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*Against the Commons* is an ambitious book that charges urban planning with ultimately disrupting communal, public control of public spaces and replacing it with a technocratic elite ordering of public space serving the interests of capital accumulation. It traces these impulses in the planning project, starting from eighteenth-century England through late nineteenth-century New York City and Chicago, moving to interwar Berlin, and finally landing in late twentieth-century Milan. The Marxist perspective that structures the analysis provides a theoretical continuity across time and space and is a considerable strength of the work. The richly discursive endnotes demonstrate research grounded in an extensive secondary literature and published primary sources: journal articles, books, reports, and newspapers. Noting that this is not a work based on original archival research is no criticism: Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago has read widely in three languages across four countries and several hundred years. The articulation of a common narrative that conceptually joins these histories makes *Against the Commons* a compelling addition to the historiography. Beyond the scholarly interests of historians, the argument in *Against the Commons* deserves a wide audience for its provocative question: whose interests does planning serve? Planners would likely prefer the notion that they serve the broad public interest. In Britain, the Royal Town Planning Institute touts planning as a way to create “prosperous places and vibrant communities.”[1] Similarly, the peak organization of American planners, the American Planning Association, has as its motto “Creating Great Communities for All.”[2] *Against the Commons* contends that historically planners served the interests of cultural and economic elites.

The notion of “commoning” is central to the book. Commoning describes how “disenfranchised populations” and “working classes” acquire and manage shared resources and physical space and seek to carve out collective, non-market control and redistribution of resources. Planning in an emerging (eighteenth-century England) or fully capitalist society (New York, Chicago, Berlin, and
Milan) does the work of capital by facilitating capitalist accumulation and managing working-class reproduction. Planning tempers the possibility of revolution by providing enough, maybe just slightly more than enough, to the working classes that they will continue to labor without too much complaint. Chapter 1 relates the oft-told story of the enclosure of the commons as a precursor of the methods of urban planning. Although the enclosure of the English commons is not part of my own research, for me, as an economic historian, it is a familiar story. Sevilla-Buitrago breaks no new ground in describing the basic facts of the transition but makes a strong case for understanding the enclosures as part of the history of planning. By relating the techniques of urban planning to transitions in rural economy and property, the author provides the emergence of urban planning in the nineteenth century with stronger intellectual roots. Canonical histories of planning have often emphasized its distinctly urban roots and contrasted the coordination problems of the teeming and growing city with the quite different division of property in the countryside. In other words, planning emerged, in part, to solve the challenge of coordinating the development of densely populated urban areas with ownership of small urban land parcels divided among many owners. Planning in this triumphantist narrative helped ensure that private developments were complementary and could benefit the public sphere. Locating the origins of planning not in urban space itself but in the social space of property relations undermines the narrative that planning has public interest at heart. Planning has its origins in the social control of people, land, and labor and serves the interests of elites who can co-opt the work of the state to order property and public space to their ends.

Despite their range across time and space, the contention of all four chapters is essentially that the working and lower middle classes (whether rural or urban) had effective social structures to govern communal space and provide material support. The argument here has an echo of those made by Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom and colleagues, though their work is not mentioned, that small communities do devise ways of effectively managing common resources. Similarly, a common thread running through the book is that capital and cultural elites perceived significant benefit in reordering society toward more centralized governance of public space. Whereas the focus in chapter 1 on the English common lands is very much on the control of land, in chapter 2, which focuses on New York and Chicago, the argument is more about desirable behaviors and urban social life in two rapidly growing American metropolises. This chapter is the one closest to my own teaching and research, and it was stimulating to see it in the arc of Sevilla-Buitrago’s narrative connecting the English countryside to interwar Berlin and modern Milan. For the most part, I have read and understood the history of American urban life and planning in the context of American history. More broadly, the connections via a common language to Australasia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have linked American planning and urban thought to at least some international development of urban spaces. Anglophone histories of twentieth-century planning and urban development have often touched on the role of American consultant planners in reshaping urban spaces in other English-speaking countries. Thus, American planning history is not detached from the world, but prior work has often connected it to global trends in quite different ways than done here.

It is mostly implicit in the structure of the book, and the selection of four different places to represent four different thematic eras in planning, that planning has had the same impulses toward serving the interests of orderly capital accumulation in Europe and North America. The ambition to draw a common narrative arc through several centuries and several places puts a book at risk of abstracting too much from the specifics of time and place. The danger is probably even greater when the author has a strong theoretical framework and political praxis. Yet those significant
hazards are avoided. Each chapter drew me into the specifics of its site and narrative to the extent that in the middle of the chapter, I was absorbed as a reader in what was happening on the fields or streets of each place. For a short while, the other sites receded in importance as the work focused on the case at hand. The contest between capital and the commons gives each chapter a dramatic trope. Though the outcome is clearly signaled—capital wins—and thus lacks suspense, the parallel structure throughout the book reinforces the argument. Moreover, while each chapter delves into its particular time and place, the pivots from England to America to Berlin to Milan are well made. As each chapter draws to a close, Sevilla-Buitrago brings the text back to arguments of greater generality to set up the transition.

The slightly unusual structure of narrating a common intellectual impulse across four places is achieved because the temporal connections are, for the most part, tight. That is, where chapter 1 ends in early nineteenth-century England, chapter 2 takes off in early nineteenth-century New York City. Chicago, of course, was but a marsh and portage site. Chapter 2 ends in the early twentieth century, and the temporal transition to interwar Berlin is straightforward. There is a more abrupt shift from 1930s Berlin where chapter 3 concludes to late 1960s Milan where chapter 4 begins (though it is mostly focused on the 1970s). On one level, the book succeeds by demonstrating a continuity in the alliance of planning and capital accumulation that survived the Great Depression, World War II, and postwar reconstruction. And yet how this occurred is left unspoken. Is the planning/capital alliance a hydra-headed form that can survive the transition from early fascism to vibrant and messy democracies? The intellectual and legal connections between Britain and the United States are well known and the pairing of these countries in global narratives quite conventional. The selection of interwar Germany and postwar Italy, two countries that shared the experience of mid-century fascism rebuilding to late twentieth-century democracy, is analytically useful. How these two cases with their elements of common and divergent histories sit together with the British and American cases could have been discussed at greater length.

These small reservations do not detract from the considerable strengths of this book: its grounding in the specifics of each site, its provocative comparison, and its clear theoretical perspective and central argument. Historians of the urban experience and people interested in the intellectual history of professions will find this a useful stimulus to thinking anew about the development and control of city life. The questions this book poses go far beyond the specific cases it is based on. Grappling with the central charge of the book—who does planning serve?—will be of great benefit for those working on cities in other places in the past and those grappling with the current contest over making and remaking cities.

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