



Transcript Ep. 68: Book Review Roundtable: Against the Commons – A Radical History of Urban Planning

[00:00:00] **Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago:** This book has argued that space and urbanization struggles have been critical in the production and subjugations of surplus and subaltern populations throughout capitalist history. Likewise, planning and urbanization politics will be essential to build a communal future beyond capitalist exploitation, reproductive alienation, and state oppression.

A new consciousness along these lines will have to address this contradiction between the legacy and prospects of spatial planning and elucidate the links between past and future urbanization struggles. In that regard, we will also need a critical history aimed at transforming rather than endorsing the apparatus of planning.

I hope this book will encourage others to join this effort. Capitalist urbanization is a relentless battle between social groups with antagonistic spatial projects and strategies. Being aware of one's own position within this field of forces is critical to prevail. This self-awareness can be supported and strengthened by theoretical work, but collective practice will remain the key terrain to grasp the scope and complexity of these struggles, for they generate contradictory manoeuvres in concrete conjunctures.

History, as a distillation and synthesis of the structural meaning of these strategies, is the name we give to a theory of such practice. The present is the dynamic intersection of two trajectories. The first connects with the past and carries the weight of the archive, of memory, of the dead and ruins within us.

Discourses and institutions, hegemonies built in asphalt and stone, possibilities denied, absent promises and defeats. The second points towards the future and speaks the language of planning, brimming with opportunities for liberation. This is why the present is simultaneously fixed and volatile, settled and open.

From this juncture, both paths, the history and the plan, are vectors of struggle. Their meaning and scope are up to us to define. Those who is to chart the course of communist urbanization must look in both directions.

[00:02:13] **Intro:** This is the urban political. The podcast on urban theory, research, and activism.

[00:02:22] **Nitin Bathla:** Welcome dear listeners. We are here today to discuss Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago's new book "Against the Commons". And we are joined by the author of the book and two great interlocutors who will introduce themselves just in a bit.

[00:02:39] **Sai Balakrishnan:** Thank you so much, Nitin, for convening these intellectual comments.

Thank you, Álvaro, for writing this very provocative book. I'm Sai Balakrishnan, associate professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and my work largely looks at urbanization in India, outside the city at the intersection of agrarian and urban studies.

[00:03:00] **Mara Ferreri:** Hi, everyone. Thank you so much, Nitin, for the invitation, and thank you also, Álvaro, for writing this, and Sai for introducing yourself.

It's great to be here. I'm Mara Ferreri. I'm a senior researcher in the ERC project Inhabiting Radical Housing in the Polytechnic of Turin at University of Turin, and I'm also a core member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, also in Turin. I'm an urban geographer working on housing commons and temporary urbanism.

[00:03:27] **Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago:** Hello, everyone. And thanks, Nitin, for organizing this conversation. And Sai and Mara for taking time to read the book. I am the author of the book *Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago*. I am an associate professor at *Universidad Politécnica de Madrid*. And my work sits at the intersection of urban theory and critical geography and planning history.

And I'm especially interested in the nexus of urban processes and political economy, and especially how urbanization, planning policy and design practices shape social change.

[00:04:10] **Sai Balakrishnan:** So, it's a book that's expansive in its thinking and in its references, Álvaro draws upon, impressively draws upon various strands of scholarship, situating his own work within very different strands of scholarship.

So, the book engages with property texts, including Linebaugh and Ranajit Guha. I hope we have a chance to come back to Ranajit Guha sometime during the conversation. The book is a wonderful amalgamation of marxist, agrarian and urban scholars. And this is very, very important because of the inherited disciplinary silos of agrarian and urban studies.

And this is what I focus most of my comments on. As someone who teaches in a planning school, the book is very important for designers and planners. It covers and introduces us to a host of influential architects and planners ranging from Frederick Law Olmsted, Jane Jacobs and the Hull House, urban reformers of early 20th century U.S. And contemporary "starchitects", including Charles Jencks and Zaha Hadid. But what's really important is that the book frames all of their ideas and practices within a history of commoning. Not within a normalized history of private property, but a history of commoning. It's an incredibly useful contribution to design and planning.

What I also enjoyed about the book, since I teach in a planning school, is it's part empirical, so a rich engagement with urban theory. It's part manifesto, so the conclusion chapter is really a wonderful dreaming of other worlds. And for those of us who are in future oriented professions, like design and planning, it's a rare combination of a book that engages very rigorously with urban histories and theory, but it's also a manifesto, a call to dream of other possible worlds. And also, I think a rare book, because Álvaro foregrounds planners and the planning profession. In the conclusion, he says, how should planners' identities and roles be reframed in a context of communist urbanization? So, thank you for this Álvaro.

I want to focus my brief comments on chapter one. It was a chapter that I enjoyed immensely, learned a lot from, and the chapter is called "Common Land and Primitive Accumulation: English Hinterlands and the Origin of Planning". Generally, when you look at planning history, there's this very common, familiar understanding that planning was institutionalized post World War II in cities, in an urban context. And Álvaro argues, in a very compelling way, that we need to go back to the agrarian origins of urban planning. More precisely, in his words: "the parliamentary enclosures are a forerunner of urban planning". Hugely important argument.

Just because I think it's important to set the stage, I'll very briefly go over his argument. I hope I'm conveying it in its richness, Álvaro. On the one hand, Álvaro argues, that at the core of capitalist planning are modes of regulating private property. Cadastres, titles, bid rent curves, zoning.

And these are mechanisms that were rationalized and institutionalized during the English struggles over enclosure. So, on the one hand, the planning project is fundamentally about primitive accumulation. It's various iterations, historically specific iterations of dispossession authorized by the law. On the other hand, Álvaro also reminds us that the planning project is about ameliorating the effects of primitive accumulation.

So, he writes about the human schemes to compensate the dispossessed for their denied access to customary tenure and to the commons. And these planning schemes take on many forms. In chapter two, which is again, a very rich chapter on New York and Chicago, he maps out the urban reformers of the early 20th century New York and Chicago.

And the schemes on designing public parks, like the celebrated Central Park. And the schemes of public open spaces are seen as a way of preserving the commons, but these are projects that allow primitive accumulation to continue unchecked. So, these are really the contradictions of the planning project, that he writes about, and there are other scholars who have written about this. For instance, Richard Foglesong, in *The Property Contradiction*, David Harvey, of course, Manuel Castells. But again, Álvaro's book, I find hugely inspiring because we're forced to reckon with the agrarian origins of urban planning.

So, with that, my main question for Álvaro, and really something that I'd like to discuss with all of you, is, you know at the core of the book, and that's why chapter one as an opening chapter is so important, at the core of the book is the argument that agrarian enclosures are constitutive of capitalist urbanization.

You cannot understand capitalist urbanization without understanding historically specific enclosure movements. Now, if we had to explore this argument in its full richness, the question that arises is how do you write a history of urban planning that does not exclude the agrarian. Methodologically, what does this entail? So, for instance, if you're writing about the urban commons and the planning project in New York in the early 20th century, you need to understand the agrarian question of Northeastern United States.

So, the enclosure movement of Northeastern United States is very different from the enclosure movement of England in the 17th, 18th, 19th centuries. So, what would it mean then to write a theory of the urban commons that transgresses the agrarian urban divide?

And I ask this question because Álvaro's book ambitiously takes on a number of cities, early 20th century, New York and Chicago, Weimar, Berlin, Milan, Italy from the fifties to the seventies, and then contemporary Milan.

The references and the scholarship in these chapters is largely urban. What are we missing out on? Because you give us such an important provocation in your opening chapter on the agrarian enclosures, what do we miss out on when we don't engage the agrarian in understanding these specific cities?

What would it mean to re-embed these cities within their agrarian hinterland? I'll just stop here, but thank you again, Álvaro, for writing this book and I'm looking forward to our discussion.

[00:11:38] **Mara Ferreri:** Thank you very much for inviting me today. I really, really enjoyed reading this book and I felt it was something incredibly rich and detailed in the breath of not just theoretical literature, the book engages with, but also the breath of empirical examples. And I think there's something that really helps making some of these provocations come to light in terms of the images, in terms of the also engagement with fiction or with prose and poetry. So, there is something really, really dense, in a good sense, thick about this book, that I truly enjoyed.

I'd like to start my comments on the book by saying that the first time I read Álvaro's work was in an article published in Antipode, Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons, which to me at the time, starting on a Marie Curie fellowship on housing commons, was incredibly useful.

And what I found particularly useful and what I think is fully developed now in the book, well it was already fully developed in the article, but really the book gives this much broader and much richer overview, is the tension, the dialectical relation between enclosures and commoning.

And in a sense, that attention to the dynamics of Logic of spatial erosion, of capturing, is something that on an abstract, in a more universalist logic of capitalist accumulation is kind of easy to grasp, but it becomes much harder to grasp when you're actually looking at specific histories and specific path dependencies and specific ways in which actors on the ground articulate imaginaries and practices.

And so, I think in this sense, what I found, what really drew me in the book was this forensic analysis of these enclosures at multiple levels in multiple historical contexts and cities. But what I also always found and really valued is that this is always put into tension with a politics of hopeful exceeding, a politics of this kind of the constant redrawing of the boundaries of the possible.

That comes to the rescue in the moment when you're feeling that capitalism, the capitalist horizon is the only horizon possible. And so, in this sense, I think I was similarly to Sai, there is a question also to the reader. Perhaps in my case, not as a planner, but as a pedagogue in a planning school. So as a geographer who teaches planning students around what Nick Blomley would say, the real tragedy of the commons, which is that invisibility, their inability

to be seen, partly because of the historiography of planning and a certain normative understanding of spatial, of the organization of space and the role of urban professionals in this.

And partly because, and I think what the book does really excellently is, because seeing the commons requires a real shift in vision. And I think in this sense, the book definitely provides theoretical and empirical ammunition to continue challenging planning orthodoxy around the conceptual framework around, in a sense, the perpetuation of that semi delusional sense of a progressive, sort of a vague progressive dimension that doesn't often engage with the realities of that progressive ideal.

And I think in this sense, it brings planning back into the picture of what planning is meant to be moderating in a sense or ameliorating. And I think showing that intrinsic co production of planning and process of accumulation is particularly useful.

I guess my second comment, and this is more specifically around chapter four. So, the book really travels between different cities and different, not just cities clearly, but it starts with the enclosures with English enclosures and then moves through Chicago, New York, Weimar, Berlin during the Weimar Republic. And the final chapter, the final empirical chapter concerns Milan in Northern Italy.

And situating it within what was a very productive and politically, I would say, quite experimental and quite radical moment in Italian history, often framed through this concept of *autonomia*. And I think what was particularly interesting for me there was, in a sense, positioning something which I had firsthand account of, which was a struggle around the planning project. In the north of the city, in the Isola neighbourhood, within these longer-term attempts to reframe and disrupt certain forms of urban planning and reframing the city.

In rereading this chapter and also sharing it with activists and scholars who had been involved in the struggles. It was, I suppose, very flattering to find that what was done about 15 years ago could make sense within the genealogy. I also felt that in a sense, the commons of creativity, and this is something that I suppose I've been exploring in my work as well, particularly around temporary urbanism and the cultural politics of temporary urbanism before, and particularly after the global financial crisis in Europe, is one of these frontiers of accumulation, is one of these frontiers of recapture.

My question there, or my comment really has to do with the spaces of hope within that. In a sense, coming to the end of that chapter, I felt there was less of a hopeful accidents than in other chapters, and perhaps this is because creativity is one of these areas where there is a lot of critical literature, clearly in unpacking it and showing how it's been mobilized by different forms of accumulation and recapturing, but I suppose what I would have liked to see or I would like to hear your thoughts about is precisely how and in what ways do you think the commoning of creativity could somehow be repurposed, reclaimed, and to what extent, in a sense.

All that is bundled up in those debates in terms of place marketing, place making, branding, and all the different professionals which are summoned and called in, to what extent can

they reframe and to what extent they can actually engage with this. And I think it goes back to this question of being able to not just recognize the promise of the potential of that alterity of the commons, which I think, for example, in my work, contemporary urbanism is absolutely central to the discourse of temporariness or a certain understanding of meanwhile spaces and DIY and all of that. But that is part and parcel of forms of capitalist enclosures rather than actually open up different spaces. And so, I guess for me, the question is, where would be that space? And perhaps extending that question, is that space just a space of action within the professional planning? Should it also include other urban actors and which ones?

[00:18:57] **Nitin Bathla:** Thanks, Mara. It's really difficult to follow up after what Sai and you said, but I'll try. I think my arrival point to Álvaro's work was very similar through that Antipode article, but also through the chapter that you wrote, Álvaro, in the "Implosions/Explosions" book.

And I think for me, what was interesting is you're pushing against the sort of grounding of planetary urbanization debate in the long 1980s, and you pushing it to calling it ex novo extended urbanization in the book, pushing it much further. And then trying to understand the primitive enclosures and a de-commoning of agrarian landscapes in the English countryside.

And I was quite attracted towards that because I always had this sort of uneasiness towards planetary organization hypothesis, which sort of invisibilizes, I think the longer durée of planetarity, so to speak. And how interconnected, but yet very specific trajectories of urbanization have existed since much longer.

And there's also been a tradition of people like Abu-Lughod, who wrote about even longer timescales of planetarity. So that was the starting point, or the point of intersection where I was reading, of course, Sai's work and then Álvaro, your work and putting two plus two into five.

So that adding this one from my activism, long term activism in the Delhi region and in North India. And so, in that sense, the book was very interesting for me because not just from the point that you start, which is a very intimate look at the processes of enclosure and primitive planning in the English countryside.

Which, of course, I was very familiar with through the book on Wastelands by Vittoria Di Palma and other works, but, I think, Álvaro, what's interesting in this book, perhaps, is you take us even a little more beyond, because you're looking at not just waste landing, but you're looking at practices of commoning and also you're looking at urban peripheries, it's a multi scalar perspective on the countryside.

And I also enjoyed how you take us to other chapters where even in New York there is a sort of commoning with livestock and pigs and all that kind of stuff. And then how the urban park movement tries to disrupt that. I'm not saying that it's a very similar story to what happens in the parts of India that I study. But there's some sort of resonances with that process, also the process of *Weltstaat* that you discuss in Berlin, this sort of reinvention of centrality, the right to centrality and you talk about the *Kiez* life and then how that's disrupted and then

this grand Berlin at the centre of the Prussian empire, or even the German empire afterwards is re embedded within that fabric, is something that I see a lot of resonances with what's happening with Delhi now. With the reinvention of Delhi and reinvention of its axis and the commons and all these sort of bourgeois parks that emerge along the riverbanks in Delhi.

It's very interesting, because your opening to your book, and I would say that's why, in an intersection to Sai's comment, why it is really a great pedagogical material in planning and architecture schools is that it's opening a sort of genetic comparison, to appropriate from Jenny Robinson's work and comparison. It's not an incorporated comparison or it's not saying that, okay, you're going to find the same things everywhere.

But it's finding some sort of genetic patterns that are inherent in capitalist planning processes. And what's interesting in the final chapter is that how you try to synthesize, and you try to isolate things from work of radical planners and work from John Friedman and from others, try to synthesize a few principles for that can allow planners to think about a form of commonist planning. It's not communist, but commonist. And that for me was very interesting and why I would use it as a teaching material for a very long time, at least.

Something that was lacking for me a little bit and that's also a subject of a paper that I'm coming out with, the sedentary perspectives on planning and commoning. One of the subaltern communities that I've been working with during my PhD and even in my postdoctoral work is a transhumant pastoralist. In India, 7 percent of the population is nomadic, it's non-sedentary. And that's true for a large part of the world. It's true for North Africa. It's true for West Asia, Southern Europe, parts of Spain, Greece, Portugal, South and Central America. Of course, North America that's been disrupted as a process. And there's rangeland pastoralism, but somehow, what I've been looking at is how transhumant pastoralists don't see regimes of property in the same way.

They believe in forms of transient commoning. So, for them, the waste of property becomes commons again. Of course, it has to do with a different ontology of space, but I think it's an interesting process in itself and somehow that's sometimes missed out because we have a very sedentary lens, also on planning and on processes of commoning and also on the agrarian.

So that would be my question to you, how would you bring in, if you were to, non-sedentary ontology or non-sedentary dwelling in these landscapes? But thanks for this work. It was really a pleasure reading your book.

[00:25:42] **Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago:** Thank you all for such wonderful and generous and generative readings of the book. It's so great, people who are producing such brilliant work on some of the topics I deal with in the book, speaking so highly of it.

So, I think what I will do before going into the responses to the specific questions is perhaps, and this will hopefully make it easier to situate and locate the particular answers to the questions raised during the conversation later on. Because, yes, of course, the book focuses on urban planning, but in a way, urban planning was an entry point to deal with a broader

problem, the problem of urbanization, of urbanization under capitalism and how it articulates social change and spatial change throughout history.

And perhaps one of the reasons why capitalist urbanization is so fascinating, such a fascinating phenomenon is because it is so paradoxical and contradictory in many, many ways. But one of them, and one we usually pay less attention to is the problematic relationship between capitalist urbanization, and the production of collectivity.

On the one hand, capitalist urbanization, it depends on the production of expanded collectivities. It feeds on collective energies and collective capacity, to produce this always larger and more complex spaces and social and spatial divisions of labour. It depends on the proliferation of a multiplicity of encounters and connections between people, between places, often distant places and regions to produce these ever-expanding networks that are sustained by collective labour.

But at the same time, and this is one of the main ideas of the book, capitalist urbanization tends to decollectivize society in the sense that even as it produces these new social spaces, it also deprives them of the communal basis that often characterizes the production of space in other historical periods, in other political economic regimes. And this is not an accident, and this is one of the main arguments of the book.

This is not an accident. This is not this spontaneous result of the ebb and flow of social change. This is an active strategy pursued throughout history, sometimes by specific groups, social and economic elites and states, and spatial politics plays a fundamental role in this strategy and particularly spatial planning understood as a set of techniques and practices and discourses that try to bring about long-term social change by regulating urbanization.

So, yes, in order to bring all these elements together, the commons, this need to decollectivize society, space, planning and so on, in order to bring all these elements and ingredients together, what the book proposes is that we look at capitalist urbanization as a site of struggles, as a site and an outcome of struggles between competing social forces trying to organize space according to their own interests and sometimes also trying to disorganize the space of their rival, of their social antagonists.

And I see this struggle around urbanization as part of a broader conflict under capitalism, the problem of reproduction, the need that capitalism has. In order to secure its own continuity and expansion, the need that it has to secure a coherent, a stable social order in the face of its own destabilizing tendencies, and particularly the problem of social reproduction, how to reproduce popular groups, working people as subaltern classes, as classes that are willing to work and live and reproduce themselves within the narrow rules of this system, the narrow institutions and practices of the system.

How do you do that? Well, among other things, what you try to do is to neutralize the capacities of these groups to reproduce outside the system, both in material and cultural terms, and you try to erase their autonomy because it can't feel social antagonism and this is the stuff of the commons, self-reproduction, self-management, autonomy.

This is the stuff of commons. The book defines commons as shared, self-managed resources and spaces that allow communities to reproduce themselves independently from direct market and state influence. So, the commons foster this, precisely the kind of things that jeopardize the reproduction of the capitalist system. And this is why we see this effort to decommonize society throughout history.

And then why space? What space has to do with this? Well, not always, but in most of the cases, especially when we look at commons that are essential for the reproduction and survival of the [unintelligible]. The commons have a strong spatial basis. These practices of commoning have a territorial anchor. So, space becomes part of the picture, and space and spatial politics are used in order to try to triangulate this attack on the commons. So, this is in a nutshell the stuff of the book, it explores this ability of deprived communities to build spaces of autonomy around these shared resources and cooperative practices and how the attempts to dismantle these spaces have influenced the evolution of urban planning, of spatial politics and capitalist urbanization for more than three centuries. In these different places that I explore in the book.

Now, focusing on your comments, let me try to do some summary because they, of course, were going in different directions. So first, Sai, yes, of course, the first chapter was a strong statement about the need to look beyond cities when we're trying to understand what planning does, especially if we're taking seriously this attempt to see planning and spatial politics as an intrinsic aspect of a capitalist political economy throughout history. We need to look at different geographies and places, not only cities, but also what's going on beyond cities. And especially we need to look at the relationships between cities and their hinterlands. And this is, of course, one of the reasons why I chose to begin the historical narrative outside cities, particularly in focusing on England, and it's interesting to see that what's going on in cities in England at that time.

In terms of the innovation of spatial policies, you find that the advancement, the progress is really slow in cities and meanwhile, if you look at the countryside, you see these bold attempts to restructure, rearrange property structures in a way and with a radicality that you cannot find in cities.

If you look at London, for instance. London after the great fire of 1666 is rebuilt preserving the property structure. And even if there are like large schemes to try to reorganize London, nothing can be done because property interests are so entrenched. Meanwhile, if we look at the countryside, we see what is going on is completely the contrary.

We see this massive reorganization of property structures, land uses, and especially all the livelihoods and rights and customs that were attached to access to land through common rights and customary practices. So, yes, I think it's important to incorporate this kind of perspective. Your specific question, Sai, was mentioning how a history of urban planning that transgresses this urban rural divide might use this perspective more consistently, perhaps, and to trace these trajectories, also in other periods.

Of course. In the book, from chapter two on, I go back to cities, and I focus on cities. In chapter two and chapter three, we still have a sense of how agrarian and rural practices

persist somehow in industrializing cities. Because of course, those dispossessed in the countryside, who then need to go to cities to work, to find a way to make a living.

And they still carry their practices and customs and habits with them and try to reproduce them in cities. And this is actually a source of the new industrial commons that appear in these places. Where in places such as New York or Chicago and Berlin, you see that in some parts of the city, livestock still coexists with humans. Goats, cows, and sheep, they still coexist with humans for a long time.

And actually, I would say that this is one of the main axis of urban policy during this period, to try to erase these rural practices from urban city contexts becomes one of the main concerns of states and municipalities and the elites, because they are trying to consolidate a more urban conception of what a city is, what belongs in the city and what does not belong to the city.

But yes, you're right Sai. This is only a remnant of rural practices that goes into cities. I don't focus on this specific problem of the ongoing reorganization of urban-rural relationships during these later periods. Simply, it was a bit too much to take on for this project.

But yes, that would be amazing, to see a revisionist planning history or urban history focusing on those kinds of relationships, specifically focusing on them on later periods. And of course, connecting to some of the currently ongoing dynamics of transformation of the countryside across the world, which both of you, Sai, and Nitin, are dealing with in your work.

And actually, I see some of the issues, of course, that I deal with not only in chapter one, but also in chapter two and three, these remnants of how rural practices and agrarian practices coexist, with what we usually understood as proper urban practices, still coexist for a long, long time, and how this overlapping produces new conflicts and contradictions. Which may perhaps become an opportunity at some point, and perhaps I will come back to this idea later because I would like to flip the format of the conversation a little bit and actually address some questions to all of you.

Now, Mara, thank you for sharing the chapter with activists in Milan, it's so great, and I would love to hear what they're thinking about it. Your question, yes, of course, is the great dilemma I would say. Again, this is something that I would like to also address the question to you. What's the room for spaces of hope? When we see how these grassroots created capacities are being increasingly and apparently more easily subsumed and incorporated and captured by these real estate machines, by municipal projects to "regenerate" "obsolete areas" of the city and so on. And how these created potentials are being co-opted and incorporated into the machinery of capitalist urbanization.

Very difficult question and as you yourself, you also, showing your research on London. It seems that in order to survive these collective projects, bottom-up projects are increasingly becoming less and less radical. Because if they want to find some kind of support from municipalities, because, of course, these projects are sometimes initiated by people who are living precarious lives and they need to find a source of livelihood of some sorts, even if

trying to maintain their commitment to these place-based and more grassroots projects, but they apparently become less and less radical and more easily to co-opt.

I would say, but this is of course, if you will, very easy to say this from this space, talking from a certain distance from these processes and projects, I would say that the only opportunity to preserve this radicality is actually to offer something that cannot be captured and subsumed, something that puts antagonism at the centre of these projects. Of course, this is very easy to say, very difficult to do. I would say that these kinds of projects can only come from, and also trying to answer to one of your questions. What's the role of planners of the profession within these kinds of difficult dynamics?

I think that these kinds of more radical projects can only come from outside the profession. Understood as an institution, this doesn't mean that planners can't be part of these processes, but as I suggest in the conclusion of the book, and of course as Nitin mentioned, this is connecting with the tradition of radical planning, especially as framed by John Friedman.

Planners need to engage these kinds of projects. They need to learn the [unintelligible] of commoners, but within these projects, they're just another commoner. At most, they are people who have certain technical skills and can operate as mediators between communities or communes and public institutions, local state or whatever.

But I don't think that we are going to see any kind of really progressive transformation around these projects in initiatives, such as those we're witnessing in recent years. Where planners in cooperation with municipalities, try to promote commons, try to foster the development of commons in particular places, of course, always linked to strategies of urban regeneration.

And as you, Mara, have Explored in your research, and I show also, I hope, in the final chapter on Milan, this kind of experiences are very ephemeral. They come with final date in which they disappeared. They are dismantled. And normal urban development, "normal development" becomes dominant in these areas.

Once commoning strategies in previous phases have cleaned, revalorized these areas in the local imaginaries. Perhaps I'm a bit pessimistic in this case, but I don't think that we are going to see this kind of more radical and transformative developments initiated by planners or the state.

This doesn't mean that the state is not important or that planning is not important. I should say this because I say this several times throughout the book, and some people are saying that this is a book against planning. This is not a book against planning, among other things, because I think planning is too important to be left in the hands of elites and of certain groups. It's too important as well as the state, they have to be part of the picture. But in a very different kind of configuration that what we are used to see.

Finally, Nitin, thanks too for your comments. I'm happy to hear that you're finding these resonances with what's going on in India. Because this was actually part of the strategy in the selection of the cases. When I selected the cases, this may be worth dealing with in a

minute, I was trying to examine places that would have a meaning or that could resonate with other locations and processes and also ongoing processes, across the world today. And in order to do that, the strategy was to try to find places which were undergoing important transformative pressure that were immersed in these transitional stages. And what was important, the history of capitalism coinciding with the formation of new accumulation regimes in the sense that they are related to the renovation, the historical renovation of cycles of accumulation as discussed by the world systems, tradition and particularly joining a region.

So, the cases under scrutiny in the book are sites, places, and communities that are experiencing important developmental pressure and stress as a result of attempts by economic elites to gain international prominence, in other words, attempts to promote these spaces as new centres of the capitalist world economy.

So, my hope was that, of course, the case selection is restricted to Western countries, but my hope was that these examples would also resonate with other places that are experiencing the same kind of pressure. So, hearing that this might also be the case in India, not only in relation to what is going on in the first chapter of the book, but also in other chapters, Nitin was mentioning this attempt to transform certain places into global spots. And what that entails in terms of the pressure you have to put your population, society at large under, it was hopefully obvious.

Then your question about nomadic populations and pastoralisms, the opportunity to bring in a different ontology of space in a narrative, that will be awesome. I would say that this particular research project was about precisely the destruction of those kind of different ontologies. At some point, I mentioned this opportunity to relativize the centrality of property in our conceptions. Of course, we live in property centric societies and even the literature on commons has become very property centric at some point. And I agree with you that bringing in these kinds of different ontologies of the space where property is just a relative institution, which actual practices are put in question and problematized would be very interesting. I think that it would be a different type of book, I would say.

Also, because you have to take into account that even, you were mentioning, that this kind of non-sedentary practices are very widespread, you were mentioning, among others, Spain, but you have to take into account that even in those cases, especially when we're in contexts that have this longer trajectory of erasure of these kinds of practices. Even if they still exist, they exist within the narrow confines of property centric regimes, and they have accommodated within that kind of system. So even including the everyday lives of these shepherds and so on don't look like what they used to centuries ago. They've revolved around property in one way or another.

And the spaces they use, they're heavily regulated and also organized and systematized through a property lens by states. Difficult, but again, really interesting.

I was wondering if maybe we can, as I was saying, flip the conversation a little bit and I also address some questions to you, in relation to your own work and how it can resonate with the book.

Sai, you focused on chapter 1 of my book, which has strong parallels with yours, with your book and also with Nitin's research and filmmaking. And I was wondering, Sai, in your work, you describe how the urbanization of rural and agrarian land makes a profound impact on the social structures of these regions and also on governance structures as well. Looking towards the future and trying to find some realm of opportunity in here. I was wondering, you show in the book that in some cases these struggles become an opportunity for the emergence of new local institutions that try to counteract the progress of urbanization, or at least try to secure a more democratic inclusion of vulnerable groups in this process. And I was wondering, how do you see these sometimes very difficult and very aggressive processes of spatial and social restructuring? If you find some kind of room for opportunity in these processes, the opportunity of different social groups that are somehow re-articulated through the process of urbanization and how this may become an opportunity to build new alliances and coalitions, and for the emergence of this alternative, more democratic institutions to control these processes?

And Nitin, to remain within the case of India and in relation to chapter one of my book and your film. The other day, I was seeing "Not Just Roads", the documentary, which I recommend everyone to watch if they have the opportunity.

And at some point, I was, this is actually more implicit than explicit in the documentary. The fact that how these aggressive transformations are experienced on the ground by different groups, according to the temporality of the process. In the sense that for some groups, the process is happening too fast. For some others, the process is happening too slow. And this overlapping of different temporalities, I was wondering if, again, trying to find some positive side to this process, if this explosion of different temporalities and overlapping of different temporalities can work as an opportunity to find hopefully an appropriation of these processes from below and maybe also ground for new coalitions and alliances?

And then, Mara, you have done research in different parts of Europe, and I was actually going to direct more or less the same question you addressed to me a few minutes ago, to you. But trying to gain some insight from your experience in different sites, I have found that in recent years, maybe this is my impression or my perception, but I have found that in recent years we've lost some of the connections that were so evident in the 1990s and early 2000s between these different sites, across different states and nations and so on.

I have the impression that struggles surrounding these experiences, that we were talking about, have become very local. Of course, they are local, and they are entrenched in the local realm. But at the same time, I feel that we've lost this kind of more international or global perspective that used to be in the picture a couple of decades ago.

So, I was wondering if you see any opportunity to join the dots. You have experience in different parts of Europe, working with relatively similar collectives. Do you see any opportunity to transcend this local environment, trying to establish these broader international platforms that can benefit from the experience in their neighbourhoods, in their particular places?

[00:52:41] **Sai Balakrishnan:** So, Alvaro, one of the ways in which I'll start answering your question, and there are many parts to this, is while reading your book, how does reading about enclosures and primitive accumulation, how I read your book as someone who theorizes from South Asia. And I think this is a way of really bringing in a global comparative perspective, because India is not exotic, India is not unique, but the trajectories of capitalism are very different. Which means that enclosures and even primitive accumulation and dispossession is going to look very different in India.

When you start with the English enclosures, for instance, and this was what was prompting my question on the very specific historic trajectories of enclosures in different places. You know, the English enclosures, there was the trajectory of the enclosures of commoners getting dispossessed, being forced to move to industrialized cities, and then to really access their means of subsistence, including food through the wage nexus.

So, the category of the property-less proletariat becomes very important. And that's a very specific category that emerges out of a very specific enclosure movement in England during a particular moment. And of course, this itself has been criticized by feminist scholars because even Engels, when he's talking about organizing the working class in the factory, completely forgets the gendered labour of the social reproduction of the family by women.

So, there's a lot of feminist scholarship that's pushing back against this masculinist understanding of proletarian organizing in the factory. In India, just given the very different trajectory of capitalism, you know, we had a very severe COVID lockdown during the peak of COVID in March 2020.

And I've written about this, it happened soon after my book came out and I wrote about it. Most of the urban informal workers started moving back to their home villages. Because during a major crisis in India, and the COVID lockdown was one of the most major crises that we've had in decades.

During a major crisis, a plot of subsistence land in their village is their safety net. That offers the possibility of the social reproduction of labour. So, if you're going to look for enclosures in the form of the landless, only the landless, if you're going to look for enclosures, only in the form of a property-less working class, you're not going to find that in many places. So, enclosures and dispossession look very different. So, in other words, what you have in India, and of course, Rosa Luxemburg has written about this, it's not the complete subsumption of the capitalist outside. The capitalist outside in the form of the subsistence plot of land in the village is what enables capital accumulation within India's very uneven geographies of capitalism.

And again, you'd be able to understand this if you go back to the agrarian question in India, as it unfolded in India. So, this question of spaces of hope is, like I said, that's what's inspiring about your conclusion, because you actually give planners this very hopeful vocabulary. But in India, I would say that the social movements and even the political parties that are most effective are those who straddle the agrarian urban divide. For instance, there is a social movement called the National Alliance of People's Movements, a very, very well-organized social movement. They work both with rural communities that are facing agrarian distress as

well as the urban informal workers in the city. Because they recognize that agrarian dispossession and the urban informal economy are just two sides of the same coin. And the urban informal economy itself is a form of primitive accumulation. So I would say the spaces of hope really are the social movements that recognize how capitalism works so that you can organize across the urban rural divide.

[00:57:17] **Nitin Bathla:** I'm just going to pick up on Sai's comments. And I completely agree with Sai.

And I think that temporalities are sort of implicit within it, within this sort of unevenness. Now with the Bharatmala program, which I write about in the chapter of the book on territories of extended urbanisation that Christian Schmid was editing, in which I extend Sai's work and where Sai has left it in the previous program.

And then in the Bharatmala program, the ambition is to actually down some 100 new urban corridors across India. So, 44 primary and 66 inter corridors. And these actually encompass the whole country, but the temporalities are so different because of the unevenness in a grand reform. And the kind of urbanization patterns that came up on them.

You see a lot of material incompleteness with this sort of new corridor programs, but also massive projects like One Belt One Road, map out on the whole planetary space. And I've been discussing and engaging in experimental comparison with a certain collective called Urban Extensions Collective, where we came out with a paper and dialogues in human geography where we were talking about material incompleteness and forms of becoming. I've been looking at these highway corridors coming up in very distant hinterlands of India, in northern India, especially. And at times, the idea there is not to complete the project, but rather to speculate on the risks and leave things fallow and leave things untended.

So, the idea is to disrupt, but not complete. And the disruption is also not full, there's very interesting ways in which people avoid it. And, I mean, social movements and alliances are, of course, very, very sensitive and their sensorium extend much beyond ours. And they always spot these things out and they're always very attentive to them.

So, I would concur with Sai, that's where the spaces of hope lie for me also.

[00:59:33] **Mara Ferreri:** So, moving back to the boring northern hemisphere and Europe and our kind of advanced capitalist, ingrained capitalist urbanization processes. I wanted to go back to this question of creativity before I answer Álvaro's question.

A few years back, I published an ephemera, an article titled: "The seductions of temporary urbanism". And for me, there is a question there around a societal and cultural shift. And I'm talking clearly from quite a Eurocentric view or perhaps Northern American, quite a Western viewpoint around precisely that front stage taken by creative professions and creative practices, and this just goes beyond the creative class, but it definitely comes hand in hand with a restructuring of industrial production and a sort of a marginalization or invisibilization of cultural production. The strong link between urbanization, urban life, urbanity, and creativity.

And I think there's something there which goes to the core of these contradictions and these ambiguities that capitalism is always generating and profiting from, that very much has to do with the elevation of the possibility of creativity for largest weights of the population in certain areas of the world, while at the same time that process also accompanying a precarization of those same populations.

And I think this to me is important because many of the urban professions, but also the artistic and cultural professions that had historically been in the orbit of the elites. In the post war, I suppose economic boom of many of the European countries and western countries had become democratized to some extent.

And so, when we are coming to the creative city as a model and seductiveness of that idea of creativity, that, I think, *ReNudo* and *Autonomia* was beginning to see in the 1970s in Italy. There is also the formation of new subjects that enter this space of creativity and enter it in a way that, perhaps for the first time, also marked that separation between other generations in Italy.

I'm specifically now thinking about Italy. So the first generation moving to cities, first generations going to university that also generated this reflection on what type of creativity or what type of professionalization could exist and I'm raising this because I think this has come on the one hand, of course, we have *Autonomia's* position or a sort of a position around the widespread creativity and creativity being one of the commons, to be produced not in this hyper artistic or professionalized way, but on the other hand, clearly the way in which capitalist formats of extractivism and recodification of this objectivity has taken place is through the myth of individual creativity.

So, there is a de-collectivization of creativity, which goes hand in hand with a flattering, I suppose, of these new subjectivities around the idea of the myths of the individual creator. And perhaps to come to responding to your question, there's definitely been a loss of recognition of social reproduction, because that idea of creativity comes with certain elite differentiation and certain separation and loss of skills and loss of that ability to sustain itself by some populations.

But I would also say that particularly after the global financial crisis, there has been a resurgence of a thinking around the precarization of livelihoods. Also, for those who technically should belong to the creative classes. And I'm using this term with many inverted commas here.

And so, I think there is a degree of radicality, which is re-emerging precisely from this breach and this clear contradiction that is experienced, particularly in urban centres. And I'm not talking here about little enclaves near rurals, people returning to the land and doing some kind of middle-class projects.

I'm talking about a withdrawal of labour or a withdrawal of labour from certain kinds of reproductions, which also, however, is still caught into the seduction of these visions of these ideas of the city and urbanity. So how do you create alliances in this case? And I think much of that has to pass through a reformulation and a repurposing of that subjectivity around creativity itself and around creative labour.

And I think, at least in my more recent work, not so much about temporary urbanism, but more on housing and housing struggles and housing organizing, what I've seen is, is that the ways in which material conditions have transformed themselves particularly in core urban areas has really given a rise to a profound rethinking around property, around collectivization of forms of reproduction of livelihoods. And it's true that perhaps we're not at that kind of 1990s, early 2000 type of internationalization of these struggles. However, I'm just mindful of organizations such as the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City, as well as many other movements for the right to the city, for the right to housing.

But also, for alternatives, which are in a sense anti-capitalist in nature, quite explicitly, that try to address questions of social reproduction through forms of decommodification of property and housing. And here I'm thinking about all the movement, for instance, for forms of cooperativism that are not through individual property ownership, but through common ownership, and I know that, again, I'm talking about here what, Álvaro, you mentioned in the conclusion is these cloistered enclaves of self-absorbed radicality.

So I'm trying to say, well true, there is some of that for sure, but the research I've been involved in also as an ally of planners and architects, for example in Catalonia around the development of *Cooperativas en cesión de uso*, so the types of undivided property cooperatives that just did not exist a decade ago is, I think, an indication of this reflection, and it's an indication that is reclaiming centrality. Not centrality in terms of just city centres but centrality in terms of recentring forms of livelihood in cities and in urban areas, are rethinking around, for instance gender inequalities within the home in relation to neighbourhoods and what I've found and I am hopeful about is that many of these experiences are spreading. And I'm seeing that, not so much in Italy at the moment, although something is also emerging here, but conversations are happening in Portugal are happening in Greece are happening in the Balkans around trying to reclaim different understandings of dwelling.

Based on forms of decommodification, and I know that cooperativism is something that emerges over and over in the book. And I think, in that sense, it was a very interesting *trait d'union*, across the different chapters.

And maybe just to end on the fact that some of these are definitely going through a reclaiming of planning and are reclaiming of housing policy, so are reclaiming of the role of state planning, also in the allocation of land, in the allocation of resources and again, I think it's central, it's important to reinstate that this is not a book against planning, but it's a book that tries to sort of trace that potential path and that futurity that, Sai, you were also mentioning at the beginning. We are concerned with a different future as well.

[01:07:42] **Sai Balakrishnan:** Like I said, the conclusion is it's really a, very inspiring, radical manifesto. When I was just talking about NAPM, the National Alliance of People's Movements, and really their ability to transgress the agrarian urban divide. On page 225, and you should read some paragraphs from your conclusion, and I hope I'm not stealing your thunder, Álvaro, but there's this really wonderful series of sentences, where you're speaking to precisely that. Where you say: "the highly fractured landscapes of contemporary surplus

populations", and that's crucial, many of these people have nowhere to go. They're not going to get absorbed into any meaningful work. "and these are mosaics of national and transnational proletariats and casualized workers, displaced peasants and indigenous communities, a lumpen precariat of informal and undocumented laborers". And this is precisely the surplus population that Nitin and I were talking about in the context of post-colonial democracies like India. And Álvaro writes: "the power to transform planning lies in new local and regional compositions of these groups". Which I think is a really, really important insight.

[01:09:01] **Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago:** Just to add to this latter comment by Sai. Yes, but how to do that, it brings us to the problem of the coalition of peripheries, how to bring together these peripheries and these surplus populations is the old problem.

I wish our friend, Stefan Kipfer was here, who knows a bit about, has written a bit about these processes. Especially as discussed by anti-colonial thinkers and [unintelligible] and so on.

[01:09:32] **Nitin Bathla:** Thanks Álvaro. All right. So maybe we wrapped the conversation there. Thanks Álvaro. Thanks Sai. Thanks Mara. Thanks for this conversation.

It was really great and very generative. I learned quite a few things. Thank you.

[01:09:44] **Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago:** Thank you. Thank you all. And I will be thanking you for a long time, I guess. Thank you for taking time to read the book and for providing such wonderful feedback.

[01:09:55] **Mara Ferreri:** Thank you for the invitation. It's been really fantastic.

This book has accompanied me on many journeys in the last couple of months. So, I've been carrying it around and annotating it.

[01:10:05] **Sai Balakrishnan:** Thanks so much, everyone.

[01:10:07] **Outro:** Thanks to you for listening.

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