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Review: “The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting” by Alexander Vasudevan

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The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting
by Alexander Vasudevan, New York: Verso, 2017. Pp. 292,
Paperback \$26.95, ISBN: 978-1-78168-786-4

REVIEWED BY DENNIS KÖLLING

The recent public debates surrounding the involvement of activists from the Rote Flora in the riots surrounding the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg, as well as the extended coverage of the Occupy movement—to name only two prominent examples—have repeatedly testified to the significance of the practice of squatting in the repertoire of urban political activists. The practice, however, has been widely neglected in the field of history so far, and it is hard to find a contemporary global historical account of squatting as a radical political practice, with the notable exception of the edited volume *The City is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe From The 1970s to The Present*.¹

Alexander Vasudevan's monograph *The Autonomous City* expands on the topics explored in the collection *The City is Ours* and weaves a number of national or local histories of urban squatting into what is claimed to be the "first popular history of squatting as practiced in Europe and North America" on the back cover of the book. Vasudevan connects the histories of local squatter movements in various cities across Western Europe and North America by dividing his book into eight topical chapters that each present a theme illustrated by the example of one or sometimes two cities.

Vasudevan's interest in squatting is twofold: on the one hand it is rather structural, or geographical, as he examines squatter groups as "movements that shared a radical geographical sensibility that operated at a critical distance from the state." (p.10) Squatting here becomes a political act, or "a place where one could (quite literally) *build* an alternative world." In addition, via the process of this world-making, Vasudevan's examination also falls back to the individual level of his actors. Imagining a new urbanism entailed the reflection on identity, "[i]t offered an opportunity to *become a squatter*, to explore new identities and different intimacies, to experience and share feelings and to organize and live collectively." (p.10)

Vasudevan's historical account then integrates these conceptual, political, and cultural questions as he follows individual squatters' movements in the larger context of emerging social movements from the 1960s on. Merging these two strings of his argument, he asserts "[a]t the heart of the book is an account of squatting as the political *other* to 'creative destruction,' such that we continue to find in the lives, spaces and practices of squatters an alternative vision of the city that grows ever more necessary and urgent in the face of capitalist urbanisation [sic]." (p.12)

¹ Bart van der Steen, Ask Katzeff, and Leendert van Hoogenhuijze, *The City is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe From The 1970s to The Present* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014).

Vasudevan presents a wide topical range in the set-up of his book. Individual chapters explore shantytowns, the practice of squatting as an anti-poverty strategy, the politics of remembering in the squatters' movements and a form of collective world-making inherent in the practice, squatting as a form of preservation and neighborhood organizing, the relation of squatters' movements to violence, makeshift urbanisms, ideas of self-determination and autonomy, the controversial relationship between settler colonialism and squatting, as well as the meaning of squatting in the contemporary neoliberal city. Vasudevan connects these historically different articulations of squatting using a red thread of commonality; all his actors saw squatting as a strategy to reassemble the social of the city, to reimagine urbanism to make it more inclusive and, in the words of Lefebvre's famous dictum, to articulate an 'alternative right to the city.'

Vasudevan's geographical diversity is as impressive as his topic range: the individual chapters in *The Autonomous City* cover squatters' movements from New York, London, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Berlin, Bologna, and Vancouver. Global Historians would surely be right to raise the critique of Euro-American-centrism at this point. However, while Vasudevan's history of urban squatting is definitely not narrated in global dimensions, he still deserves credit for his usage of a wide variety of original sources in six different languages. Most of his chapters are based on archive-heavy research, which he integrates well into his overarching narrative.

Vasudevan's source-base widely fits his argument for a "popular" history of urban squatting, while allowing him to make a concise and well-reasoned case. A great number of his sources are taken from squatters' memoirs, as well as political artifacts such as leaflets and do-it-yourself squatting handbooks. This provides a unique insight into the squatter's world, highlighting the processes of world-making and urban imagination that run parallel to political and social agendas connected to squatting. While the type of sources he engages with vary from chapter to chapter, depending on which overarching theme he is exploring, Vasudevan manages to integrate a structural, even conceptual, approach to squatting with an investigation into the lives of the actors that made use of the strategies he discusses.

Although Vasudevan manages to weave together the structural and individual levels very well in his narrative, he nevertheless neglects to point towards interconnections between the individual case studies he is concerned with. While his individual chapters are mostly coherent in their argument, Vasudevan only partially engages with possible interconnections between the actors he follows in different chapters. Some of the sources he is using, however, do hint at the fact that squatters' movements were, at least to some degree, connected across national borders, a topic which definitely deserves further historical attention. Unfortunately, Vasudevan's account falls short here as most movements he discusses

appear almost historically contingent, a feature which highlights that his overall focus is more of a geographical than historical nature. For the book to be considered a truly (global) historical account, Vasudevan would need to make more connections with the wider historical context of his narrative, which is always apparent in the background of his book but remains rather static throughout.

Nevertheless, *The Autonomous City* provides the reader with a conceptually diverse history of squatting in Europe and North America since the 1960s and engages critically with a wide variety of important questions. While his focus may stray towards the geographical, his minute treatment of varied sources serves as a great starting point for historians interested in exploring a popular history of squatters' movements. The strongest part of *The Autonomous City* is Vasudevan's approach to the topic from the bottom-up without glorifying actors and actions, and it deserves attention from an audience of historians.