

Table of Contents

The accumulation of the wretched 1

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ByPepe Escobar

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BOOK REVIEW

Planet of Slums by Mike Davis

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SAO PAULO - Pentagon planners must have loved what happened in South America's premier hypercity in the past few days; as urban warfare goes, it was more illuminating than Baghdad or Gaza. The leaders of the First Capital Command (PCC, for Primeiro Comando da Capital) - a super-gang involved in drug and arms trafficking, kidnappings, bank robberies and extortion and controlling most of Sao Paulo's overcrowded and notoriously corrupt prisons - declared war against Brazil's wealthiest state.

From inside their prison cells, using US\$150 mobile phones, they ordered motorcyclist "bin Ladens" - warriors indebted to the PCC, heavily armed with guns, shotguns, hand grenades, machine-guns and Molotov cocktails - to conduct a violent orgy: spraying police cars with bullets, hurling grenades at police stations, attacking officers in their homes and after-hours hangouts, torching dozens of buses (after passengers had been ordered off), and robbing banks. Almost 100 people were killed in three days. On Monday, the PCC managed single-handedly virtually to paralyze Sao Paulo, the third-largest of the world's hypercities (those with more than 19 million people).

The PCC leaders were demanding better jail conditions; and crucially - as this is soccer-mad Brazil - a few dozen television sets so inmates can follow the World Cup in Germany next month. Sooner or later, with better coordination, demonstrations of force like this one will inevitably spread to Rio de Janeiro's slums, also a drug-dealing beehive. Brazil's mega-cities are used to urban civil war. And the war has been on since at least the late 1970s. "Baghdad is here" has become a common mantra.

Mike Davis, one of the United States' premier urban theorists and analysts of urban hell, author of *City of Quartz* and *Dead Cities*, should have been watching Sao Paulo's civil war first-hand; this is everything the future predicted in his remarkable new book is all about, the slums of the world's mega-cities rebelling against the state. We're heading toward a world where "cities will account for virtually all future world population growth, which is expected to peak at about 10 billion in 2050".

Already the combined populations of China, India and Brazil roughly equal that of Western Europe and North America. By 2025, Asia will have at least 10 hypercities, including Jakarta (24.9 million people), Dhaka (25 million), Karachi (26.5 million), Shanghai (27 million) and Mumbai (with a staggering 33 million). Davis also refers to the coming leviathan of the Rio/Sao Paulo Extended Metropolitan Region, a 450-kilometer-long axis between the two Brazilian mega-cities already encompassing 37 million people, even more than the Tokyo-Yokohama conurbation (33 million).

Davis sees the future as a realist, not as an apocalyptic visionary: "This great dragon-like sprawl of cities will constitute the physical and demographic culmination of millennia of urban evolution. The ascendancy of coastal East Asia, in turn, will surely promote a Tokyo-Shanghai 'world city' dipole to equal the New York-London axis in the control of global flows of capital and information."

But most of all, the dire consequences of the hypercity explosion will be inevitable: appalling inequality within and between cities and, as far as China is concerned, the terror gripping their urban experts - the unbridgeable gap between small inland cities and coastal hypercities. Nobody yet has examined in full the implications of China ceasing to be the predominantly rural society it has been for millennia.

What we already have in the early 21st century, in rich as well as poor countries, is a new paradigm coined by German architect and urban theorist Thomas Sieverts: the Zwischenstadt ("in-between city"). Referring to Indonesia, Davis points out the advanced rural/urban hybridization of "Jabotabek", the Greater Jakarta region. "Researchers call these novel land-use patterns *desakotas* ('city villages') and argue whether they are transitional landscapes or a dramatic new species of urbanism," he writes.

As Davis points out with glee, "Eighty percent of [Karl] Marx's industrial proletariat now lives in China or somewhere outside of Western Europe and the US." Most are ready to explode. This accumulation of the wretched has been enhanced by "policies of agricultural deregulation and financial discipline enforced by the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and World Bank" that spawned "an exodus of surplus rural labor to urban slums even as cities ceased to be job machines". So this "over-urbanization" was driven "by the reproduction of poverty, not by the supply of jobs".

This is one of the unexpected tracks down which a neo-liberal world order is shunting the future. Davis proves his point by quoting an array of United Nations data, from the 16.4% annual growth rate of Sao Paulo favelas (slums) in the 1990s to the 200,000 floaters (unregistered rural workers) who arrive annually in Beijing or the 500,000 who migrate annually to Delhi (of these, 80% end up in slums). Davis dedicates a whole chapter - "SAPing the Third World" - to examining the dire consequences of the dreaded, one-size-fits-all, IMF-imposed "structural adjustment programs" (SAPs).

Abandon all hope those who dream about the glamorously high-tech cities of the future. They will be largely constructed of "crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the urban 21st century squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay". To see it live, right now, one just has to drive by Kolkata, Mumbai, Manila, Jakarta, Cairo, Changing or Sao Paulo.

According to UN-HABITAT figures, most places with the world's largest percentages of slum-dwellers are in Asia: Afghanistan (98.5%) and Nepal (92%). Mumbai holds the dubious record of being the slum capital of the world - as many as 12 million squatters - followed by Mexico City and Dhaka and then Lagos, Cairo, Karachi, Kinshasa-Brazzaville, Sao Paulo, Shanghai and Delhi.

Exclusion, of course, is the norm, as this correspondent, who has lived and worked in many a teeming, vast, messy hypercity in the developing world, can attest. Mumbai is a classic case, as Davis quotes research according to which the rich own 90% of the land, while the poor are overcrowded in the remaining 10%. "These polarized patterns of land use and population density recapitulate older logics of imperial control and racial dominance. Throughout the Third World, post-colonial cities have inherited and greedily reproduced the physical footprints of segregated colonial cities ... despite the rhetoric of national liberation and social justice."

As far as exclusion is concerned, Davis could not but refer to the most Orwellian "urban beautification" program in Asia - the preparation for Visit Myanmar Year 1996 undertaken by the junta that rules Myanmar. "One and a half million residents - an incredible 16% of the total urban population - were removed from their homes ... and shipped out to hastily constructed bamboo-and-thatch huts in the urban periphery, now creepily renamed the 'New Fields', thus leading to Rangoon [Yangon] being transformed into 'a nightmare combination of a Buddhist tourist wonderland, a giant barracks and a graveyard'."

Another crucial process, the criminalization of the slum - as it happened, among other examples, in Rio and Jakarta - runs parallel to what Davis describes as the "explosive growth of exclusive, closed suburbs on the peripheries of Third World cities. Chinese urban designer Pu Miao has called this 'the most significant development in recent urban planning and design'."

Gated-community heaven - be it in Beijing or Sao Paulo, Bangkok or Manila, Bangalore or Cairo - is an "off world", and Davis is happy to borrow the terminology from the film Blade Runner. These replica southern Californias are also the epitome of an "architecture of fear", as Nigerian researcher Tunde Agbola, quoted by Davis, defines fortified lifestyle in Lagos. Davis correctly points out that its most extreme forms are "in large urban societies with the greatest socio-economic inequalities: South Africa, Brazil, Venezuela and the US".

It is indeed a "culture of the absurd" - as every upper-middle-class condo in Sao Paulo comes with armed guards, banks of closed-circuit-television cameras, electrified wiring connected with emergency alarms and sometimes connected to "armed response" security companies. Rich and poor, in this environment, rarely intersect. It's what some Brazilian writers call "the return to the medieval city". Gated-community heaven, as reached by the upwardly mobile in the developing world, elevates them, in Davis's words, into "fortified, fantasy-themed enclaves and edge cities, disembedded from their own social landscapes but integrated into globalization's cyber-California floating in the digital ether". The whole thing also means the death of civil society as we know it.

All over the world, hundreds of millions survive by juggling within the so-called "informal sector". Davis agrees with an array of multinational researchers: the rise of the informal sector is a direct byproduct of neo-liberal policies. Some Brazilian sociologists, as Davis points out, call the process "passive proletarianization". According to the UN, informal workers already constitute "two-thirds of the economically active population of the developing world".

In Latin America, the informal economy already supplies four out of five "new jobs". In the end Davis cannot but mock development aid bureaucrats and their air-conditioned utopian vision of slums as Strategic Low-income Urban Management Systems (SLUMS). There's nothing romantic about Varanasi, the "world capital of enslaved and exploited children", or the 200,000-plus rickshawallahs of Dhaka - "the unsung Lance Armstrongs of the Third World" earning about \$1 for pedaling at least 60km every day.

Davis saves the best for last - the chapter titled "Down Vietnam Street". Reflecting reality in the streets of the world's hypercities, where the permanently redundant masses will never stand a chance of being included in socio-economic terms, he writes that "the late capitalist triage of humanity, then, has already taken place". The enterprising Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has also reached the same conclusion, he notes, as a 2002 report stressed that already by the late 1990s "a staggering 1 billion workers representing one-third of the world's labor force, most of them in the South, were either unemployed or underemployed".

Davis remembers how the administration of US president John Kennedy "officially diagnosed Third World revolutions as 'diseases of modernization' and prescribed - in addition to Green Berets and B-52s - ambitious land reforms and housing programs". Everyone living in Latin America in the 1960s remembers the dreaded Alliance for Progress - advertised US-style as a sort of Marshall Plan that would "lift pan-American living standards to southern European, if not gringo, levels". The results were disastrous, just as the heavily advertised UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will not be met. Davis quotes the UN's Human Development Report 2004, which warns that measuring by recent "progress", sub-Saharan Africa will not reach most of these goals "until well into the 22nd century".

So we're left with repression - the definitive neo-liberal paradigm, a literal "Great Wall" of high-tech border repression trying to suppress migration to rich countries - as in the conservative US vis-a-vis Mexico and Central America and the European Union vis-a-vis the Maghreb. Meanwhile, slum populations, according to UN-HABITAT, will keep growing at least by 25 million people a year.

Squattable land is eroding. So welcome to "the radical new face of inequality", as Davis put it, "a grim human world largely cut off from the subsistence solidarities of the countryside as well as disconnected from the cultural and political life of the traditional city". This is the edge of the abyss, the new Babylon; and its inhabitants more than ever will include the young, dispossessed neo-terrorists who attacked Casablanca in May 2003 as well as the motorized "bin Ladens" attacking Sao Paulo police only a few days ago.

As much as he can't stand the IMF-World Bank "development" crowd, Davis's post-modern neo-realism has no time for "portentous post-Marxist speculations" like Toni Negri's "multitudes" acting in "rhizomatic spaces". This book is as much a scholarly effort - grounded in solid research ranging from urban-planning papers to the general media - as a cry of alarm. Davis presents the intractable problems but also sets the stage for finding solutions - the subject of his next book, to be written alongside Forrest Hylton, on the history and future of slum-based resistance to global capitalism. The only thing missing would be Davis himself spending more time in the developing world's hypercities and adding an element of reportage to his theoretical tour de force.

It may be an apocalyptic urban background that virtually no politicians, corporate types or think-tank "experts" ever visit - but this is real life, not virtual reality. As Davis correctly puts it, "the rulers' imagination ... seems to falter before the obvious implications of a world of cities without jobs". Thus the French elite's perplexity with the Paris banlieues on fire late last year, the US perplexity with the dispossessed becoming Salafi jihadis in the outskirts of Istanbul, Cairo, Karachi and Casablanca, the Brazilian authorities' impotence facing street gangs and narcotrafficantes.

For the powers that be, the easiest way out is to demonize. Thus the "war on terror", the "war on drugs" and the obliteration of any serious and honest debate about the unspeakable daily violence of perpetual economic exclusion. Davis sums it all up thusly: "The categorical criminalization of the urban poor is a self-fulfilling prophecy, guaranteed to shape a future of endless war in the streets." And this is happening while virtually nobody in positions of political power is examining the terrifying geopolitical implications of a planet of slums.

So back to the standing order - to repress, repress, repress. Davis embarks on a short, brilliant analysis of the Pentagon's take on global urban poverty. He inevitably has to talk about MOUT - Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain. As the journal of the Army War College declared, Davis quotes, "The future of warfare lies in the streets, sewers, highrise buildings and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world." The Santa Monica, California-based Rand Corporation - which helped to set strategy for the Vietnam War in the 1960s - has added a little more concept to MOUT.

Rand has concluded that the urbanization of world poverty has produced "the urbanization of insurgency"; insurgents are "following their followers into the cities, setting up 'liberated zones' in urban shantytowns". The Rand experts are obviously talking about Baghdad's Sadr City - one of the world's largest slums - where the young and the wretched join Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army to make life hell for the American occupier (no wonder Sadr City's squalid main boulevard is nicknamed "Vietnam Street").

But the Rand crowd could also be talking about the drug-infested slums of Sao Paulo, where "faculties" are prisons dominated by the PCC, monthly contributions by members - ranging from \$25 to \$250 - finance drug trafficking, prison exchange and attacks, and "bin Ladens" have either to fulfill their mission and pay their debt to the organization, scoring points with the criminal elite, or they become traitors to the "Party of Crime".

So this is the way the world ends: not with a whimper, but with bang after bang, the "homeland" cities of the world crouching in their defense against "forces of darkness", or the "axis of evil", or "terrorists", Islamic and otherwise, who threaten the "free world".

"Night after night, hornet-like helicopter gunships stalk enigmatic enemies in the narrow streets of the slum districts ... every morning the slums reply with suicide bombers and eloquent explosions." It's happening right now, over there in Baghdad and over here, in the vast, messy hypercity of Sao Paulo. Welcome to the (overcrowded) Dome of Hell - and this one is not digital, it's the real thing.

Planet of Slums by Mike Davis. Verso, 2006. ISBN 1-84467-022-8. Price US\$24, 256 pages hardcover.