

REVIEW ESSAY

Apocalyptic anti-urbanism: Mike Davis and his planet of slums

Mike Davis 2006: *Planet of Slums*. New York: Verso.

A stranger could drive through Miguel Street and just say 'Slum!' because he could see no more. But we who lived there saw our street as a world, where everybody was quite different from everybody else (V.S. Naipul, *Miguel Street*)

The title of Mike Davis' latest tome should make every progressive cringe. Boston's Mel King, prominent African-American community activist, once said that for him the term *slum* meant that 'somebody else defined my community in a way that allowed them to justify destruction of it'. *Slum clearance* was the high-minded objective of the federal urban renewal program in the US, the program that displaced millions of people, disproportionately poor and African-American. Around the world today, working people are evicted by governments and private developers who have determined that their neighborhoods are hopeless 'slums' filled with disease, crime, and unemployment, problems which they claim will go away once the people are out of sight and cities stop growing. While 'slum' is used in other parts of the world without the negative connotation it enjoys in the US, such homogenizing labels continue to obscure both the underlying relations of social and political inequality and an increasingly complex urban world.

But there are more troubling parts of the book besides the title. On the positive side, Davis draws out the connections between rapid urbanization, global capitalist development and neoliberal policies. He shows how poor housing, lack of basic infrastructure, and threats of being summarily uprooted are normal conditions for most of the world's urban dwellers. He also draws attention to the dramatic ongoing transformation of the global settlement structure from towns and cities to large metropolitan regions.

The main problems are that *Planet of Slums* is overly descriptive and its apocalyptic rhetoric feeds into longstanding anti-urban fears about working people who live in cities. Davis' evocative hyperbole sees Mexico City as a 'giant amoeba'. Lagos is exploding like a 'supernova'. We are witnessing 'a major moral crisis in our history' as cities are uncontrollably devouring the earth. This 'overurbanization' and 'urbanization without industrialization' is producing not just 'megacities' but 'hypercities'. His rant against urban conditions includes sections titled 'Back to Dickens' and 'Urban poverty's "big bang"'. Catastrophic hyperboles and apocalyptic clarion calls pepper all of Davis' books, including *Monster at Our Door*, which warns of the coming avian flu pandemic, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, *Dead Cities*, and *Ecology of Fear*. *Planet of Slums* improves on Davis' 2004 article of the same name that appeared in *New Left Review* (Davis, 2004), but still suffers from major problems of form and content.

In Davis' dismal descriptions of urban poverty, there are no people or social forces capable of challenging the social order. Davis sees a world of massive informality 'disconnected from the cultural and political life of the traditional city'. In his 2004 article Davis saw 'a shantytown world encircling the fortified enclaves of the urban rich'. Virtually absent in his litany of poverty conditions are the progressive and often radical urban movements struggling against evictions and displacement and for better living

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conditions. Without recognizing these protagonists, the urban world would indeed appear gloomy and devoid of hope.

Planet of Slums is a windshield survey of cities in the South by a stranger from the North. It is an expression of moralistic outrage that one would expect from a Westerner who discovered for the first time that the conditions of most people living in cities around the world are much worse than in Los Angeles and Amsterdam. Such a reaction is to be expected from the naïve freshman taking his first course in global urbanization, or a neophyte journalist (such is Neuwirth, 2005), but from a self-proclaimed left urban expert? A simplistic, rich/poor dualism can help wake up those who are isolated in their own privileged enclaves but won't help progressives and activists all over the world who are struggling in complex political environments for a better quality of urban life.

I will argue that Davis' dualistic analysis oversimplifies the complex urban world and process of urbanization. This bifurcation of the world into two giant categories, urban and rural, supports the anti-urban bias that has strong roots in the US and has served mostly conservative political agendas. It also influences progressives and the left. Anti-urban discourses often accompany liberal and neoliberal condemnations of poverty, urban and otherwise, that obscure fundamental economic and social inequalities. I will also show that Davis' approach is far from the Marxist legacy he claims, and instead feeds into moralistic and philanthropic approaches to the city that Friedrich Engels criticized, and the very neoliberal policies that Davis himself opposes.

Dualism and informality

Davis' dualist division of the world is accomplished by depicting 'slums' as giant repositories of the 'informal sector' — where people work in marginal services, off the books, in unstable, non-unionized jobs. Three decades ago Janice Perlman's pioneering study of Brazilian *favelas* destroyed what she called 'the myth of marginality' (Perlman, 1976) that allowed strangers from afar to paint monstrous pictures of huge undifferentiated neighborhoods filled with hopeless underemployed masses. She demonstrated that many people living in *favelas* were far from 'marginal' and the connections between formal and informal activity are multiple and complex. Her work is joined by a rich body of research detailing the substantial economic, social and political differences within so-called slum neighborhoods and the many intimate connections between the formal and informal city. In fact, internal conflicts are intimately bound up with the struggles of these communities against outside forces threatening their destruction. Urban communities have complex internal class and social conflicts, including struggles between landlords and tenants, workers and business owners, the local state and grassroots organizations. Women, youth and ethnic minorities organize to fight for social justice and human rights. Decades of comparative research have also showed the many profound differences in conditions among cities within the same world regions and the same nations, differences that have to do with rich and diverse geographic, cultural and political histories. The picture of one huge urban informal sector spanning the globe is simplistic and a grotesque distortion of reality. Saskia Sassen, for one, has called attention to 'the new geography of centrality and marginality' whereby cities are riddled with enormous contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities, and urbanization is not simply a linear phenomenon (Sassen, 1998: xxv).

In his book, Davis patches up the worst omissions of his earlier article by at least describing some of the differences and recognizing the devastating effects of urban renewal programs, displacement, and structural adjustment programs. But his starting and ending points remain the same: condemnation and moral outrage, not serious analysis. Happily, he dropped the last section of his article that depicted the urban poor as docile subjects of evangelical religion, though they still appear in his book as atomized, apolitical masses. While he includes a well-deserved critique of 'self-help'

programs and conservative NGOs, he is apparently blind to the progressive urban social movements.

Anti-urbanism

Davis starts his book with the 'fact' that half of the world's population lives in cities and many of them live in 'slums'. This is followed by tons of demographic evidence that people are moving in massive numbers from countryside to city. To which we have to ask, 'so what?' Why is it a problem that more people live in cities? Is rural poverty any better than urban poverty, and, if it is, why are so many people migrating to cities? And so what if cities are 'big?' or getting bigger?

But even Davis' 'facts' are wrong. In a statistical sleight of hand, he uses the broadest definition of 'urban' to reach the 50% figure. Even a liberal estimate (using UN Habitat data conservatively) shows no more than 25% of the world's population living in cities over 750,000 population, the metropolitan regions of the world. Despite his dire predictions that these large cities will blanket the earth, the fastest growing cities are small and medium-sized cities, many of which still have strong connections with agriculture and their rural regions. The majority of the world's population is still rural, doesn't have a telephone, and has never surfed the internet. What 'planet' are they on, Mr. Davis?

Contrary to Davis, large cities didn't 'explode' in a 'Big Bang' but there has been a long, slow evolution since the onset of the industrial revolution. Throughout the twentieth century metropolitan regions replaced smaller industrial cities as centers of economic and political power, the result of global capitalist accumulation, industrial expansion, migration, and technological innovation. While the process is happening in every world region it is highly uneven (Angotti, 1993).

What is wrong with such doomsday anti-urban theories? On a global scale, they are used to justify government austerity, the further isolation of poor neighborhoods, massive clearance programs, and elite urban planning experiments. For example, the World Bank allows us to believe that urbanization is a problem so it doesn't have to invest in urban services and can instead pour its money into infrastructure in less developed areas that allow for the penetration of capital. This fits neatly with neoliberal strategies of social austerity and government downsizing, where responsibility for urban services falls strictly on the backs of weak local governments.

In the US anti-urbanism is ingrained in the nation's history of westward expansion, rural homesteading, abundant land, and dynamic real estate markets. Since the early twentieth century 'urban' problems were equated with new immigrants and African Americans. Suburbia, though clearly an integral part of the modern metropolis, has been defined not as part of 'the city' but as the legitimate place for the single-family 'American Dream' house. Conservatives in Congress have long demonized cities; for example, they opposed investment in public housing by arguing that it only encourages migration to cities. In the 1950s, before central city neighborhoods exploded in rage against institutional racism, conservatives pulled out yet another epidemiological metaphor and declared that central cities with large black populations were 'cancers'. The prescription was surgical removal via 'urban renewal', or they would be allowed to self-destruct if government only ignored them (this was the policy of 'benign neglect' invented by Richard Nixon's advisor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan). After decades of struggle, many neighborhoods managed to survive, and some actually thrive.

The main city planning ideas in the US are anti-urban. They encourage dispersal of the population from big cities (the Garden City approach) or transformation of working-class neighborhoods into monumental civic centers (the City Beautiful approach). The latter is the ideological forerunner of the federal urban renewal program that destroyed many low-income neighborhoods. These were pilloried as essentially anti-urban in the classic work by Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).

Urbanization without industrialization?

Davis bases his gloomy outlook for cities on the worn-out myth that the real problem is urbanization without industrialization. This notion has long been a popular tenet of orthodox economists who prescribe the model of economic growth followed in Europe and North America for the rest of the world. Their antidote to underdevelopment is to promote industrial investment from the North, unimpeded by local regulation, of course. Unfortunately this kind of link between urbanization and industrialization has its supporters among organized labor in the North (especially the AFL-CIO) whose own power base is among industrial workers. Alternatively, they could try to stop the urbanization process, but few economists really believe that this will work in a market-driven economy. Indeed, centrally planned economies have been the most successful at limiting urban growth, not necessarily because big cities are seen as a problem (though some socialist planners certainly believe this) but because greater priority must be given to productive investment and services in less urbanized areas as a matter of social equity and/or defense policy.

Today more than ever before, as the US and Europe de-industrialize and flexible production scatters smaller production units across the landscape, the South is seeing more foreign industrial investment than ever (though it's still a fraction of all investment), even as the WTO continues to knock down barriers that might have allowed poor countries to appropriate larger shares of the enormous surplus their industries generate. And contrary to the impression given by Davis of a looming urban nightmare of 'megacities' and 'hypercities' taking over the world, most of the industrial growth is in small and medium-sized cities precisely because of the fragmentation of production into smaller flexible units. In any case, it only takes a handful of factories paying more than farmers can make to draw a huge mass of labor to cities, many more workers than those factories can ever employ. This is exactly what happened in Birmingham and London in the nineteenth century.

The theoretical basis for anti-urban theories is well established in the *urban fallacy* hatched by Western social science. Since the Victorian era and the conservative Chicago School of Urban Sociology of the early twentieth century, the 'urban crisis' was said to have been the result of cities themselves, not exploitation, urban landlords, or capitalist development. Cities were too big, too dense, and too much a diverse pool of humanity that produced conflict and violence. But if size were the problem, then what about the huge metropolitan regions in the North with high standards of living? If density leads to poverty and violence why are the dense metropolises of Japan relatively crime free? And are the economically and socially diverse New York and Los Angeles metropolises any worse off than those in Africa, Asia and Latin America? A portion of the Chicago School used biological metaphors to understand the city as if it were a natural organism that evolved on its own and independently of human intervention. But generally the solutions flowing from the urban fallacy are to ignore cities or get rid of them. In practice, the real target is always the working-class neighborhoods (call them slums!). The urban fallacy was artfully debunked in the important early work of Manuel Castells (1977), *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, which showed how the problem is class exploitation and not the city.

Poverty and 'poverty reduction'

In the absence of any serious policies to improve the life of working people in cities, global capital instead promotes phony 'poverty reduction'. The noble-sounding goal of poverty reduction has become a mantra of the World Bank and United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Samir Amin believes the UN's first Millennium goal, to 'reduce extreme poverty and hunger by half' is 'nothing but an empty incantation as long as the policies that generate poverty are not analyzed and denounced and alternatives proposed' (Amin, 2006).

Describing and denouncing poverty is necessary, but it has become a cottage industry in the wealthy North, and powerful multilateral aid agencies lead the crusade. Davis relies heavily on United Nations reports that describe the depth and breadth of urban poverty around the world. But while the UN agencies are in the business of shocking and shaming donor countries to toss a few more crumbs into the global charity mill, it's unfortunate when a noted left scholar like Davis joins the chorus.

Progressive urbanist alternatives

The place to look for progressive urban options is not the sinkhole of liberal despair but the huge well of urban social and political movements around the world. In Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela and Argentina, among the most urbanized nations in the most urbanized part of the so-called third world, militant community movements against displacement and for a better quality of urban life pushed stagnant political parties to the left or out of business, creating new community institutions, national political coalitions, and new spaces for anti-capitalist mobilization. Some were integral to broader revolutionary movements, others slowed them down, but none of them could come out of the depths of despair that Davis has put them in. While Davis fixates on the small group of conservative NGOs that benefit from the charitable largesse of the North, he is blind to the large grassroots networks of active, militant community-based organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In his 2004 article, for example, he dismissed the rich array of grass-roots organizing going on in Venezuela with a sweeping and simplistic categorization of the government of populist president Hugo Chavez as a product of the informal sector. Perhaps Davis left this part out of his book because it is becoming increasingly clear that to understand Venezuela today one must look beyond the person of the nation's charismatic leader and look at the incredible progressive currents emanating from the 'slums' of Caracas.

In the US progressive urbanism arises from the struggles of African-American and working-class communities against displacement by urban renewal and highway expansion programs that were intimately connected to the civil rights movement. The Black Panthers and Young Lords took up struggles to improve the quality of life in urban neighborhoods. The victims of anti-urban policies have become the strongest defenders of urbanism.

Of course, there are many neighborhood-based groups everywhere that are dedicated only to narrow exclusionary politics. This is especially true in middle-class and elite neighborhoods. But it should come as no surprise that there are sharp divisions even within working-class neighborhoods about where to draw the line between protecting and improving the quality of life for everyone and setting up barriers to keep people out or enhancing the property values of landowners. This is actually the very heart of the urban class struggle. In essence, it is no different from the struggles that occur within labor unions about class solidarity vs. immediate wage gains.

The World Social Forum would not be possible without the myriad globalized local movements from cities (and rural areas as well). Even while taking into account all the political limitations of this new form of decentralized popular organizing, the Social Forum's counter-hegemonic slogan, 'Another world is possible' has no place in Davis' atomized planet.

Back to Engels

Since Davis goes back to the Victorian era for inspiration, it is worthwhile revisiting the insightful work of Friedrich Engels, who recognized the depth of urban poverty in that period but also pilloried urban 'reformers' of his day who moralized about this situation and dreamed up half-baked solutions.

First of all, Engels described the miserable living conditions in most cities, as Davis has done. Engels meticulously catalogued urban poverty in his *Conditions of the*

Working Class in England (Engels, 1973). But he went much farther than that. He looked at the profoundly political question of *what is to be done* about urban problems, in other words the roots of urban policy. He launched a scathing critique of the urban reformers whose moral outrage led to the totally ineffective solutions of philanthropy, on the one hand, and minimal, legalistic reforms on the other (Engels, 1975). He made sharp distinctions between utopian and scientific socialism — the former based on nostalgia for small-scale communities and lofty promises to redeem humanity, the latter based on the struggles to overcome class oppression (Engels, 1969).

While Marx and Engels never anticipated the fierce urban struggles that would arise in the twentieth century (just as they underestimated the potential of 'third world' revolutions, global racism, and the divisions within the industrial working class), their methodology of dialectical and historical materialism can be used to understand, and change, the urban world we encounter today. Andy Merrifield, in his brilliant book *Dialectical Urbanism*, shows precisely how contradiction, difference, and scientific method uncover a rich world of urban class struggle. He calls for 'an understanding of what gives cities their frightening force and awesome grandeur ... an understanding of dialectical urbanism, of an urbanism of ambiguity and contradiction and conflict' (Merrifield, 2002: 17). He argues against fetishizing cities (another form of the urban fallacy). Cities aren't simply 'things' but a complex set of social relations, including class struggle. It is important to understand not only what they are but what they are becoming. The inventory of urban ills is just a beginning.

Conclusion

Today's progressive approach to cities should start not with moralistic anti-urban diatribes but with the struggles for a better quality of life for people who live and work in cities. It should begin with the contradictory opportunities presented by urbanization as we know it, just as neoliberal capitalism offers many opportunities for its own transformation.

Cities make it easier for grassroots movements to organize in opposition to oppression in all its forms. Democratic institutions can evolve and mature in the public places of cities. Cities can potentially create a wider range of services and a more diverse cultural life than a ruralized world. They can have more economically efficient public infrastructures and create a better quality of life for a larger number of people. Imagine trying to provide every village in the world with the cultural riches and infrastructure enjoyed by large cities! This might be achievable (and desirable) in some far distant future of the planet, but it's hard to imagine any such luxury in today's world of urgent needs and urban realities.

The urban problem today is that the incredible potential of urban agglomeration is not being realized because of the savage neoliberal policies of global capitalism, and the anti-urban theories and practices they give rise to. Cities are big polluters, less economically efficient and productive than they could be, and not necessarily centers of cultural development. Thus, cities by themselves are no more the solution than they are the problem.

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