The Brutal Energy of the Capitalist City: a review of Carving Out the Commons

Amanda’s book is a much-needed, compellingly-told narrative of activism in the face of capitalist violence in urban housing markets, told through stories of successful efforts at self-determination by opting out of one of the most aggressively-capitalist housing markets in the country. Indeed, opting out seems too tame a term for the processes this book helps us to understand. Its case studies on limited equity housing cooperatives, or LECs, in Washington, D.C. present a challenge to the presumed totality of the typical rent or private property relations in cities. The book undermines that presumption by re-examining urban land not as an object of capitalism, but as a potential object of commoning, and by demonstrating that land is a keystone in maintaining capitalist urban arrangements, that securing land tenure outside of a capitalist framework affords a range of options for further amplifying the non-capitalist possibilities of urban life beyond housing. I found the book theoretically provocative, raising a number of important challenges in its efforts to develop a theory of urban commons vis-a-vis capitalism by drawing on Community Economies and other commons literature. Especially instructive for me was Amanda’s theoretical unification of institutionalist commons studies, which she considers to be generally ahistorical and apolitical, with the alterglobalization literature, which she says often focuses on political critique at the expense of the specific practices that produce and maintain commons themselves.

On that note, the book felt in some ways like getting back to the roots of the Community Economies project by looking at how power—either to common or to enclose—is constituted. I especially saw this in Amanda’s call for greater historicization of commons “on the ground”, and her argument, following the alterglobalizationists, that commons aren’t given, but must be
created, which she carries through her narrative of housing coops’ struggle to thrive within a field of power that privileges capitalist arrangements over others.

But my role in this short essay, as I see it, is not just to praise but to critique, though my critique is the very same one that has been leveled against my own work at various points, and which I thought at the time missed the mark. So I offer it here as a sympathetic ally.

In my reading, I thought there was a bit of a mismatch in the book’s development of the case study and its theoretical chapters, in which Amanda develops her contribution to a theory of urban commons. Specifically, I wondered if the book’s theorization of the intersection of LECs and a capitalist real-estate market, and more broadly the capitalist urban economy, is too politically constraining.

The book largely frames cooperative housing efforts in terms of resistance to and activity within a capitalist market. For instance, at one point, the book describes LECs as commons that are “enacted within capitalism”, a statement that connects to arguments made elsewhere in the book that urban commons are always contingent on the limitations and challenges posed by overarching capitalist structures, precisely because they exist within the capitalist city. This made me wonder if there a danger in theorizing urban commons as a product of the urban process, particularly when that process is understood as already-capitalist. For me, this called to mind Gibson-Graham’s caution about framing efforts to enact non-capitalist arrangements against a backdrop of capitalism, as well as Kate Derickson’s advocacy of “an epistemological posture that aims to produce knowledge about life in cities and the processes of urbanization that are not understood in relation to trajectories of capitalist urbanization.” This is a posture that seeks to
understand urbanization “from below” to use Derickson’s language, rather than from above, an approach that Huron herself advocates.

Yet, while Amanda explores co-ops “from below”, in my reading it often retains an analysis of capitalism “from above”. The book does an admirable job of excavating the work required to build commons, but does not give similar treatment to the work required to maintain the capitalist city. Though the narrative makes reference to the difficulties of maintaining co-ops within the context of capitalism, capitalism often remains merely context, lurking outside of the story, and we never really see how, exactly, capitalism itself is constituted. Instead, we only see its effects — the requirements imposed by low-wage labor, the barriers to accessing capitalist housing markets, and so on. I realize that Amanda’s intent was probably not to write a book in which capitalist practices are foregrounded, and instead wanted to keep the emphasis on urban commons and the people who maintain them. But in keeping the focus off of the constitution of capitalist arrangements, capitalism becomes in many respects the backdrop against which cooperative struggles are staged but can never directly confront, precisely because we never see where or how capitalism itself is reproduced.

What I’m really asking here is, with such a vivid description of the constitution of commons, what does this framing of urban capitalism get us, in terms of an analysis of a problem to which LECs are part of the solution? If the urban is a consequence of capitalism, what does it mean to develop a theory of urban commons as endemic to the capitalist urban condition?

The book ends with major questions about the durability of LECs. What hopes do LECs have in the face of the ever-expanding power of capitalist forces in the city? In this way, the book’s theorization of urban capitalism leads to a narrative in which LECs are ever-more
desperately needed, but whose success is ever more unlikely. That seems to me to be precisely the kind of position Gibson-Graham had hoped to avoid when they asked “How do we get out of this capitalist place?” and which Ananya Roy sympathetically laments in post-colonial literature that retains the violence of colonialism as central to its account. To paraphrase Roy and adapt her critique here, I sometimes struggled to read Huron’s argument as a reversal of capitalist power, because, theoretically speaking, it often took for granted what Roy might call the brutal energy of the capitalist city (adapted from Roy 2011, cited in Derickson 2016). At times, though certainly not always, the book’s theoretical framing risks reifying urban capitalism as an indomitable force, even as it offers such a clear and well-documented example to the contrary. In my reading of the book’s case study chapters, LECs are able to produce new economic spaces based on a different economic logic precisely because capitalism was not a coherent, ever-present force, and because the city is more than the consequence of capitalist accumulation. Which isn’t to say there aren’t powerful, countervailing capitalist forces at work. Capitalist housing markets are obviously comparatively stable, fortified, and defended by a diverse range of well-placed actors. But to treat them as coherent, consistent, or given perhaps risks undermining the political potential of alternative strategies like LECs.

I want to conclude by saying that I fear I’ve overstated my criticisms for the sake of clarity, and that I find this book to be an important contribution to a broader effort to theorize urban commons in opposition to what is usually a capitalocentric vision that dominates so much of urban geography. It offers a clear demonstration of why survival in a deeply unequal society is best understood as a political struggle over the social arrangements that constitute the urban sphere, which is a message that I think needs to be documented and amplified. So I reiterate my
hope that my comments aren’t read as a foundational critique, but as an effort to continue to develop a vision of urban life beyond capitalism.