

Review of A. Vasudevan, 2015, Metropolitan Preoccupations

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VASUDEVAN, ALEXANDER 2015

METROPOLITAN PREOCCUPATIONS: THE
SPATIAL POLITICS OF SQUATTING IN BERLIN,
REVIEWED BY MICHELE LANCIONE

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Unfolding the surface of occupation

There are two main streams at play in Alexander Vasudevan's latest book, *Metropolitan Preoccupations: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin*. The first is about the cultural and political geographies of squatting in the city, of which this text, as the author reminds us, represents the first book-length study available. The second is about the analytics that Vasudevan employs to narrate those stories and geographies. If the former makes for a very informative read and an invaluable resource for further studies on Berlin, it is within the latter that the true merit of this text resides.

This book is not simply about "squatting" in Berlin. Rather, it is a masterful exercise in geography: the careful tracing and detailed writing of histories, events, bodies, materialities and atmospheres and of their nuanced capacities, debris, and paths. To some extent, this is a textbook. In reading it we can perceive the excruciating dedication of its author in avoiding over-theorisations; in trying to narrate occupation as a universe of heterogeneities rather than only through the voice of its leaders; in laying out a history that is also

a geography, and a geography that takes its historical lineages seriously. Maintaining a clear analytical lucidity throughout the dense 242 pages of text in this monograph, as Vasudevan does, is not an easy task, and he deserves praise and attention.

If readers have encountered the two pieces that Vasudevan published recently in *Progress in Human Geography* (2015a; 2015b), they will be accustomed with one of the arguments framing this book. This is Vasudevan's attempt to write a "global" geography of urban squatting, where the term "global" does not point to a universal theory of what squatting is but serves to highlight the common ground shared by squatters around the world. Vasudevan's contribution is in understanding this common ground as both makeshift (i.e. made of heterogeneous practices, materialities, affectivities) and a producer of new ways of being together in the city (i.e. a producer of a new urbanity). As David M. Bell has pointed out in his review of this book in *City* (forthcoming), Vasudevan does not want to forge a theory or a meta/ narrative to explain Berlin's squatting history. What he wants is to navigate this history and its geographies, to let us see where connections and disjunctions are formed, when alliances are constituted and endured (or not), and how these processes are articulated in both time and space to forge new spatio/ political imaginaries.

In reading this book, I was reminded of one of AbdouMaliq Simone's notions, that of surface. According to Simone the urban is made up—in the sense of being held together—by surfaces, junctions that enable things to move, to be moved, to stop and be stopped. These surfaces are not a thing but amalgamations: provisional intersections that turn into channels; machines that come to operate as "circuits that instantiate particular points of view, ways of doing things, and convictions among those who operate across [them]" (Simone 2011, p.358). One could argue that certain contemporary urban theory is mainly about dealing with these surfaces, with dark matter that seems to escape structural understandings and typologies. People's makeshifts can become surfaces (Simone 2004); the lively infrastructures of the urban area are another (Amin 2014;

McFarlane 2010); and affective atmospheres and sentient technologies play a similar role, too (Thrift 2014). Metropolitan Preoccupations deals with a number of these surfaces, which Vasudevan analytically divides into “makeshift” and “emotional,” to show us how squatting emerged, developed, spread, and only nominally declined in Berlin from its 19th/ century historical groundings to nowadays.

The analysis starts off with a sketched history of housing shortage in Berlin, moving through 19th/ century planning, Weimar Berlin’ s housing strikes, the Third Reich’ s “spatial cleanse” and the layered history of post/ war reconstruction. This historical overview does not serve the purpose of offering justification for what comes next, but to situate the squatting scene of contemporary Berlin “within an expansive field of possibilities and potentialities” (p.49). Connecting to that field, Vasudevan renders justice to the claim that the past and the future are always present in the building of repertoires, strategies, postures, anticipatory practices, and their everyday articulations. This is an important analytical choice because in investigating the connections between the past and the present, Vasudevan treats squats for what they are, a civic event, an event about who, what, and how we are in the city. This is about, as Askins and Mason put it, “our relations with others—other bodies both human and non/ human—elsewhere and in the past, present, and future” (2012, p.425).

These relations become visible in the central chapters of the book. In Chapter 3 Vasudevan traces the infrastructure that made alternative support networks possible, especially among student activists and members of the extra/ parliamentary opposition in West Germany during the 1960s. He shows the nuanced negotiations and conflicts that surrounded the attempt to establish a Berlin Commune (by student activists like Rudi Dutschke and situationists like Dieter Kunzelmann) and stresses how those late/ 1960s attempts bear an “elective affinity” with the practice of squatters that followed in the next decade. The notion of performance,

and performances themselves, is central in understanding this history. As the author highlights, it is indeed through performances— “agitprop, happenings, teach/ ins, and street theatre” (p.63)—that a new time and space for the city was created, and thus politics enacted and brought to the fore. In those early days not only were students and artists performing in public but they were most of all constituting “new public geographies of dissent and resistance” (p.64). Squatting in this sense was assembled with (and through) the fabric of the city to re/ invent the city itself.

Such a process of (re)assembling fully comes to the fore in the analysis of the late 1970s and mid/ 1980s proposed in Chapter 4. If canonical scholarship has understood that moment as one of retreat and, to a certain extent, defeat of “anti/ authoritarian revolts,” Vasudevan on the contrary shows how those years were pivotal in constructing a peculiar kind of urban imaginary. Taking the TUNIX congress of January 1978 as the event signaling a transitional moment for the radical leftist scene in West Berlin and showing the relevance of transnational autonomist movements in that history (e.g., Italian operaism and autonomia), Vasudevan’ s analysis turns to the everyday makeshift urbanism of occupation (adaptation, mending, and repairing) and the emotional labour needed to constantly (re)assemble activism and the political.

The merit of this analysis is to show how the politics of being together politically is by no means detached by the politics of being together bodily, materially and emotionally. Vasudevan describes the work that was put in place to improve and increase communal spaces, which included organising floors and rooms according to different activities, repairing things or (re)inventing them to serve communal purposes, opening social spaces to exterior parties and more. In these beautiful pages Vasudevan clearly shows the material and emotional oeuvre of the squat; the house was not only to be occupied but it was to be (re)designed in order to fit, and effectively in order to (re)produce, also emotionally, the kind of metropolitan preoccupations for which squatters aimed.

Having showed the history of occupation in Western Berlin, from the first *Kommun* to widespread occupation and its seizure by the police, Vasudevan then turns his attention to the East. The increased number of occupations in East Berlin after the fall of the Berlin Wall is explained not only through the evident social changes taking place at that moment but also through a detailed account of an “earlier history of illegal occupation and alternative housing in East Berlin and elsewhere in East Germany, a practice that was commonly known as *Schwarzwohnen* (‘illegal living’)” (p.135). Showing how *Schwarzwohnen* was both a response to the housing shortage and, at least in a number of cases, a way to connect to “underground political activism” (p.140), the book offers a nuanced account of squatting in Berlin after the reunification. The reader is left, however, with a sense that more could have been said about the makeshifts and emotional labor of occupying in communist East Berlin, a presentation that lacks the depth offered by the previous chapters. The research needed to reconstruct the peculiar makeshift and emotional geographies underpinning occupations in the East is, perhaps, a task that requires a study of its own (and may not even be possible due to the lack of data and primary sources). Despite this imbalance, both in this chapter on East Berlin and on the following one on the latest, controversial developments of squatting in the city, Vasudevan is successful in showing how these are preoccupations that cannot be wiped out and that continue to be “laboratories where people have come together to assemble alternative lifeworlds and articulate new forms of contentious politics” (p.192).

Despite its indisputable merits, this is not a book that will be liked by everybody. Vasudevan knows this, and in the early pages of the volume he is quick in taking distance from “the” other recent attempt to write about urban squatting in Europe, namely that of the *Squatting Europe Kollektiv*, or *SqEK* (*SqEK* 2013).

There are two levels of differentiation here. The first resides in the explicit activist/ oriented nature of the *SqEK*. This, however, is only an apparent distance because both approaches are arguably about being actively involved in (re)writing, (re)imagining, (re)searching, and (re)doing a differential “shared city life” (p.207).

The second resides in the refusal, by Vasudevan, to “produce a typology of squatting,” such as the one brought to the fore by long/ term housing scholar Hans Pruijt (2013), who identifies five configurations of squatting: deprivation/ based, alternative housing strategy, entrepreneurial, conservational, and political. The debate between these approaches remains open and won’ t be over soon. I believe, however, that the present book is successful in showing something important for the economy of that debate: namely how political preoccupations rise from the everyday makeshifts of the occupation, rather than the contrary. It is in mending, repairing, sharing, and dwelling that new spaces emerge and new political consciousness is brought to the fore. These are matters that cannot be grasped through a priori categorisation or top/ down models.

If occupation is “the tactic of anticipating an adversary’ s arguments by preempting them, taking the initiative in a space where one knows in advance that there will be resistance and counterarguments” (Mitchell 2012, pp.9 – 10), what this book does is show how that tactic takes place; how it comes to the fore; how it emerges from scattered times, spaces, affects, and matter. Vasudevan traces and unfolds the surface of squatting in Berlin to tell the story of how the city is remade anew or at least of how a part of the city tries to reinvent itself through political contestation and makeshift. Its insights matters to every urban theorist and activist interested in (re)engaging with how the city today is and how it can be.

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