

Read Mike Davis

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Mike Davis, the American geographer and historian, has died. There was no better socialist writer in the last four decades.

n around 2017 or 2018 I finally picked up the copy of Mike Davis' *The Monster at Our Door* from the shelves where it had been sitting for a few years, and read it. Davis had been right about so much—about the rise of the carceral state and ubiquitous surveillance, about the ecological disasters that would overtake exurban California, about the rise of ruthlessly protected and patrolled 'evil paradises' overlooking slums, to name a random handful—that I felt honestly relieved that he was wrong that a disastrous avian flu pandemic would overtake the world's cities in the 2000s and 2010s. The book was excellent, as always, in the sweep of its account of how factory farming and natural pathogens were combining to create new viruses that could easily be transmitted by humans, but... it didn't happen, did it? At last, I thought, Mike Davis was wrong about something, and put the book back on the shelf. And here we are, in the autumn of 2022, at the end of three years of a disastrous and avoidable pandemic, the result of a new virus that emerged in much the fashion described in *The Monster at Our Door*. And now, we are without Mike Davis.

There will be a lot of people mourning Mike Davis, and in all of this it's important to remember as the anecdotes come in thick and fast *just how fucking good* a writer he was. There has been almost nobody with his gifts in the four decades—1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s—in which he published prolifically. His talent for suddenly zooming in from the panoramic to the minutely particular, in forcing himself to look at the very worst of the 'bad new things' without abandoning the search for the seeds of positive, socialist change, the darkness of his humour, the breadth of his reading, the crackling, jargon-free but dense and forceful momentum of his prose: in all of these he was without rival.

But it's worth stopping to remember these books, and to read them, and read them again. When you do, you'll find they have a subtlety which belies the easy portrayal of Davis as a one-dimensional prophet of doom. Start, for instance, with his first book—an atypical one, as it's one of the only books of his that isn't in some sense a work of geography—*Prisoners of the American Dream*, published in 1986. This intervenes in the endless debate about why it is that the USA, despite the one-time strength of its labour movement, never produced a truly mass socialist party of any kind. His answer is essentially one word—racism—but argued through the various moments that it looked like it could have been different, especially the huge strike waves of the '30s that culminated in the creation of the CIO trade union federation as a fighting alternative to the deeply racist and conservative AFL; but the CIO was defeated in its attempt to organise the South, and the two were merged in the McCarthyite 1950s.

It's popular in some circles to make the case that US left's historic failures to challenge racism and imperialism doom the American labour movement permanently, in a Maoist version of original sin; but that wasn't Davis' argument. A few years ago, he [argued](#), responding to an over-quoted line of Raymond Williams, that 'hope is not a scientific category. Nor is it a necessary obligation in polemical writing'. But if 'hope' isn't the right word, his work even at its darkest always searched for

possibility and for ways to intervene in the present, and in *Prisoners* he found it, to an extent, in the 'rainbow coalition' of labour and civil rights and left activists around Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign, before it was sunk both by the Democratic Party's machine and its figurehead's own manifest failings.

That insistence on looking hard at what is happening, no matter how grim, means that some of the books are exceptionally dark. A great many urban theorists have found the spread of self-built settlements on the edges of cities in the Global South to be 'super-interesting', fascinating examples of an architecture without architects, an inspiring example of good old-fashioned self-help. *Planet of Slums* does not. It paints instead an appalling picture of Victorian poverty, with 'hope' mostly channelled into ferociously reactionary Evangelical churches. The chilling anthology *Evil Paradises* (edited with Daniel Bertrand-Monk), meanwhile, is on the enclaves built by the rich from the UAE to Shanghai to Johannesburg to Budapest; and those 'paradises' have only proliferated since that book was published (think here of the linear city of 'luxury flats' that stretches along the Thames from Battersea Power Station to Woolwich Arsenal). Davis' other work of (relatively) straight history, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, traces in horrific detail how weather events and the smashing by western imperial powers of existing agricultural famine relief systems created several waves of avoidable mass death across the colonised world, particularly India, between the 1870s and 1890s; a systematically obscured catastrophe on the scale of the better known disasters of the twentieth century. These books are powered not by despair, but by rage.

City of Quartz is the towering classic, the one that 'if you have to read one', you should read. Speaking for myself, it's the book above all others that made me interested in where geography and politics clash into each other, and a book I re-read every few years. Its depiction of Los Angeles as the monstrous city of the future, a dream factory protected by a near-fascistic police force, runs alongside the story of a shadow LA, an industrial, multicultural city of socialist experiments, civil rights revolts, and righteous eruptions. One of these, the LA riots of 1992, would come so soon after the book's publication that it began the not entirely inaccurate perception of Davis as a kind of seer—though he would have rightly pointed out that tracing the development of a capitalist city and keeping your ear to the ground is not in fact prophecy. The underside of the apocalyptic LA of *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear* is the new American city emerging in *Magical Urbanism*, a book on the Hispanicisation of North America's urban areas, and how that has created a level of politicisation and (to steal a line from Paul Gilroy) a 'convivial culture' in contrast to the privatised, paranoid, and brutally policed new worlds described in the earlier books. Davis had justified reservations about electoral socialism, but was no doubt pleased by the fact that the recent resurgence of democratic socialism in the US was especially strong in Southern California and Nevada.

But there are two late texts that I've found myself thinking most about in the last few years, in the middle of another cycle of giddy hope and miserable defeat, in a situation where we simply can't afford as a species for the left to disappear again, as it did from Europe and North America in the 1990s and 2000s. One is from the essay, included in *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, ['Who Will Build the Ark?'](#). Within this essay on the necessity of eco-socialism is a passage on 'what' the ark could be like, a clear affirmation of a socialist modernism that is often missed in Davis' writing.

...the late nineteenth and early twentieth century conversations about the 'socialist city' provide invaluable starting points for thinking about the current crisis. Consider, for example, the Constructivists. El Lissitzky, Melnikov, Leonidov, Golosov, the Vesnin brothers and other brilliant socialist designers – constrained as they were by early Soviet urban misery and a drastic shortage of public investment – proposed to relieve congested apartment life with splendidly designed workers' clubs, people's theatres and sports complexes. They gave urgent priority to the emancipation of proletarian women

through the organization of communal kitchens, day nurseries, public baths and cooperatives of all kinds. Although they envisioned workers' clubs and social centres, linked to vast Fordist factories and eventual high-rise housing, as the 'social condensers' of a new proletarian civilisation, they were also elaborating a practical strategy for leveraging poor urban workers' standard of living in otherwise austere circumstances.

In the context of global environmental emergency, this Constructivist project could be translated into the proposition that the egalitarian aspects of city life consistently provide the best sociological and physical supports for resource conservation and carbon mitigation. Indeed, there is little hope of mitigating greenhouse emissions or adapting human habitats to the Anthropocene unless the movement to control global warming converges with the struggle to raise living standards and abolish world poverty. And in real life, beyond the IPCC's simplistic scenarios, this means participating in the struggle for democratic control over urban space, capital flows, resource-sheds and large-scale means of production.

The inner crisis in environmental politics today is precisely the lack of bold concepts that address the challenges of poverty, energy, biodiversity and climate change within an integrated vision of human progress.

Too long for a banner or a tweet, but if I have a credo, this is it. The other is in his last book, written with Jon Wiener, *[Set the Night on Fire - L.A. In the Sixties](#)*. The book is on how this brutally segregated, class-and-race ridden city produced a proliferation of a new culture of socialist and liberation movements, and how they were, eventually, crushed. At the end of the book, Davis and Wiener note that crushing, and the horrors of south and east LA in the 1980s and 1990s that resulted from defeat.

From this perspective one might conclude that all the dreaming, passion and sacrifice of that era had been for naught. But the Sixties in Los Angeles are best conceived of as a sowing, whose seeds grew into living traditions of resistance. Movements rose and fell to be sure, but individual commitments to social change were enduring and inheritable. Thousands continued to lead activist lives as union organisers, progressive doctors and lawyers, schoolteachers, community advocates, city employees, and perhaps most profoundly, as parents.

Few writers have ever sown as much as Mike Davis.

Owen Hatherley

P.S.

• Tribune. 26.10.2022:

<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/10/mike-davis-writer-geographer-historian-socialist>

• Owen Hatherley is the culture editor of Tribune. His latest book, *Red Metropolis: Socialism and the Government of London*, is now out from Repeater Books.