

Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting*, London: Verso, 2017. ISBN: 9781781687857 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781687864 (paper); ISBN: 9781781687871 (ebook)

The Autonomous City traces the struggles of squatters across Europe and North America in the 20th and 21st centuries. Whilst there are examples of existing activist-written collections that tell the stories of squatter movements in Europe (see, for example, Cattaneo and Martinez 2014; Van der Steen et al. 2014), Alex Vasudevan provides a unique and detailed historical account of squatting that extends into North America. Based largely on in-depth archival research, each chapter focuses on a particular city, revealing the multifaceted radical methods employed by squatters, and the wide range of political and social contexts within which they have fought. Together, these stories highlight the ways in which squatters have, throughout modern history, and in a range of contexts, fought to secure and maintain a “right to the city” (Harvey 2003), to remake it, to catalyse an urban social transformation that champions social justice and equality over neoliberal agendas that prioritise profit over people.

Beginning and ending in New York City, Vasudevan traces the emergence of radical squatting movements in the 1960s and earlier, through to the militarised and often violent movements and struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. The book also pays heed to more recent squatting practices that face the relatively new challenges of criminalisation (in, for example, Amsterdam and London in 2010 and 2012 respectively), as well as the ongoing deregulation, financialisation, and precarisation of housing across the Western neoliberal world. *The Autonomous City* predominately focuses on Western European cities, with Chapters 2-6 exploring the squatted histories of London (Chapter 2), Amsterdam and Copenhagen (Chapter 3), Frankfurt and Hamburg (Chapter 4), Berlin (Chapter 5), and Bologna, Rome, Milan, and Turin (Chapter 6). Chapters 1, 7 and 8 turn to the North American context, recounting the squatted histories of New York (Chapters 1 and 8) and Vancouver (Chapter 7).

In each of the case study cities, Vasudevan highlights the evolution of squatting movements, from direct responses to housing shortages and rising unemployment levels, to fully fledged radical political movements with multiple factions and social goals. He highlights the integral role of squatting movements as a challenge to the normalisation of neoliberal and capital-oriented processes that dominate contemporary urban life. As he states: “to be in a movement was to be part of a complex process that challenged how a city could be imagined, lived and ordered differently” (p.70).

Included throughout the chapters is an exploration of the wide array of intersectional causes and campaigns adopted by and incorporated into squatting movements. Vasudevan highlights how feminist, student, LGBTQI, and anti-racist activist groups have throughout its modern history utilised squatting as a means through which to establish autonomous spaces for creative and political practice.

Although in large part a celebration of squatters’ struggles for and commitment to the establishment of fairer, more just cities, Vasudevan also acknowledges and examines some of the failures of and controversies surrounding squatters’ movements. This includes discussion of the increasingly violent methods adopted by some squatting and autonomous movements, for example the *Brigate Rosse* (“Red Brigades”) in Italy, who in the mid-1970s turned increasingly to the kidnapping and assassination of political figures. Equally, he is attentive to the complex relationship between squatting and colonisation in the North American context, highlighting the omission of histories of settlement in cities such as Vancouver as ones in which the act of squatting is laced with the destruction of indigenous rights to home and land. In short, a context where “squatting was used as *both* an agent of dispossession and a basis for alternative political claim-making and resistance” (p.190). Vasudevan’s insightful discussion of some of the flaws and failings of squatter movements make the book all the more useful as a learning tool for current and future activists, highlighting that we must learn from squatting’s darker histories, as well as its positive impacts and successes.

The Autonomous City deftly provides informative and wide-ranging accounts of the squatted histories of particular cities. However, the book may have benefited from the

exploration of squatting practices in cities beyond Western Europe and North America. Whilst it is undoubtedly an impossible, and arguably unproductive task to connect the practices and forms of urban informality across the world into one cohesive comprehension of squatting as a practice, an account of movements from a wider range of urban contexts may have expanded its scope. In previous work, Vasudevan has himself called for a greater bridging of the conceptual divides between squatting in the Global South and Global North, calling for a “global geography of squatting” that attends to the ways in which squatting, in its myriad forms, is a means through which to understand alternative imaginaries of the city that manifest themselves in precarious conditions (see Vasudevan 2015). *The Autonomous City*, however, remains a Western-centric (and particularly Western European) account of squatting movements. How do activists in other parts of the world reimagine and remake the city through squatting movements? How do they relate, or not, to Vasudevan’s chosen case studies? These could provide interesting avenues for future exploration, and prove particularly important when squatters themselves often acknowledge the racial, gendered, and cultural inequalities present within squatting and other radical activist movements.

However, *The Autonomous City* remains a deeply relevant and important piece of work, particularly given the pernicious dismantling of citizens’ rights and access to decent and secure housing that we are currently witnessing in cities across Europe and North America. Austerity rhetoric, inflated housing markets, and the roll back of welfare states, both in the context of Vasudevan’s case studies and beyond, have instilled ever-growing levels of inequality (Dorling 2015) that have come to be presented as a normative condition of Western society. *The Autonomous City* highlights how integral radical squatting movements are in the fight for social equality and an alternative to the neoliberal consensus.

Although it would be misleading to boil down the struggle of squatters’ movements to one that is solely concerned with housing access, squatting is nonetheless clearly connected to the ever-raging battle for secure housing in cities across Europe and North America. As Vasudevan states:

The history of urban squatting has always been closely connected to housing insecurity and the efforts of ordinary people to secure their own right to housing and the basic fundamentals of survival. (p.239)

The Autonomous City aptly outlines the distinct and complex relationship between squatting and housing insecurity, both in terms of the sheer precarity of squatting as a practice, and the ways in which squatters utilise their precarious conditions to highlight social injustice. Vasudevan is careful not to give an overly romantic account of squatting, acknowledging that squats can be sites of conflict and struggle as much as of social transformation and empowerment. But by tracing in detail the ways in which squatting movements have in various ways been successful in instigating significant change and autonomy—for example, Christiania in Copenhagen, or the historical linkages between veteran squatting and the establishment of mass social housing in London—Vasudevan makes clear the possibilities squatting provides in the fight for housing equality and security.

We are living in a political climate where we are told that there is no alternative to the current social system, that we must acknowledge and accept the need for austerity measures while we wait for the market to do its job and revive our economies. We are told that affordable, sustainable housing is unviable and out of reach. We are made to feel as though these conditions cannot be successfully refuted or overthrown, that the only feasible city is the neoliberal one. *The Autonomous City* reminds us that it is both possible and fundamental to remake and reconstitute the city, to imagine and enact an alternative. It is an invaluable guide to the successes, and mistakes, of past practices of urban resistance and reconstruction. This book is not just an historical account of radical housing movements, though; it is a call to action for future ones.

References

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