. Indeed, for Soja, space is not only the “outcome/embodiment/product” of social activity—and thus, of history itself—but society’s “medium/presupposition/producer” as well.[4] More simply put, for Soja, we are not only located in a specific time, shaped by the forces of history, but in a specific *historical-geographical conjuncture*. [5] We are not simply here; we are *here now*, in a space *and* time forged by history, which radically delimits the kinds of lives that we might live. Space, as Soja suggests, is made by history, and it makes us, just as spatial transformations have the potential to bring a different kind of history, a different kind of subjectivity, and a different kind of world.

Again, these are contentions that are broadly shared. Few would argue with the fact that the forces of historical-geography structure our lives, even if we might not all insist, as Marx writes, that the “tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”[6] And yet, there is surely less agreement on a number of questions that extend from these premises. How do we explain the continuity of distinctive historical-geographical conditions, and of distinctive social formations more broadly, over time? How are these conditions reproduced? Why does the received world, which is not of our choosing, seem to maintain such permanence? And why does the weight of historical-geography feel, in a sense, so heavy, so path-determined, and so resistant to change? This is not, of course, to say that these questions have not been posed and answered in various ways. But answering them is hard work. It is one thing to develop good or “rational” abstractions about the

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[1] Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: WW Norton, 1978), 595.

[2] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 229.

[3] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 226.

[4] Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 129.

[5] Of course, each of the theorists named above also suggests their own theorization of space and spatiality, and often to great effect.

[6] Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” 595.

world—to develop observations that “isolate necessary relations” concerning any number of phenomena[7]—but it is quite another to move from the abstract to the concrete: to determine why those “necessary relationships” are combined with others in the way that they are, and, perhaps most pressing of all, to *probe how and why those combinations are reproduced*, creating the kind of historical-geographical durability and permanence intimated above.

Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago’s recently published *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning* is decidedly not an attempt to answer such broad and perhaps unwieldy questions. It does not take as its primary target the problematic of societal reproduction, nor is it an explicit attempt to trace the various “lines of tendential force,” to quote the late Stuart Hall, that hold social formations together over time.[8] This is a book much closer to the ground, but, as I will suggest below, it is precisely in Sevilla-Buitrago’s *groundedness* that we can find answers to some of these vexing questions. In other words, it is in and through his landmark account that we can identify those dynamics that ensure the reproduction (and apparent permanence) of socioecological relations that have no “necessary belongingness”—that ensure, that is, the enduring weight of historical-geography, even as it is remade.[9]

But if that is what we might glean from Sevilla-Buitrago’s account, what is it, exactly, that he sets out to do? *Against the Commons* tells a history of urban planning and capitalist urbanization, and of the forms of so-called “decommonization” that these processes have brought with them. In his own words, Sevilla-Buitrago aims to combine “critical-theoretical” and “sociohistorical” perspectives, deploying the “the commons as a heuristic category” that helps to clarify and crystallize “the role of spatial planning in the emergence, development, and cyclical restructuring of capitalism” and capitalist urbanization. [10] And indeed, in that context, the argument he develops can be stated quite simply.

First, Sevilla-Buitrago suggests that planning has functioned since the start of capitalism itself to mediate, manage, and canalize capitalist urbanization—a process which he conceives of as extending beyond spaces of agglomeration, and which he insists is the *medium and outcome* of enduring and endemic struggles over the relationship between production and social reproduction under capitalism.[11] Planning has always functioned, in other words, to “mediate” the multi-scalar process of capitalist urbanization, and to give shape to the prevailing articulation (and spatialization) of the relationship between capitalist production and the “noncommodified, unwaged, or cheap” reproductive activities upon which it depends.[12] Second, Sevilla-Buitrago argues that moments of capitalist crisis—which stem from capitalism’s tendency to undermine its own reproduction as a result of its violent self-expansion—bring with them new forms of planning practice, as well as new urban spaces and new modes of engaging with the commons. More precisely, planning helps to reorganize and re-spatialize the relationship between capitalist production and (largely noncommodified) social reproduction in such times of crisis, and it often implicates “the commons” in the process—or those collective capacities to “appropriate, forge, and manage shared resources and social spaces through collaborative practices that increase popular autonomy from markets and states.”[13] While “specific aspects of the commons

[7] Andrew Sayer, “Abstraction: A Realist Interpretation,” *Radical Philosophy* 28 (Summer 1981): 9; see also Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

[8] Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Larry Grossberg and Others,” in *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays, Volume I*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 236.

[9] Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 235.

[10] Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 2.

[11] Sevilla-Buitrago’s work is allied with the broad, neo-Lefebvrian agenda to rethink urbanization as a metabolic process that implicates both city and non-city space. In that sense, “urbanization” need not refer exclusively to processes of urban agglomeration or “city-ization.” See, for an earlier statement on these themes, Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, “*Urbs in Rure: Historical Enclosure and the Extended Urbanization of the Countryside*,” in *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, ed. Neil Brenner (Berlin: Jovis, 2014), 236–259.

[12] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 14.

[13] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 205.

become crucial targets” in distinctive moments of capitalist development,[14] Sevilla-Buitrago insists that political-economic crises reliably provoke renewed attempts by planners to “decommonize society” and to reestablish the basis for profitable accumulation in and through new frontiers of dispossession: “to neutralize, erode, or subsume the commons and popular forms of self-reproduction, thereby facilitating the consolidation of new economic and political regimes.”[15] And third, Sevilla-Buitrago suggests that a particularly clear way to trace these dynamics is by turning to the “inner frontiers and near peripheries of capitalism in its emergence, expansion, and transformation across Europe and North America” between the eighteenth-century and the 1990s.[16]

This is an ambitious set of theoretical and historical tasks, but Sevilla-Buitrago takes it up piece by piece, dividing his work according to “strategic, transitional stages” in the history of Euro-American capitalism.[17] Following an introductory chapter, Sevilla-Buitrago turns to four historical episodes, each of which helps to support his broader argument that planners have consistently targeted the commons in their efforts to resolve crises, “rearticulate production and reproduction” relations, and remake urban space. [18] He moves from the history of parliamentary enclosure in the English hinterlands of the eighteenth-century; to the rise of urban reform in the United States at the turn of the twentieth; to attempts at world-city making in Weimar Berlin; and, finally, to struggles over creativity in neoliberalizing Milan. Each of these instances is taken as illustrative of broader transformations in the relationship between planning, urbanization, and the commons, and in each we predictably find evidence of “decommonization.” But what exactly that means is relatively context-specific, with different “aspects of the commons” becoming targets in each of these transitional historical-geographical moments.[19] In the eighteenth-century English countryside, for example, we encounter what Sevilla-Buitrago defines as an early form of spatial planning—a form of planning that existed *avant la lettre*—which functioned unabashedly in the name of enclosure and struggles over “material commons such as land and food provisioning resources.”[20] This was a moment, in other words, that Sevilla-Buitrago insists on understanding in relation to the project of planning, and one which involved the fairly straightforward demonstration of state-initiated and/or state-backed violence, as the spheres and spaces of common resource access that guaranteed the “relative autonomy” of small landholders and landless laborers were broken down in the name of capitalist “improvement.”[21] It was a classic case of the destruction of the material commons, one which radically reformatted patterns of urbanization and social reproduction.

And yet, in Chapter 2, which moves decidedly closer to planning’s inherited canon and engages the history of New York’s Central Park and Chicago’s Progressive Era urban reformers, we find a different form of “decommonization”—and decidedly less in the way of privatization and violent dispossession.[22] Rather than overt confrontation, Sevilla-Buitrago identifies the construction of “regimes of publicity,” which *eroded* the commons, neutralizing and reshaping the city in accordance with bourgeois sensibilities.[23] More simply put, planning worked in that historical-geographical conjuncture not as a technology of privatization, but in order to bolster a “spatial politics of community, a more benevolent form of power that blended aspects of discipline with a new spirit of reform.”[24] This was ultimately manifested in “parks,

[14] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 21.

[15] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 4.

[16] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 24.

[17] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 6.

[18] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 23.

[19] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 21.

[20] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 23.

[21] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 25.

[22] Though there are some exceptions to this general claim, particularly in Sevilla-Buitrago’s discussion of Seneca Village, a predominantly African American community that was “leveled to the ground,” in Sevilla-Buitrago’s words, in order to make way for the construction of Central Park.

[23] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 26.

[24] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 26.

settlement houses, playgrounds, sports facilities, and community centers.”[25] It produced what Sevilla-Buitrago elsewhere calls a “surrogate commons” that aimed to clean up the “multifarious, tactical commons” produced by “ethnicized and racialized migrant communities” between the 1850s and the Progressive Era.[26] And it is this same general dynamic that animates the narrative told in Chapter 3 of *Against the Commons* on Weimar Berlin and attempts to promote its transformation into a “world-city” (*Weltstadt*). In that context, the commons—and “decommonization”—came to be central to elite efforts to establish a “polarized structure” of urban growth, one defined by “dynamic core service and business areas” and “languid, decentralized residential peripheries for a renovated working class.”[27] In other words, in that post-war milieu, attempts to establish new “bonds with international trade, cultural, and touristic networks” clashed with entrenched and putatively “unruly proletarian” activities in the city’s peripheries, as well as “pockets of recalcitrant poverty in the city core.”[28] And this clash was ultimately addressed in and through renewal, as well as through the removal of “undesired populations” in the city core and the making of new “suburban atmospheres” and peripheral settlements for the “higher echelons of the working class.”[29] Thus in both the turn-of-the-century United States and 1920s Berlin, Sevilla-Buitrago finds planners engaging the commons (here very broadly conceived), remaking practices and geographies of social reproduction, and reweaving the urban fabric, albeit in ways that are quite distinct from the forms of violent dispossession described in Chapter 1.

Still, it is perhaps not until the final historical chapter of *Against the Commons*, which turns to neoliberalizing Milan, that we truly gain a sense of the breadth of potential relationships that Sevilla-Buitrago intends to outline between planning, capital, and the commons—and of the kinds of “decommonization” that capitalist development has produced. Indeed, in Milan, we encounter attempts by planners and capital to target and capture the “creative commons”: “collective creative labor, popular potentials for spatial appropriation, and the capacity to produce wealth out of wastelands.”[30] Put otherwise, in this prototypical neoliberalizing conjuncture, collective forms of social reproduction were not simply enclosed, neutralized, or destroyed, but “reframed and elevated to a productive condition by a perverse alchemy.”[31] The image and affect of urban resistance and autonomous reproduction itself—the “collaborative skill to generate use values” and to make subaltern space “more autonomous and cohesive”[32]—became a key tool for so-called “urban regeneration.” As theorists of Italian *autonomia* have long suggested, post-Fordism in cities like Milan came to rely on forms of “wealth produced outside of market logics... parasitizing communal worlds to endure.”[33] And urban governance strategies followed suit, aiming toward urban revalorization and “innovation” by way of “autonomist place making” and “domesticated forms of ephemeral commoning” like artist hubs, educational spaces, and so on.[34] In Sevilla-Buitrago’s words, this chapter is concerned with using Milan—ostensibly “Italy’s most salient case of urban neoliberalization”—in order to make sense of planning’s “embrace [of] the creative city paradigm,” and the use of public-private alliances to “extract urban value from grassroots and community practices, fueling dynamics of spatial commodification, co-optation, and gentrification.”[35] In short, Sevilla-Buitrago concludes his

[25] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 27.

[26] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 27.

[27] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 110.

[28] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 28.

[29] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 28.

[30] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 158.

[31] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 30, emphasis added.

[32] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 188.

[33] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 158–159.

[34] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 203.

[35] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 181.

historical narrative with what other theorists have identified as the *real* rather than simply the *formal* subsumption of the “creative commons” under neoliberal capitalism, underscoring the centrality of the commons to the extraction of new forms of urban rent.[36] In the former phase, the creativity of “grassroots urbanism” is subject to “gradual, external appropriation” by the state and private actors, whereas in the latter, “public-corporate alliances... [actively] promote, coordinate, and reorganize these movements.”[37]

At this stage, it is worth pointing out that in making these arguments, Sevilla-Buitrago not only develops a unique historical and theoretical approach to the history of planning and its relation to “decommonization,” but he stakes out his own constellation of positions in relation to a host of hotly contested debates as well. Against the dominant historical narrative, which places the origins of planning in the nineteenth-century metropolis, Sevilla-Buitrago insists on the eighteenth-century case as evidence of “the emergence of a primitive but consistent form of planning in the expansive hinterlands of territorial restructuring at the dawn of agrarian and industrial capitalism.”[38] And, in so doing, Sevilla-Buitrago not only takes up the thesis that the hinterland and the city are part and parcel of an uneven, metabolic process—of an extended urban fabric, which spans city and non-city space[39]—but also demonstrates that planning cannot be conceived as a merely reactive or reformist project, developed to balm the violence of industrial capitalist development. Planning is instead situated at the bleeding edge of capitalist urbanization and restructuring, present even at the origins of capitalism, where it “tore asunder entire territories to facilitate the industrial revolution” itself.[40] Planning, in other words, loses its “aura as a progressive technique” in this account, appearing as integral to the making and remaking of capitalist space, as well as to enduring struggles to reorganize production and (largely noncommodified) reproductive work.[41] As Sevilla-Buitrago puts it: “It is from this arcane but critical perspective”—that is, from a perspective that situates planning at the center of capitalism’s enduring and endemic struggles over production and reproduction[42]—“that we can consider planning as intrinsic not only to the development of cities in industrial contexts but also to the very emergence and unfolding of capitalist spatialities.”[43] While always insisting that we not simplify the relationship between planning and capitalist hegemony, Sevilla-Buitrago recalls that it is through planning, and the shifting morphologies of capitalist urbanization, that production and reproduction have been articulated and organized from the start.[44]

It is precisely here, from the vantage of what Sevilla-Buitrago describes as his “arcane but critical perspective,” that *Against the Commons* provides some of its most profound and wide-ranging insights. These putatively arcane concerns seem to provide nothing less than an attempt to rethink the spatialities of capitalist reproduction, and to concretize that history (in the Euro-American context, at least) *in* and *through* the relations of spatial planning. With Sevilla-Buitrago’s narrative in view, we come to see that spatial planning and urbanization are not merely narrow, disciplinarily specific concerns, but are rather “intricately entangled, mutually coconstituting and conflictually coevolving formations,” profoundly implicated in struggles and contestations over the materialization and reorganization of life under capitalism.[45]

[36] The “real subsumption” of the commons by capital has been a consistent theme in autonomist and post-autonomist thought for some time now, explored by Michael Hardt, Toni Negri, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Massimo De Angelis (among many others) in various forms and in various guises. In a pre-doctoral publication, I explored these themes and their racial specificity in the United States; see William Conroy, “The Biopolitical Commons: A Revised Theory of Urban Land in the Age of Biopolitical Production,” *Planning Theory* 18, no. 4 (2019): 470–491.

[37] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 189.

[38] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 11.

[39] See Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[40] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 11.

[41] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 31.

[42] Nancy Fraser has, as Sevilla-Buitrago underscores, developed a highly sophisticated theorization of this kind of “boundary struggle” over the past several years, building on a long tradition of Marxist feminist thought. For context, see Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); see also, William Conroy, “Background Check: Spatiality and Relationality in Nancy Fraser’s Expanded Conception of Capitalism,” *EPA: Economy and Space* (forthcoming).

[43] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 13; see also, for context, William Clare Roberts, “What Was Primitive Accumulation? Reconstructing the Origin of a Critical Concept,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (2020): 532–552.

[44] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 16.

[45] Neil Brenner, *New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10.

Planning and urbanization are a constituent—and *central*—part of “a larger systematic imperative: the necessity under capitalism to secure a coherent social basis in the face of its own destabilizing forces.”[46] They are, in other words, the presupposition, medium, and result of capitalism’s enduring and endemic reorganizations and re-spatializations, which arise primarily due to capital’s tendency to commodify, deplete, and erode its necessary conditions of social reproduction. In this account, both planning and the urban fabric take shape by way of “elite and state attempts to isolate, contain, operationalize, and commodify reproductive practices and spaces and, on the other hand, popular efforts to preserve self-reproduction as a platform for collective autonomy from state and market forces.”[47] Sevilla-Buitrago therefore helps us to insist that to obscure the urban process and its emergence through spatial planning is to radically delimit our understanding of capitalism itself.

Indeed, *Against the Commons*’s approach to these “arcane but critical” matters allows us to go even further still, and to posit an answer to those vexing questions posed at the outset regarding the reproduction of distinctive historical-geographical conditions and their relative permanence and durability over time. As I have already suggested, these are not new questions. They emerge quite directly from the contention that the world is not of our own choosing, and that space is both the “outcome/embodiment” of social activity and its “medium/presupposition” as well. Many have wondered about the reproduction of social formations, and Stuart Hall—to name just one example—provides a kind of response. Hall, for his part, suggests that while many social formations are comprised of elements that have “no ‘necessary correspondence’ or expressive homology,”[48] specific articulations do in fact come to be “*sedimented and solidified* by real historical development over time,”[49] preventing the perpetual reorganization of society as a “totally open discursive field.”[50] Writing about religion and its place in distinctive societies, Hall provides a sense of how this works:

[RELIGION] EXISTS HISTORICALLY IN A PARTICULAR FORMATION, ANCHORED VERY DIRECTLY IN RELATION TO A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT FORCES. NEVERTHELESS, IT HAS NO NECESSARY, INTRINSIC, TRANSHISTORICAL BELONGINGNESS. ITS MEANING—POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL—COMES PRECISELY FROM ITS POSITION WITHIN A FORMATION. IT COMES WITH WHAT ELSE IT IS ARTICULATED TO. SINCE THOSE ARTICULATIONS ARE NOT INEVITABLE, NOT NECESSARY, THEY CAN POTENTIALLY BE TRANSFORMED, SO THAT RELIGION CAN BE ARTICULATED IN MORE THAN ONE WAY. I INSIST THAT, HISTORICALLY, IT HAS BEEN INSERTED INTO PARTICULAR CULTURES IN A PARTICULAR WAY OVER A LONG PERIOD OF TIME, AND *THIS CONSTITUTES THE MAGNETIC LINES OF TENDENCY WHICH ARE VERY DIFFICULT TO DISRUPT*.[51]

[46] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 3.

[47] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 13.

[48] Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays, Volume I*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 196–197.

[49] Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” 203, emphasis added.

[50] Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 240.

[51] Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 236, emphasis added.

Nevertheless, like many that have written on these themes before, Hall is less than precise on what these “lines of tendency” (or “lines of tendential force”) exactly are. As is the case in much work on this problematic, we are left with the rather broad notion that the force of history somehow helps to anchor particular articulations and relations in place, though the agents and media that ensure such continuity are left relatively “black boxed.”

*Against the Commons* can help us fill in this lacuna. Sevilla-Buitrago’s work would seem to suggest that the urban fabric itself, and the vast web of state and non-state activities that constitute the apparatuses of spatial planning, are key “*lines of tendential force*.” Planning and urbanization come to ensure, I would insist, the *articulation and durable reproduction* of specific socio-spatial relations—including specific patterns of both production and noncommodified social reproductive work—that have no “transhistorical belongingness.”[52] In other words, it is in and through Sevilla-Buitrago’s account that we come to see the urban fabric—intricately entangled and intercalated with the techniques of spatial planning—as a technique of articulation, *in the dual meaning of that term*: (1) It ensures that distinctive processes and forms of life—specific patterns of production and reproduction which have no necessary relation—are joined up, or “articulated.” And (2) the urban fabric also quite literally produces and *gives expression* to those relations as well—concretizing, materializing, and sedimenting them in space.[53] Indeed, against the excesses of those that would claim that anything is “potentially articulatable with anything”—or, that society is a “totally open discursive field”[54]—Sevilla-Buitrago’s work suggests that specific articulations, and specific relations of production and reproduction more exactly, quite literally become *fixed in the land* in the form of an urban fabric, creating profoundly material effects (or path-dependencies). While always attentive to history and the possibility of change, Sevilla-Buitrago tells a story of planning as an “intrinsic element of [the] spatial reproductive fixes under capitalism,”[55] and of urbanization and the urban fabric as the medium and outcome of enduring attempts to remake the relationship between capitalist production and social reproduction. And taken together, both planning and the urban fabric thus appear to *embed relations in space*. These dynamics become visible as key factors in delimiting the kinds of lives available to live—and in circumscribing what will come next in a particular place.

If we can agree that the world we inherit is not one of our choosing, Sevilla-Buitrago allows us to *ground* that observation—in quite a literal sense—and to acknowledge that this is so, at least in part, because of the ways in which relations of production and reproduction have been sedimented and spatialized in and through the apparatuses of planning, and in the form of an urban fabric. To be sure, others have drawn attention to the importance of capitalism’s fixity, and to capital’s capacity to produce durable material effects in space, from David Harvey’s classic writing on the making of a “structured coherence” for profitable accumulation, to Doreen Massey’s work on the layering of distinctive “rounds of accumulation,” to more recent work by the likes of Michael Ekers and Scott Prudham, who suggest that the “spatial fix” represents the materialization of socioecological conditions and forces of production, as well as the spatialization of capitalist hegemony itself.[56] But Sevilla-Buitrago is uniquely productive in demonstrating (1) that the relationship between production and

[52] Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 236.

[53] Zachary Levenson, “Make ‘Articulation’ Gramscian’ Again,” in *Ethnographies of Power: Radical Concepts with Gillian Hart*, ed. Sharad Chari, Mark Hunter, and Melanie Samson (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022), 187–215.

[54] Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 240.

[55] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 6.

[56] Michael Ekers and Scott Prudham, “The Socioecological Fix: Fixed Capital, Metabolism, and Hegemony,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, no. 1 (2018): 18–19.

reproduction is sedimented and solidified in and through an urban fabric that extends (well) beyond zones of agglomeration, and (2) at underscoring the role of planning in that process of crystallization, materialization, and spatialization. Again, this does not mean that once a certain set of relations is embedded in space that it is embedded once and for all. Sevilla-Buitrago's account is equally concerned with capitalist urbanization's variegated patterns and materializations—and with historical transformation in moments of crisis. And yet, *Against the Commons* allows us to insist that it is always from the “existing components” of the material world that new formations must be produced.[57] Historical change must begin from the “complex result of previous moments and resolutions” materialized in space.[58] It must begin, much as our attempts to understand it, with urbanization.

Of course, to say as much is not to suggest that *Against the Commons* is the final word on these matters, nor is it even to suggest that this work is faultless. One might, from inside the fields of critical urban studies and radical geography, quibble with any number of the book's details. I was left wanting more explication on the precise relationship between social reproduction and the commons, as well as more clarity on the conceptual bounds or limits of the concept of the commons itself, insofar as Sevilla-Buitrago's usage covers radically different social and socioecological practices. Moreover, I would have appreciated more explicit and consistent engagement with the precise crisis tendencies that call forth “decommonization” and capital's various “spatial reproductive fixes”—not least because I think that Sevilla-Buitrago's account points in fascinating directions, which could radically reorient our conceptualization of urbanization and capitalist crisis, but which remain relatively undertheorized. *Against the Commons* could have also offered more context and clarity on its position vis-à-vis the vast literature on the origins of capitalism and the so-called “transition debate,” given the book's strong arguments about the place of Britain's agrarian hinterlands in the emergence of capitalism. [59] And, to be sure, other scholars will contest the centrality of class in Sevilla-Buitrago's account—and his focus on class over other forms of social differentiation—which he claims functions as the “axis around which other forms of social and spatial difference are organized and operationalized,”[60] as well as the general Euro-American focus of the work at large.

To be clear, this final critique—on the project's Eurocentricity—is not exactly well founded: all projects must delimit their scope and scale, and Sevilla-Buitrago has simply taken his parameters to be the history of planning in Euro-America since the eighteenth-century. Still, there is no doubt that future work would do well to extend this narrative beyond capitalism's “inner frontiers and near peripheries” in Euro-America, and to probe precisely how the urban fabric and urban planning have functioned in struggles over production and social reproduction in other contexts. In my view, the critical question, in that regard, is not only how urbanization and spatial planning work together as key “lines of tendential force,” rendering particular forms of life durable and permanent *within a given nation-state*. It is, more broadly, how urbanization and spatial planning have worked in the materialization, spatialization, and sedimentation of dependency, under-development, and global racial empire in the *longue durée*. Indeed, as Olúfemi Táiwò reminds us, these patterns of dependency, under-development, and global racial empire are themselves the “accumulated

[57] Levenson, “Make ‘Articulation’ Gramscian’ Again,” 199.

[58] See, by way of comparison, Levenson, “Make ‘Articulation’ Gramscian’ Again,” 202.

[59] A particularly clear summary of the “transition debate” is found in Evgeny Morozov's “Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason,” *New Left Review* 133, no. 4 (Jan/Apr 2022), [link](#).

[60] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 10.

[61] Olúfemi Táiwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 26.

[62] Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena, “Colonization and the New Imperialism: On the Meaning of Urbicide Today,” *Theory & Event* 10, no. 2 (2007).



imprint of past racist distributions of resources and infrastructure.”[61] The task of future work, therefore, would be to probe how these relations have been materialized and sedimented in the form of a planetary urban fabric—and the role of planning in that process.[62] Of course, Sevilla-Buitrago’s ground-breaking work provides as good a guide as any in how to approach such a vast undertaking.

After years of relative skepticism toward the concept, there has recently been a welcome turn toward the idiom of “planning” on the Left, and toward the prospect of planning a post-capitalist world.[63] Sevilla-Buitrago is undoubtedly a participant in these debates. At the conclusion of *Against the Commons*, he turns from a more historical register to the present and future, providing not simply a recapitulation of his argument, but also the contours of what he refers to as a “commonist” form of urbanization and of the forms of spatial planning that might facilitate its realization.[64] There is much to say, and commend, in the political future that Sevilla-Buitrago imagines. It is one in which state and non-state apparatuses of planning will function as “mechanism[s] to protect and amplify the circulation of the common,” as well as a world in which the “planetary precariat”—subjects whose experiences with contemporary forms of capitalist urbanization are marked more by displacement than proletarianization—will be situated as a kind of vanguard in this struggle.[65] And yet, as illuminating and ambitious as these concluding reflections might be, it seems that there is a simpler point that emerges from *Against the Commons*: a point that follows from the reading developed above, and which has profound resonances in relation to the project of planning a post-capitalist world today. What Sevilla-Buitrago’s account allows us to see is that any project of post-capitalist planning will take as its presupposition and medium not only space but further an urban fabric that has been *fixed* in space and designed to facilitate specific patterns of production and social reproduction. Whatever else it might be, such a project will (by necessity) take shape in and through the very materiality of the world, and it will emerge from a world forged by spatial planners over centuries of capitalist history in order to facilitate the naturalization of relations of difference, indefinite “growth,” and (fossil-fueled) accumulation.

While this is, perhaps, a simple point, it is also one that at times falls from view, even in the emergent literature on post-capitalist planning.[66] And it means, ultimately, that urbanization and those forms of planning and management that support it should be squarely within our political sightlines. As Sevilla-Buitrago puts it, the present “carries the weight of the archive, of memory, of the dead and ruins within us—discourses and institutions, *hegemonies built in asphalt and stone*.”[67] And thus, it is no exaggeration to suggest that post-capitalist history must begin not only with new relations of production, but with urbanization and the urban fabric itself.[68]

[63] See, for context, Max Aji, *A People’s Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass, *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change, and Pandemics* (London: Verso, 2022).

[64] Sevilla-Buitrago unfortunately fails to explicate the precise difference between “commonist” urbanization and, say, “communist” or “socialist” urbanization.

[65] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 225; on these themes, see also Kalyan Sanyal’s *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

[66] Aji’s *A People’s Green New Deal* does, however, contain a fascinating discussion of urban and spatial planning.

[67] Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 227.

[68] For a closely linked set of reflections, see William Conroy, “Fanon’s Mobilities: Race, Space, Recognition,” *Antipode* (forthcoming).