

The political importance of Mike Davis

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From the 1980s until his death in California on October 22, Mike Davis was among the most influential Marxist theorists writing in the English language, says Phil Hearse.

I met him in London in 1982, where he was living at the time. Mike was one of the people who set up the Reagan Reception Committee, which worked to stop US President Ronald Reagan's state visit. At the same time, Reagan was met with the kind of [cringe-making deference](#) that only the British capitalist class can stage (and which it expects from its subjects). But he was also met with an anti-imperialist, anti-nuclear demonstration of 250,000 in London.

For the Left internationally, Reagan was a brutal enemy; overseer of US intervention which drowned the El Salvador revolution in blood and destabilised the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua with 'contra' terrorism; author of the 'Star Wars' nuclear weapons systems and the new cruise missiles aimed at the Soviet Union; the President who had authorised the imprisonment of the striking PATCO air traffic controllers; and together with Margaret Thatcher, enabled a new wave of capitalist economics that would ultimately crystallise as neoliberalism.

The huge demonstration is not much remembered, perhaps because CND's demonstrations against the missiles a couple of years later were much bigger, up to 400,000. Mike used this occasion for a new round of theorising. He was one of the few authors on the Left who linked the nuclear confrontation of the superpowers to imperialism. He helped edit a Verso collection called ["Exterminism and Cold War"](#). The debate was initiated by the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson, who argued that the nuclear confrontation between the East and West had established a new world system that he called "Exterminism." For him, this military-nuclear system had escaped rational control and had its own logic, which led to war. Thompson helped start European Nuclear Disarmament (END), an offshoot of CND that called for the East and West to be disarmed and for an area from the Atlantic to the Urals to be free of nuclear weapons. Mike wrote a keynote article on "nuclear imperialism," which argued for the imperialist origins of the Cold War and the "nuclear umbrella" under which America organised its military interventions worldwide. And he pointed out that when the United States had come closest to using nuclear weapons, it was against revolutionary and nationalist victories in the Global South. For example, the plan to use nuclear bombardment to relieve the French armies at Dien Bien Phu, the US retreat from the Cochin reservoir in Korea, the siege of Khe San in Vietnam and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Mike was from a working-class background, starting out as a meat cutter and truck driver, and came to left politics through militant trade unionism, not academia. He attempted in his first major book, [Prisoners of the American Dream](#), to answer the question that Marxists had long wrestled with-how does the American capitalist class retain its dominance? How come there is no US labour party independent of the capitalist class? [1]

He showed, with copious evidence, that American capitalism had been sustained by both brutal and repeated class-struggle violence and pernicious division. As each new wave of migrants arrived from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries, the already established national groups were mobilised to

defend their position with brutal division—English against Irish, Germans against Irish, and white against black [2]. As the different white immigrants became more integrated, the legacy of slavery-anti-black racism persisted, causing massive historic obstacles to class unity. Racism in the South underpinned the Dixicrats and then the Republicans. Trump and Trumpism would have been inconceivable without this racist underpinning, still going strong in the furious reaction to Black Lives Matter and the battle over “critical race theory.”

Mike’s last book, [Set the Night on Fire](#), shows how the 1960s Californian left was centrally involved in the struggle against racism, and in particular the ‘freedom buses’ that travelled through southern states, breaching segregation laws and getting brutalised by the forces of “law and order.” Black members of the Communist Party in Los Angeles were heavily involved in building support for this work and in riding the buses. Angela Davis’s (no relation) transition from the Black Panthers to the Communist Party would have been less likely without it. The whole of the Los Angeles left had to come to grips with the rise of Black Nationalism and the Black Panthers, an essential but difficult unity.

The power of Mike Davis’s cultural criticism was on full display in [City of Quartz](#), which looked at how the elites of different national groups in Los Angeles, the second largest city in the United States, came together to form a single capitalist power. He shows how the Los Angeles Police Department was still, in the 1950s and ‘60s, being used as an active force against black encroachments in white middle-class areas, beating up black residents and smashing up their homes. Mike went beyond the usual Marxist frameworks to look at the social ecology. He looked at how the power structures merged with the built environment, which was a city made for cars with no identifiable centre.

On returning to the United States in the mid-1980s, Mike settled in San Diego, the city divided by the border with Mexico—the other side is the infamous Ciudad Juarez, a centre of mass [femicide](#).

Two of his most important books came in the ‘noughties’—*The Monster at Our Door* (2004) and [Planet of Slums](#) (2006). The book “Monster” analyses the different waves of avian flu that had emerged in the previous decade, causing the mass slaughter of fowl and thousands of dead human victims worldwide. As evidenced by its title, Mike predicted that there would be a new and massive pandemic—and of course, he was right. I re-read *Monster* in 2016 and wondered if Mike hadn’t been exaggerating, especially in light of how easily — seemingly — the Ebola virus had been contained. Three years later, I realised how right he had been.

By the time the COVID-19 virus struck, Mike had been ill for five years with two terminal diagnoses, and his work capacities were greatly impaired. He put together a re-issue of *Monster* called [The Monster Enters](#), updating his analysis but mainly using text from the original. If he had not been so ill, and he had been able to speak at more Zoom meetings and on TV, there would have been an even stronger wave of new Mike Davis fans. Prophetically, in the 2004 book he wrote:

Access to lifeline medicines, including vaccines, antibiotics, and antivirals, should be a human right, universally available at no cost. If markets can’t provide incentives to cheaply produce such drugs, then governments and non-profits should take responsibility for their manufacture and distribution. The survival of the poor must at all times be accounted a higher priority than the profits of Big Pharma.

After “*The Monster at the Door*” came “*Planet of Slums*.” Mike started by noting that at the turn of the millennium, the majority of humanity now lived in urban areas, no longer in the countryside. But

this has not resulted in the integration of the majority of urban newcomers into either formal jobs or reasonable housing. On the contrary, the new elites that took control in the 1940s and 1950s excluded the new urban poor:

'Polarized patterns of land use and population density recapitulate older logics of imperial control and racial dominance. Throughout the Third World, post-colonial elites have inherited and greedily reproduced the physical footprints of segregated colonial cities. Despite rhetorics of national liberation and social justice, they have aggressively adapted the racial zoning of the colonial period to defend their own class privileges and spatial exclusivity.'

Because of this, the poor built their own slums and mostly worked in informal jobs. However, in many areas, the slums have become well-established and workers find employment in factories, construction, and even offices. Mike predicted that the slums would become major arenas for social and political conflict.

In [Late Victorian Holocausts](#) Davis analyses how imperialist brutality in the 19th century created avoidable droughts and famines, leading to the deaths of around 31 million people. He always saw imperialism and white supremacy as the key enemies of the Left that had to be overthrown. Lois Beckett [interviewed him](#) recently and commented:

'Davis's focus on how white supremacy and capitalism had shaped southern California, and how they continued to endanger its landscape and its people, led to dismissals and backlash early in his career, particularly from the real estate developers and regional boosters he savaged in his books. But over the decades, his warnings kept coming true.'

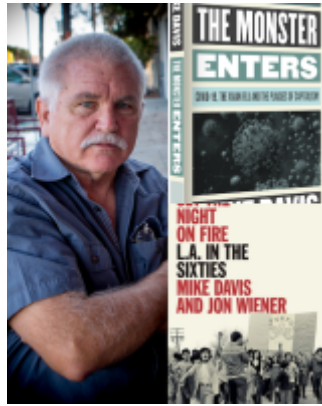
'In essays like The Case for Letting Malibu Burn, Davis has argued that California's natural disasters are not really natural at all, but the result of greed, racism and lack of foresight from the region's power brokers. In City of Quartz - published in 1990, two years before the Rodney King uprising - he depicted Los Angeles as a white supremacist police state that had successfully marketed itself as paradise.'

Like the great Marxist historian, Isaac Deutscher, Mike never got a stable university job. He was too hot to handle, and the American right attacked him mercilessly, accusing him of distorting facts to suit his arguments. He briefly joined the American International Socialists but dropped out well before that organisation self-destructed.

His work is unique and a treasure trove for socialists, class struggle fighters, and environmental activists. Mike had a fiercely critical intelligence that mastered the subjects by appropriating all the relevant details. He read everything. His writing is important for all those who want to discover the origins of the great environmental, economic, and social crises that we are living through.

Mike Davis's books can be viewed at [Verso](#) and [Haymarket](#). Dozens of his essays can be accessed by a simple internet search.

Phil Hearse



P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance.29 Oct 2022 :
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-political-importance-of-mike-davis/>
- Phil Hearse is a member of Anti*Capitalist Resistance and joint author of both Creeping Fascism and System Crash.

Footnotes

- [1] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301738277_Why_Is_There_No_Labor_Party_in_the_United_States_Political_Articulation_and_the_Canadian_Comparison_1932_to_1948
- [2] Brilliantly portrayed in the Martin Scorsese film [Gangs of New York](#)