

Fire in the Belly: Mike Davis (1946-2022)

Saturday 29 October 2022, by [O'ROURKE Ciarán](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2022).

Ciarán O'Rourke remembers the work of Mike Davis (1946-2022).

"If there was ever a time for fire in the belly and a radical politics of hope, it is now." So declared [Mike Davis](#) (1946-2022), in the 2016 preface to [City of Quartz](#). "In cities like Los Angeles", he observed in that monumental work first published in 1990, there is "an unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort." Against such a backdrop, and tracing L.A.'s long legacy of police repression and racism, Davis prophesied "helter-skelter" on a scale not seen in decades: "a whole generation is being shunted toward some impossible Armageddon."

Within 18 months, the city erupted in full-blown insurrection after four LAPD officers were acquitted of using excessive force during the arrest of Rodney King: a typically ferocious incident, but unusual in having been captured on videotape. As chants of "no justice, no peace" echoed through downtown L.A., swathes of the city were reduced to rubble – leading President George H. W. Bush to declare a "federal disaster area" – as protestors countered a long-standing tradition of authoritarian "law and order" policies with tactics of civil disobedience, arson, and looting. Even after the notorious police chief, Daryl Gates, resigned his post, L.A. remained exposed as the "bright, guilty place" that Davis (quoting Orson Welles) and his comrades in the street had always known it to be.

One of the many charms of Davis himself, and of his writing, was his combative irreverence, often literally incendiary. "Perry [Anderson] asked me to come to London in 1980", he [recalled](#), "and I ended up staying most of the eighties [there], totally wrapped up in the whole strange world of the *New Left Review*.... Some of the worst years of my life." For Davis, a virtuosic scholar, who had earlier worked as a truck-driver in his native California before starting his university studies at age 29, radical politics began with living people, and it resided in the streets. His path-breaking [Prisoners of the American Dream](#) from 1986 cast a cold (almost comically sceptical) eye on the vote-harvesting oratory of the "quasi-aristocratic" Franklin Delano Roosevelt, while reserving a furious sympathy for the "millions of young workers aroused by the struggle for industrial unionism" during the 1930s. An incisive, and gloriously provocative, later article, critiquing California's socially and environmentally destructive real estate business, was called, simply, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn".

Ever the anti-establishmentarian, Davis combined critical precision with an insurrectionist's anger at capital itself, its relentless round of hubris and desecration. "American labour may never have had to face the carnage of a Paris Commune or defeated revolution", he noted, with the force of sober judgement, "but it has been bled in countless 'Peterloos' at the hands of Pinkertons and the militias." Davis was unusual as a Marxist intellectual. Nevertheless, it would be easy to imagine him as an IWW organiser or, farther back, a pike-wielding member of the United Irish movement in the late eighteenth century. He was a fighter as well as a thinker; and the fight was always fresh

His work brought together a vivid understanding of local struggles with an intuitive awareness of Capitalism as a global phenomenon. In [Late Victorian Holocausts](#), at once a study in climactic stress

and an indictment of nineteenth-century Britain's imperial model of commercial expansion, he wrote:

We are not dealing [with] 'lands of famine' becalmed in stagnant backwaters of world history, but with the fate of tropical humanity at the precise moment (1870-1914) when its labor and products were being dynamically conscripted into a London-centred world economy. Millions died, not outside the 'modern world system', but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures.

Renowned for the sociological breadth and street-savvy perceptiveness of his urban histories, he also had a fiery sense of human history – and agency – as such. Passivity was not an option. "Urban segregation is not a frozen status quo", he argued in *Planet of Slums*,

but rather a ceaseless social war in which the state intervenes, regularly, in the name of 'progress', 'beautification', and even 'social justice for the poor' to redraw spacial boundaries to the advantage of landowners, foreign investors, elite homeowners, and middle-class commuters.

Davis had the Gramscian knack for identifying the class enemy without shirking the complexities of the political landscape in which he was, invariably, immersed. He was capable of both a deep-diving analytical clarity – as in *The Monster at our Door*, his uncannily prescient hot-take on the dangers of global pandemic from 2005 – and of a panoramic faith in 'the long view'. "Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven", he noted (again in *Planet of Slums*),

much of the 21st-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay. Indeed, the one billion city-dwellers who inhabit postmodern slums might well look back with envy at the ruins of the sturdy mud homes of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia, erected at the very dawn of city life nine thousand years ago.

Part of what made Davis's analyses so original was not just the compulsive anthropological momentum of his approach, and his eye-level empathy with displaced and proletarian communities, but his profound sense of world-history as an ecologically grounded process. "Left to the dismal politics of the present", he summarised near the close of *Old Gods, New Enigmas* (even by Davis's standards, an essential volume), "cities of poverty will almost certainly become the coffins of hope." In attempting "to raise our imaginations to the challenge of the Anthropocene", he continued:

... we must start thinking like Noah. Since most of history's giant trees have already been cut down, a new Ark will have to be constructed out of the materials that a desperate humanity finds at hand in insurgent communities, pirate technologies, bootlegged media, rebel science, and forgotten utopias.

Although sometimes labelled a "catastrophist" of history, Davis's drive was always towards action, struggle, and solidarity – in brief, the politics of continual and transformative resistance, of "radical hope." He lit the torch; it's time for us, now, to carry it on. May he rest in power.

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P.S.

- Verso. 26 October 2022:

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5476-fire-in-the-belly-mike-davis-1946-2022>

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