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# 21st Century Noir

By Iain Boal

Urban analyst Mike Davis' bleak prognosis for the future of the city in his article Planet of the Slums has catalysed much discussion and helped spark this issue of Mute. Here, Iain Boal reviews Davis' book-length study of the same name

*While crews were still excavating the remains of dead firefighters and stockbrokers from the crater that was once the World Trade Center, the Larsen B ice shelf in Antarctica suddenly collapsed. Sixty stories thick and covering more than 1300 square miles, the shelf had survived every warm pulse since the end of the Pleistocene. Yet in a mere few weeks, it pulverised – like a window hit by a cannonball – into thousands of iceberg shards... We don't need Derrida to know which way the wind blows or why the pack ice is disappearing.– Mike Davis, postscript to 'Strange Times Begin' [1]*

To anyone inside, and to many beyond, what passes for the radical academy, this is the unmistakable voice of Mike Davis, anatomist-in-chief of what Naomi Klein has dubbed 'disaster capitalism'.

His dispatch from post-Katrina New Orleans – a powerful blend of vivid reportage and trenchant analysis – was vintage Davis. It is hard to think of anyone else with his ability to jump scale so tellingly from the micro-topographies of class and race to the hydrometeorology of the Mexican Gulf. Davis' bulletins from the disaster zones of modernity are beacons in a dark time.

He announced his arrival as a writer with a remarkable three-part essay, composed in the mid-1980s, which appeared as the front half of his first book, Prisoners of the American Dream. The essay, 'Labour and American Politics' is still an essential synopsis for students of the history of the American working class. When, four years later, Davis published his noir history of Los Angeles, City of Quartz was immediately recognised as a modern classic in urban studies, even if LA boosters resented his muckraking and called him a pornographer of apocalypse. Davis made even his friends nervous when he quite seriously proposed, in Ecology of Fear, to 'let Malibu burn', on the grounds that it was a natural fire corridor that would inevitably burn anyway and that anything else amounted to a massive hidden subsidy to entertainment industry plutocrats. Kevin Starr, the dean of California historians, proclaimed that fifty years ago Davis would have made a good priest, but that 'If he doesn't watch it, he'll become a crank'. The Monster at Our Door, Davis's recent book on the likelihood of an avian flu pandemic under prevailing conditions of poultry capitalism in Asia, probably confirmed Starr in his judgment. The cover art may have verged on parody, but the analysis inside is rooted in a materialist account of the factors now favouring the lethal evolution of the H5N1 virus.

It is now over a decade since Davis, in his contribution to an eco-socialist forum convened on the UC Santa Cruz campus by the economist James 'Crisis' O'Connor, turned his attention to the emerging mega-slums of the global south. He called them, 'sociologically, UFOs'. Davis was pushing into new territory for a Californian urbanist, far removed from the lilywhite utopianism of an Ernest Callenbach dreaming of a green Berkeley, with the ghettos of Oakland and Richmond nowhere to be seen.

A significant pair of closely related words – derived from the Latin adjective urbanus – entered the English language simultaneously at the beginning of the 17th century. The historical identification of 'urban' with 'urbane' may not survive contact with the developments portrayed in Davis' latest work. If urbanity seems outdated, even residual, it turns out that the career of 'urban' is only just beginning.

Planet of Slums is the opening salvo of a large project first announced in a manifesto with the same title published in *New Left Review* 26 in the spring of 2004. In that landmark essay Mike Davis laid out the rationale for an urbanism adequate to the 21st century. Davis opened with two striking observations – that worldwide, for the first time in human history, there are now more people living in cities than in the countryside; and secondly, because the global hinterland has reached its maximum population, all future growth in the number of humans will happen in cities.

What makes these milestones ominous as well as striking is a third observation – that ‘95 percent of this final buildout of humanity will occur in the urban areas of developing countries’. The context, in other words, is military neoliberalism and the policies (‘There is No Alternative’) pursued by the specialists in immiseration belonging to the IMF/World Bank/US Treasury nexus. The result is, and will be, ‘gigantic concentrations of poverty’.

Davis acknowledges the work of Jan Breman (*The Labouring Poor in India*, Oxford, 2003) and Jeremy Seabrook (*In the Cities of the South*, Verso, 1996) as models of the new urbanism, and in the immediate background, both as stimulus and framework, UN-Habitat’s report *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*. Davis uses these three texts as lodestars to navigate the virtually uncharted world of the new mega-cities. He is a master of the astounding statistic: who would possibly have guessed that 85 percent of the urban residents of the developing world ‘occupy property illegally’.

We have to wait, however, until the final chapter, ‘A Surplus Humanity?’, to find the conceptual centre of Planet of Slums. In what amounts to a research programme for critical urbanism in the 21st century, Davis frames it by drawing a theoretical connection to the 19th century city. He posits that the recent growth of a vast global informal proletariat living in the new slum-world is undergoing a process of ‘urban involution’. This is by analogy with Clifford Geertz’s notion of ‘agricultural involution’ describing the spiral of labour self-exploitation in the Indonesian countryside in the early 1960s. Davis suggests that the potential for urban involution existed among the displaced peasantries of the 19th century European industrial revolutions, but the rise of mega-Dublins was prevented by mass emigration to the settler societies of the western hemisphere and Siberia. Today, surplus labour faces hardened borders, making large-scale migrations impossible; slums become sinks of human labour and are the only ‘solution’ to the warehousing of the surplus humanity produced by the structural adjustment programs of the IMF. These settlements have, says Davis the ironist, ‘a brilliant future’, and will contain perhaps 20 billion people by the year 2030. Davis the Marxist ponders the historical fate of ‘this fastest growing and most unprecedented social class on earth.’ He muses: ‘To what extent does an informal proletariat possess that most potent of Marxist talismans: “historical agency”?...Or is some new, unexpected historical subject, à la Hardt and Negri, slouching toward the supercity?’

These questions drive to the heart of the Marxist imaginary and its view of human agency in contrast to the traditional anarchist faith in autonomy – the inertness of the masses versus the self-activity of the populus. Although he has previously called for a re-visiting of the anarchist urbanism of figures like Pietr Kropotkin and Patrick Geddes (given the mostly disastrous record of 20th century liberal-Keynesian and Stalinist city-planning), Davis the Ironic Marxist, in the chapter on ‘Illusions of Self-Help’, really puts the boot into John Turner, disciple of Geddes and erstwhile contributor to *Freedom*, the journal founded by Kropotkin. Turner, an arts-and-crafts-inspired architect (his grandfather had worked with William Morris, and May Morris was his mother’s godparent), had an epiphany after the big Peruvian earthquake of 1958, when he saw the results of facilitating communal self-help in the *barriadas* of Arequipa. Later, in 1976, the year of the first UN-Habitat conference, Turner published the fruits of his long experience with poor city-dwellers in *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*. Its message turned out to be congenial to the agenda of

Robert McNamara at the World Bank, or as Davis puts it, Turner ‘was mesmerised by the creative genius he discerned at work in squatter housing ...[and his] core program of self-help, incremental construction, and legalisation of spontaneous urbanisation was exactly the kind of pragmatic cost-effective approach to the urban crisis that McNamara favored.’ (p.71-2) However naïve or complicit or undialectical Turner may have been – and Davis does not hesitate to call his case an ‘intellectual marriage’ between anarchism and neoliberalism – it was certainly not the first or last time that a radical programme has been suborned. (‘Flexible hours’ was once a demand of radical feminists; ‘We’ll give you flexi-time’, said Business, ‘all of it!’ And Marxists, shall we say, hardly have an unblemished record in the matter of collaboration with ruling powers.) Still, the essential point is that opponents of capitalism’s life-world – whether they fly a red or a black flag – face a truly serious task, to theorise afresh popular agency in conditions of late modernity, and to understand why we find ourselves, as Retort put it in *Afflicted Powers*, ‘living in an age defined by a terrible atavism – a plunging backward into forms of ideological and geo-political struggle that call to mind now the Scramble for Africa, now the Wars of Religion.’ (p.14)

Certainly Marx and Engels would have been surprised by the decline of secular radicalism. For the moment at least, notes Davis, Marx has yielded the historical stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost. The rise of militant Islam and Pentecostal Christianity is only one of many striking features of the social ecology of the slumworld. Davis systematically skewers the regnant myths about the world’s informal working class; urban studies at this level is now, it seems, theoretically bankrupt. The De Soto vision of bootstrap capitalism, of the global informal sector as ‘a frenzied beehive’ of micro-entrepreneurs – a view which underpins the World Bank/IMF/NGO strategy of the transubstantiation of poverty into capital – is predicated on a raft of false premises. In reality: De Soto’s heroic voluntary micro-entrepreneurs are mostly displaced public sector workers forced into sub-subsistence; most participants in the informal economy are not, as imagined, self-employed but work for someone else – via, for example, the consignment of goods or the rental of a pushcart or rickshaw; there is growing inequality within the informal sector as well as between it and the formal sector; informality ensures extreme abuse of women and children; the informal economy generates jobs by fragmenting existing work and thus subdividing incomes (the ‘urban involution’ phenomenon); slum-dwellers turn in vast numbers to quasi-magical wealth appropriation, such as lotteries, pyramid schemes and religious devotion; micro-credit and cooperative lending initiatives have become ‘something of an urban cargo cult among well-meaning NGOs’ but they have little macro impact on the reduction of poverty, even in Dhaka, home of the Grameen Bank;[2] increasing competition within the informal sector is dissolving self-help networks and social solidarities essential to the survival of the very poor; the rise of the informal sector goes hand-in-hand with the growth in ethno-religious or sectarian violence.

It is no surprise, as Davis notes, that this last development has drawn the attention of the Pentagon, whose neo-Orientalist consultants and wargamers are assuming that the slum outskirts of ‘feral, failed cities’ of the Third World will be ‘the distinctive battlespace of the twenty-first century’.

As if suspicious of his own attraction to the overdrawn and the terminal, and in this indispensable book to what might be called ‘demographic reductionism’ – whereby myriads of flesh-and-blood humans become pulverised into the dramatic statistics of poverty and immiseration, ‘an existential ground zero beyond which there are only death camps, famine, and Kurtzian horror’ – Davis closes *Planet of Slums* on the promise of a companion volume (co-authored with Forrest Hylton) whose topic will be ‘the history and future of slum-based resistance to global capitalism’. That book will no doubt contain tales of heroic improvisation against tremendous odds, and insist on the role of human agency. (There is after all plenty of material fast accruing at the sites of Forrest Hylton’s courageous dispatches and field work – Bolivia and the Andean region.)

And yet the book that Davis is really preparing to write will demand that extraordinary jumping of scale in time and space that is the Davis hallmark, thinking the quotidian-human and the geological together. It will stretch even the Davisian canvas. What such a book will entail he actually tells us in his original NLR manifesto: it will mean exploring ‘the ominous terrain of...interaction’ between ‘the dangers of global warming [and] the global catastrophe of urban poverty.’

If the conditions requiring such a report do come to pass (and who can say they won't?), Davis will not be able to write it from either of his two favourite cities, lying at sea level on the Pacific and Atlantic littorals – Los Angeles and Belfast. One minor consolation will be the inundation of the Santa Monica real estate brokers who tried to defame the author of *Ecology of Fear*, and now of *Planet of Slums*, naively believing that disasters, and rumors of disasters, were bad for business.

Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2006.  
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[1] Mike Davis 2002 postscript to ‘Strange Times Begin’ in *Dead Cities*, Verso, 2002 (p.414).

[2] The Grameen Bank is a microfinance organisation started in Bangladesh that makes small loans (known as microcredit) to the impoverished without requiring collateral,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grameen\\_Bank](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grameen_Bank)

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