

Review of Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*

Richard Pithouse, July 2007

Visions of the future, presented as aspiration or inevitability, exercise tremendous power over certain kinds of decision making in the present. In cities where local elites are able to imagine a convivial future for themselves and where the economy is based on consumption, as well as production or extraction the vision of the future is, above all, the idea of a 'World Class City'. This is the idea that guides and justifies the decisions of the technocratic elites organized in 'partnerships' across governments, donor agencies, NGOs, the academy and corporations. Their decisions produce broadly similar results around the world – the exclusion and eviction of the poor, the commodification of public space and public investment in projects for private profit such as conference centers, casinos, hotels, shopping malls, golf course estates, major sports events and so on at the direct expense of public investment in public housing, public facilities and public space. Rem Koolhaas tells us that it is time to get real and the reality is that shopping is “the last remaining form of public activity.”¹

It has become clear that the most perfected instance of the aspirant World Class City is Dubai. It is now very often asserted or assumed that “New York was the city of the 20th century, and now Dubai will be the city of the 21st century.”² Some celebrate Dubai as a fantastical futurism floating unanchored above the old world of historically shaped and still contested place. Others, like Mike Davis in a commanding polemic in *New Left Review*³, see it in dystopian terms – feudal absolutism, government run as business and phantasmagoric, architectural megalomania for the super rich all sustained by indentured labor, physically segregated and expected to be invisible to bourgeoisie eyes. But this previously unimaginable power of the fetish of the commodity thrives on all too familiar traces of past oppression. For instance former administrators of the apartheid migrant labor system have been key actors in the designing and running of Dubai's biometric version of apartheid.⁴ And of course Dubai is very much tied to regimes of accumulation mediated through smaller islands of similarly themeparked cybermodernity in places like Bombay, Lagos and Johannesburg.

In recent years the lives and struggles of ordinary people in the still obviously historically conditioned places in these cities have often slipped off the agenda of the metropolitan left, a left that by virtue of its privileged location in global coloniality has a more extensive reach than any other. And in what Partha Chatterjee usefully calls “most of the world”⁵ shack settlements are the urbanism of the contemporary moment and, if things stay the same, the future. The shack settlement may not be hegemonic in the sense that

¹ Hal Foster, 'Bigness', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 23 No. 23, 29 November 2001, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n23/fost01.html>, accessed 6 July 2007.

² George Katodrytis, <http://www.eikongraphia.com/?p=1318>, accessed 6 July 2007.

³ Mike Davis, 'Fear & Money' in *Dubai New Left Review*, 41, September – October 2006 <http://newleftreview.org/?view=2635>, accessed 6 July 2007

⁴ Keith Breckenridge alerted me to this telling anecdote.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflection on Popular Politics in Most of the World* Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri insist that immaterial labor is hegemonic despite it being much less common than industrial labor. But, just as more people work with the material than the immaterial, vastly more people live in shacks than in cities where the guiding motif is the shopping mall.

Mike Davis has confronted the metropolitan left with this reality. He has been largely silent on the thinking and politics of people living in shack settlements, but he has issued an influential - although seriously flawed - challenge to the widespread omission of a serious consideration of the material realities of the billion people living in shacks.

In early 2004 he published an article in *New Left Review* titled *Planet of Slums*. It was primarily based on the 2003 UN Habitat report *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements*, a report which draws heavily on World Bank research. Davis heralded the report as “the first truly global audit of urban poverty” and an “authoritative warning about the global catastrophe of urban poverty” and commended it for “breaking with traditional UN circumspection and self-censorship to squarely indict neoliberalism.”⁶ His article was famously pessimistic about the prospects for progressive politics in shack settlements and concluded with the view that “with the Left still largely missing from the slum, the eschatology of Pentecostalism admirably refuses the inhuman destiny of the Third World city.”⁷ There was an obvious methodological flaw at the base of the assessment. The UN’s research, drawing heavily as Davis casually notes on the World Bank, is interested in measuring certain aspects of the bare life and not the political life of the poor. The fact that none of the many politics of the poor appear in the research of the institutions of contemporary imperialism does not mean that they do not exist.⁸ And, as even a quick Google search shows, they most certainly do exist in places like Caracas, Cité Soleil, Durban, Sao Paulo and so on.

Nevertheless not all of Davis’s readers accepted his political pessimism as if it were some kind of law of the slum. Slavoj Žižek famously responded by arguing that:

The slum-dwellers are the counter-class to the other newly emerging class, the so-called 'symbolic class' (managers, journalists and PR people, academics, artists etc) which is also uprooted and perceives itself as universal (a New York academic has more in common with a Slovene academic than with blacks in Harlem half a mile from his campus). Is this the new axis of class struggle, or is the 'symbolic class' inherently split, so that one can make a wager on the coalition between the slum-dwellers and the 'progressive' part

⁶ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* *New Left Review*, 26, March-April 2004, <http://newleftreview.org/?view=2496>, accessed 6 July 2007.

⁷ Davis, *Planet of Slums* 2004

⁸ Davis goes so far as to assert that the UN Habitat report “follows in the famous footsteps of Friedeich Engels” (2006:20) but UN Habitat is far from being a progressive or even politically neutral force. It has been seriously criticized in Nairobi (for instance see Robert Neuwirth’s *Shadow Cities* New York, Routledge, 2006) where it is headquartered and elsewhere, such as in Durban, South Africa, where it has given warm support to the housing project of the local municipality despite that project being based on systematically illegal and violent evictions that leave many people homeless or dumped in bleak rural ghettos.

of the symbolic class? The new forms of social awareness that emerge from slum collectives will be the germs of the future and the best hope for a properly 'free world'.

In 2006 Davis published a book based on the *New Left Review* article which received an even more extraordinary reception from the metropolitan left with gushing reviews, a few of which seemed to be perversely thrilled at his apocalyptic account. Jeremy Harding began his more sober review in the *London Review of Books*, by noting that “If any of us has seen the places in the developing world that Mike Davis catalogues remorselessly in *Planet of Slums*, it was probably from an aeroplane.”⁹ It is clear that many and perhaps most reviews have been written as a first confrontation with the reality of urbanization in most of the world. For this reason the extraordinary reception of this book is, in part, a useful corrective to the Eurocentricism that cripples the analysis of much of the metropolitan left. For instance it is encouraging to note that this review directly confronts its readers with the fact that “About a billion people worldwide operate in the informal sector. Davis tells us they constitute 'the fastest-growing . . . social class on earth'.”¹⁰ In other words Davis’s statistics, flamboyantly pulled into the gathering rush of his text from a dazzling range of literature as he hurtles to his apocalyptic conclusions, have provided an important reality check for the metropolitan left.

The World Bank and the UN can produce statistics with a global reach that no unfunded and more local intellectual commitment to particular shack dwellers’ struggles could ever match. And most reviews have, correctly, focused on the fact that Davis has provided what Jan Bremmer writing in *New Left Review* called a “properly global portrait”¹¹. Harding observes that observes “*Planet of Slums* “howls with figures” and declares that:

This constant production of numbers – and a seamless access between continents – offers us the world as a single, intelligible place defined by the universal laws of accumulation and deprivation. Any sense that slum cultures and slum cities might have a specific character, beyond the common lot of misery, is tenuous. No book will give readers the impression of covering greater distances, even if they will feel by the end as though they'd been cooped up in a narrow, featureless room. Homogeneity, Davis would argue, is what late capitalism does: already a billion people live in roughly the same extraordinary way in roughly similar environments.¹²

David Cunningham, writing in *Radical Philosophy*, recalls that in a review of Davis’s celebrated book on L.A., *City of Quartz*, Marshal Berman had argued that “the efforts of

⁹ Jeremy Harding, ‘It Migrates to Them: The coming megaslums’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29, No. 5, 8 March 2007 http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n05/hard01_.html, accessed 6 July 2007

¹⁰ Harding, *It Migrates to Them*

¹¹ Jan Breman, ‘Slumlands’ *New Left Review*, No. 40 142, July/August 2006, <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=2631>, accessed 6 July 2007.

¹² Harding, *It Migrates to Them*

the comfortable to lock out the poor is more vivid than his descriptions of the poor themselves”¹³ and acknowledges that:

While Davis’s approach may entail certain undeniable risks – a flattening out of differences in both history and social-spatial form – it is in fact, precisely the inherently totalizing and comparative project pursued in *Planet of Slums* that gives it its distinctive power. For in the social world of an emergent global capitalist modernity, the ‘grandest narratives’ just always are ‘histories of money’ in some fundamental sense.¹⁴

From a situated reading there is certainly tremendous value in this totalizing history of money. For instance, given that shack dwellers are routinely pathologised by local elites and the transnationalized Northern NGO/academic/donor complex as being responsible for their suffering by virtue of their own inadequacies, the remarkable scope of Davis’s analysis does shift the blame in useful directions. But it remains the case that the lived experience against which readers who know something about life and struggle in particular shack settlements will measure the degree to which these statistics accurately represent the lifeworlds they seek to describe is necessarily a question of local resonance.

In Durban a book like Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*¹⁵ (and even more so *Multitude*)¹⁶ can only be read as fiction in so far as it aspires to the global, and as alien in so far as it really describes the particular. But most of *Slums* reads like a welcome acknowledgement of the real lives of a part of humanity often rendered invisible in leftism orientated around the Northern left. Davis is particularly good when he identifies and addresses the reality of the two great curses of shack life – shit and fire. And he is just as good when he addresses the way in which post-colonial elites have aggressively adapted racial zoning to class and tend to withdraw to residential and commercial themeparks from which they engage in an ongoing struggle against the poor for control of the cities. Their strategies can include forced removal to bleak ghettos outside of cities, mass evictions (particularly in the lead up to major international events), brutal police repression of shack dwellers’ movements and active collaboration with international NGOs and donors acting to co-opt and demobilize resistance.

But it is also true that Davis’s global picture doesn’t always look right. This isn’t always a mere question of differences of perspective. At times Davis just hasn’t pulled his avalanche of information out of the library with sufficient care. For instance, readers familiar with South Africa will be astonished at Davis’ confusion of formal state built and serviced townships with informal self built and largely unserved shack settlements.¹⁷ And he is simply wrong to argue that shack settlements are always owned by slumlords.

¹³ David Cunningham, ‘Slumming It: Mike Davis’s grand narrative of urban revolution’, *Radical Philosophy*, No. 142, March/April 2007
http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2188&editorial_id=23627, accessed 6 July 2007.

¹⁴ Cunningham, *Slumming It*

¹⁵ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000

¹⁶ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri *Multitude*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004

¹⁷ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London 2006, p. 60

That is certainly not necessarily the case in Durban. And one can only assume that his unreferenced claim that “the militant NGOs so instrumental in creating the World Social Forums”¹⁸ are an exception to the relentless NGO tendency to cooption, clientelism and bureaucratization of popular struggle comes from an uncritical reading of the marketing put out by these NGOs. The experience in South Africa has been precisely the opposite – in Africa the WSF is an NGO project and not a popular movement project and the more left the NGO the more likely it is to seek to co-opt movements of the poor by buying off leaders with a view to subordinating them to the imperatives of the NGO with the objective of staking apparently credible claims for its own power in spaces like the WSF.¹⁹

Moreover, the thinking of people who live in shacks is entirely absent from this book. Davis does pose the question about the extent to which shack dwellers may or may not have the capacity for historical agency but misses numerous opportunities to indicate that the very question is profoundly and perversely prejudicial. For example he occasionally makes mention of various riots and protests but never enquires into what the rioters and protesters were thinking. The riot appears as a natural phenomenon. Similarly his, again naturalizing, description of Soweto as “having grown from a suburb to a satellite city”²⁰ leaves out the history and political agency of the shack dwellers’ movement, *Sofasonke* which in 1944 led more than ten thousand people to occupy the land that would later become Soweto.²¹ And he makes no attempts to show that shack dwellers have often been cultural innovators within popular cosmopolitanisms. He could, for example, have pointed to the large gay section of the Cato Manor settlement in Durban where homosexual marriage was pioneered in South Africa in the 1950s²² or noted that so much popular American music stems from a shack dweller – Woody Guthrie.²³

However there has been more serious critique. Harding is rightfully tough on Davis’s Third Worldist idealization of states before structural adjustment. And Cunningham notes, with reference to Robert Neuwirth’s cautions in this regard²⁴, that the use of the word ‘slum’ is risky given its origins in Victorian fear of a metropolitan savagery in the new ‘urban jungle’. But perhaps the strongest version of this line of critique has come from Tom Angotti writing in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Angotti is deeply skeptical of Davis’s claim to Marxism and sees his book as being much closer to the neo-liberalism against which it rails. He rejects the use of the word ‘slum’ outright arguing that it has racialized connotations that are used to justify ‘slum

¹⁸ Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 2006, p. 76

¹⁹ And in South Africa key people in or associated with left NGOs have, notoriously, and in an exact echo of the practice of the state/party called shack dwellers’ movements ‘criminal’ in the media when they have politely declined their money and their often racialized assumptions of a right to authority. See *What Happened at the SMI?* <http://abahlali.org/node/462#comment-662>, accessed 6 July 2007.

²⁰ Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 2006, p. 76

²¹ Tom Lodge *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* Ravan Press, Johannesburg 1983, p. 16.

²² See Iain Edwards Cato Manor, ‘June 1959’ in the superb collection *The People’s City: African life in Twentieth Century Durban* edited by Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996 pp. 102-144.

²³ Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A life* Random House, New York 1980

²⁴ Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A billion squatters, a new urban world* Routledge, New York, 2006

clearance', argues that Davis's "apocalyptic rhetoric feeds into longstanding anti-urban fears about working people who live in cities", laments the presentation of shack dwellers as atomized and apolitical and castigates Davis for the absence of any discussion of "the progressive and often radical urban movements struggling against evictions and displacement and for better living conditions."²⁵ It is certainly the case that in South Africa the UN Report which initially inspired Davis's book has been misused by the state to wage a major assault on shack settlements in the name of slum clearance. There is a clear danger that the apocalyptic aspects of Davis's book could be misused in the same way. Angotti also makes pointed reference to Janice Perlman's 1976 favela study *The Myth of Marginality* which, Angotti explains, argues that the idea of absolute marginality "allows strangers from afar to paint monstrous pictures of huge undifferentiated neighborhoods filled with hopeless underemployed masses".²⁶ He concludes that Davis has succumbed to a reactionary racialized and fearful anti-urbanism.

This bleak assessment is a fair assessment. Davis makes some profoundly bizarre and clearly racialized statements in this book, especially towards the end. For instance, prostitution is the only named cause cited as an explanation of the AIDS pandemic in parts of Africa and we are even told, by way of a right wing tabloid newspaper, that in Accra, Ghana, "75 percent of the waste of black polythene bags in the metropolis contains aborted human fetuses."²⁷ There is no attempt to approach this ludicrous statement critically or to ground it empirically. But things really fall apart when he concludes the book with a look, largely through imperial eyes, at Kinshasa. Commenting on his climatic reference to "Kurtzian horror" after a "frenzy of apocalyptic rhetoric"²⁸ Cunningham observes that "The accumulated historical force of this allusion threatens to tip Davis's account into a profoundly unintended discourse of 'primitivism' and 'third world savagery.'"²⁹ In his comments on Kinshasa Davis notes in passing that the city has been "officially expelled from the world economy by its Washington overseers"³⁰ and makes a couple of comments about the damage done by the IMF's successive structural adjustment programs. The civil war is just noted in passing and even then the comment comes, and not untypically, via USAID. Davis uncritically cites an anthropologist declaring the 1991 "popular pillaging of factories, stores, and warehouses" to be "perverse". But the real horror is reserved for the "fear of sorcery" (described as 'renascent' and as 'perverse') which has led to "the mass-hysterical denunciation of thousands of child 'witches' and their 'expulsion to the streets, even their murder.'" "USAID researchers", we are told, "blame the industry of self-made preachers".³¹ This image of a general 'Kurtzian' horror is accepted uncritically, despite its powerful resonance with the most base anti-African racist stereotype, and Davis sees no reason to label USAID, who work to legitimate state murder, as well as rapacious modes of extraction to the metropole and the very policies that in his view have produce the 'planet

²⁵ Tom Angotti, 'Apocalyptic Anti-Urbanism: Mike Davis and his planet of slums', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 30, No. 4, December 2006, p. 961 <http://abahlali.org/node/240>

²⁶ Angotti, *Apocalyptic Anti-Urbanism*, p. 962.

²⁷ Davis, *Slums*, 2006, p.135

²⁸ Cunningham, *Slumming it*, p.16

²⁹ Cunningham, *Slumming it*, p.16.

³⁰ Davis, *Slums*, 2006, p. 191.

³¹ Davis, *Slums*, 2006, p. 197.

of slums' in similarly pejorative ways. They appear as neutral eyes, white eyes dutifully confronting the horror out there in dark Africa.³² When he does make the quick gesture (rare in this book) of briefly citing a local intellectual, who speaks (with an unremarked on but strikingly different assessment to Davis) of "an economy of resistance" conferring honor on the poor, he describes him, in high colonial fashion, as "an authentic Kinois".³³

In his epilogue Davis notes that the American military is planning to fight its future wars in urban slums and calls their thinking in this regard "the highest stage of Orientalism, the culmination of a long history of defining the West by opposition to a hallucinatory Eastern Other... (a) delusionary dialectic of securitized versus demonic urban spaces."³⁴ He has inadvertently concluded his book with its own epitaph.

³² It is telling that although Davis describes the World Bank's professional staff as the contemporary avatar of the colonial civil service and ascribes the growth of the slum to neoliberal policies he never problematizes the fact that he relies so heavily on the work of the Bank and other institutions of contemporary imperialism. He seems to lack the conviction to take his analysis seriously which would, amongst other things, require him to approach most of his sources with a large degree of suspicion rather than respectful collegiality. A simple count of the positive and negative adjectives that he uses with regard to shack dwellers and researchers in imperial institutions gives a clear indication of who he fears and who he respects.

³³ Davis, *Slums*, 2006, p. 198.

³⁴ Davis, *Slums*, 2006, p. 206.