

REVIEW ESSAY

Like a Meteorite: The Life of Mike Davis¹

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Abstract

This article surveys the lifetime work of scholar-activist Mike Davis, and his attentiveness to the wide-ranging synthesis of the global political economy and ecology of capitalism and militarism, focusing on labor and social history, and to inequalities of race, class, gender, and nation, and struggles for diversity and inclusion, marking his distinctive style. Covering themes ranging from American exceptionalism, working-class formation, struggles for the eight-hour workday, the political economy and ecology of the Third World, and the growth of today's informal proletariat, the article underlines the author's deepest commitments to a lifetime of scholarship. These include democratic control over the means of production, and the remaking of the global system on new and enlarged, more peaceful and just socioecological foundations, now essential if humanity and other sentient beings are to survive and thrive.

On October 25, 2022, Mike Davis, born in 1946, in the Fontana suburb of Los Angeles, California, died. The child of working-class, Irish-Catholic parents, Davis's family moved to San Diego when he was young, and it was there that Davis was forever altered by the civil rights movement. He immersed himself in the work of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), organized for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and, in the same era as Angela Davis, became a member of the multiracial Communist Party of Southern California. To make a living, he worked as meat-cutter and long-distance truck driver, while also serving as a rank-and-file activist in the trade union opposition (Southern California Teamsters).

In the 1980s, Davis moved to London, becoming a long-time editor of the *New Left Review* until his passing.² Davis also edited Verso's Haymarket Series, dedicated to the legacy of Chicago's Haymarket martyrs who were murdered for their tireless activism for labor and immigrant rights in the aftermath of the May Day uprising of 1886—itsself part of the international struggle for the eight-hour workday.³ Davis's brilliant *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* came out in 1986, on the hundredth anniversary of these struggles, and a half-century after the sit-down strikes of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). As labor historian Gabriel Winant noted in a perceptive review of both *Prisoners* and Davis's oeuvre, he seamlessly integrated political economy with social and political history, entwining questions of race, ethnicity,

religion, city, community, neighborhood, and more.⁴ As the Brazilian historian Emilia Viotta da Costa once put it in the pages of *ILWCH*, some scholars sought to overcome the divide between experience and structure in labor history. Davis's work certainly aimed at exactly such a synthesis.⁵ Ever-present in Davis, too, were his spirit of generosity and visions of alternative urbanisms that could serve the laboring classes, remaking the world on socioecologically sustainable foundations.⁶

The first chapter of *Prisoners*, "Why the American Working Class is Different," starts off by noting that in 1828, "a group of Philadelphia artisans organized the first 'Labor Party' in world history."⁷ And of course, the struggles in the United States for the eight-hour workday, notably in Chicago's Haymarket Square, helped give birth to May Day, the international holiday commemorating labor worldwide. All the more striking then, that the United States today stands apart from all other advanced capitalist states, not to mention countries such as Brazil, in the absence of any independent labor or socialist party. Hence Davis's query: "Why has American labor, for all its cultural and organizational assets, been so weak as a class force?"⁸

In later chapters of *Prisoners*, "The Barren Marriage of American Labor and the Democratic Party" and the "Rise and Fall of the House of Labor," Davis interrogates these central questions of American exceptionalism so as to examine the possibilities for a revival of the labor movement today. These essays still retain their relevance for understanding the right turn in the United States, and globally, as well as the crisis of actually existing democracy.⁹ As with W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, Davis long argued that the failure of the US labor movement to align itself with the Black freedom struggle, and workers of color more generally, contributes to its declining power. This weakness is revealed today in the continued shift of workers without a college degree, especially white workers, toward an increasingly extremist Republican Party, which continues to successfully capture large shares of these voters through nativist and racist appeals.¹⁰

Prisoners went on to chronicle the fate of labor in the aftermath of these failures, in the eye of Ronald Reagan's counterrevolutionary hurricane. It specifically sought to signal what Davis called "those real historical forces which do exist to sustain the project—and the responsibility—of an internationalist Left in the United States."¹¹ As part of this larger project, his multivolume, *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook*, took up many of these same issues starting in 1985. Shortly after these timely interventions, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, arguably Davis's most famous work, was published, earning him a 1998 MacArthur genius award. Two other widely read books *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998) and *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (2001) soon followed.¹² In fact, though, Davis's earliest interventions in articles like "The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World," were as a historian of labor and capitalism, it was through books like *City of Quartz* and *Late Victorian Holocausts* that Davis revealed his unique socioecological perspective as well as his deepest hopes and motivations.¹³ As Davis told one interviewer in the early 1990s:

I never expected that we would be so much in the position of fighting not just over the nature of the future, but to defend the past, to defend the millions of

human beings who died in the struggle for labor and socialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Now obviously for socialists this is the hour of the furnaces, it's the most trying time imaginable, but I still can't believe, that there is any alternative for humanity except to figure out some way to...democratically organize the means of production.¹⁴

In the first decade of the new millennium, Davis published books on immigration, empire, neoliberalism, the car bomb, and an introduction to a biography of the US socialist activist Eugene V. Debs.¹⁵ Yet arguably Davis's most important and widely read book of greatest relevance for labor scholars and activists continues to be his 2006 examination of urban inequality *Planet of Slums*. A powerful indictment of contemporary capitalism in the *longue duree* (which led the Vatican to invite the author to meet the Holy See), *Planet of Slums* was inspired by the heroic labors of Jan Breman, one of the world's pioneering scholars of labor and informality.¹⁶ In the book, Davis asks the question of whether this burgeoning informal proletariat, the fastest-growing class on the planet, can exercise historical agency. As Davis notes, the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm raised this burning issue in a 1995 interview in *ILWCH*, shortly after the publication of his *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*.¹⁷

In a 2004 article in *New Left Review*, Davis laid out the existential challenges confronting a surplus humanity in the twenty-first century. In a section of that essay, titled "Marx and the Holy Ghost," Davis revealed his longstanding concern with the religions of the poor, observing that "for the moment at least, Marx has yielded the historic stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost. If God died in the cities of the industrial revolution, he has risen again in the postindustrial cities of the developing world."¹⁸ A series of questions peppered a review of the role of urbanization, industrialization, proletarianization, and secularization in classical social theory, just as such processes were undergoing fundamental reversals. In today's era of urbanization without industrialization—recapitulating in part the experience of Dublin and Naples, and excepting East Asia—to paraphrase Davis: Pentecostal Christianity, populist Islam, and the cult of Shivaji, or Hinduvata, occupy analogous social spaces of earlier ideologies of socialism and anarchism across the burgeoning slums and cities of the Global South. Global Christianity, now primarily a non-Western religion with believers living primarily outside its historic home of Europe and North America, is today energized by Pentecostalism, which with its African American origins, "retains a fundamentally exilic identity."¹⁹

If *Prisoners* and *Planet of Slums* are among the most important works by Davis, for labor historians, his 2018 *Old Gods, New Enigmas* is the most appropriate bookend for Davis's engagement with labor and working-class history, an issue that was always at the center of his life's work and hopes and dreams for a better future. Here, Davis explores the question of revolutionary agency, putting forward what he called a "*historical sociology* conforming to the ideal-type of a socialist working class in the eras of the First and Second Internationals ... designed primarily as a comparative matrix for thinking about agency in the radically changed conditions of contemporary class conflict."²⁰ What follows is an extraordinary tour of European and US labor history from 1838–1921, with forays into Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, and the present. Designed to grapple with the shift of the vast majority of Marx's industrial

proletariat outside the United States and Europe (most notably toward China, the new workshop of the world), as well as processes of deindustrialization and automation, Davis scans the future to try to “solve the puzzle of how heterodox social categories might be fitted together in a single resistance to capitalism.”²¹

Grounding the argument in the volcanic eruptions of US and European working classes seeking bread and dignity starting in the nineteenth century, Davis attempts a periodization that captures the shifting terrain of class struggle, from the early rise and proliferation of socialist theory, to the defeat of the Revolutions of 1848 and the discovery of gold in California, to the rise and fall of the First and Second Internationals through the US Civil War, the Paris Commune, and beyond.²² Coming into view here are the Great Depression of 1873–1896, including what Davis calls the *Sturm-und-Drang* of the workers’ movement in Europe and North America (1878–1889), socialism’s long spring (1890–1906), which included the Russia, Revolution of 1905 (an event that “reset all the clocks in Europe,” with reverberations throughout the world), and the Third European Revolution (1916–1921). This latter period saw the fiery spread of revolution throughout wartime Europe, as war and industrial mobilization became transmission belts for socialist-inspired revolution and counterrevolution. The latter tragically planted seeds for the spread of fascism and barbarism throughout much of Europe, especially after the Great Depression, at least until the Red Army ensured the American Century, rather than the Thousand Year Reich, would prevail.²³

These interrogations are leveraged to adumbrate theses on the role of the working classes in the formation of hegemonic alliances and historic social blocs. Davis highlights, for instance, the central role of international solidarity in forming new global subjects, bound together in chains, yet struggling for a new birth of freedom and a better world. Davis quotes the Chartist George Julian Harney, who at the first supper of the Fraternal Democrats in London in 1845, proclaimed “We repudiate the word ‘foreigner’—it shall exist not in our democratic vocabulary!”²⁴ So too in writings on the US Civil War and during the founding of the First International did Marx himself emphasize the indispensable role of international solidarity of working people and their allies across the globe, particularly in calls for the eight-hour workday. This quest for time crystallized transnational workers’ struggles in this era, laying the foundations for the Socialist International, although not until the Russian Revolution, and the titanic class struggles that followed, did this demand triumph throughout much of Europe.²⁵

Central in these struggles were the memory of martyrs fighting for another world—whether it was in the US Civil War, during the years of Black Reconstruction, the Paris Commune of 1871, the nation-wide US strikes of 1877, or the Haymarket uprising of 1886.²⁶ More recently, we can also point to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations in the aftermath of the police murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, which echoed around the world to commemorate their lives and further the struggle against police violence, as well as Greta Thunberg’s Friday for Future global climate strikes. Today we see increasing efforts to combine environmental and labor movements as part of a Green New Deal. Though such alliances go back to the 1999 Battle for Seattle, Davis, in his powerful essay on climate change, “Who Will Build the Ark?”, traces their earlier origins to the utopian dreams and experiments of radical urbanists, anarchists, and socialists, through Red Vienna and beyond.²⁷

Underscoring class consciousness as a project, at first largely defensive, then increasingly assertive as part of the move toward collective moral transcendence of the socio-ecological relations of actually existing capitalism, Davis has long paid attention to the Achilles' heels of the labor movement during this period: white supremacy and patriarchy. Emphasized here, too, are the oftentimes ethno-religious and national bases of class conflict, as well as the related struggles of women against exploitation and sexual harassment inside workplaces and in the community. As Davis notes, such struggles are intimations "of the gender-equal liberating force that the socialist movement had to become, yet largely failed to be."²⁸ Here, Davis invokes the legendary figure of Flora Tristan, who even before Marx called for an international of workers linking socialism and feminism. In the early 1840s, Tristan also called for the construction of Workers' Palaces, or the labor temple, as the socialist alternative to the bourgeois public sphere.²⁹

Davis emphasizes the centrality of both the agrarian question and the city for the trajectory of labor, including through constructions of communal and residential associations and cooperatives, struggles for shelter, and movements for municipal socialism.³⁰ In a poignant passage, Davis reminds us of the deepest well-springs of labor's struggle for self-emancipation, and that of humanity as a whole. He recounts a legendary tale of a caterpillar that only crosses the "threshold of metamorphosis by seeing its future butterfly," alluding to the butterfly effect, wherein chaotic systems provide nonlinear paths to alternate futures—in this instance, a more peaceful, solidaristic, and ecologically sustainable world.³¹

Intimately related to this is Davis's final thesis in *Old Gods, New Enigmas*: "Labor must rule because the bourgeoisie is ultimately unable to fulfill the promises of progress. If the socialist project is defeated the result will be the retrogression of civilization as a whole."³² Such impassioned analysis, accompanied by tireless activism, are essential if humanity is to overcome the threats of catastrophic climate change, global militarism, the very real possibility of a nuclear holocaust, and the hollowing out of the dreams of future generations, in the face of today's astounding inequalities of wealth and power. All of Davis's work, including his laser focus on the political economy and ecology of militarism, and related struggles for peace and justice, were firmly rooted in the finest traditions of progressive left internationalism, and his lifetime of scholarship and activism sought to make such international solidarity a reality.

In a world where catastrophic militarism and climate change, xenophobia, ethno-religious nationalism, and resurgent patriarchy seem to be the order of the day, Davis sought to help movements understand the world and change it.³³ Hopefully, today's generation will heed this clarion call for international solidarity so as to light the way for better futures.

Notes

1. Davis was an avid meteorite collector, part of his engagement with the scientific theory of catastrophism, and related concepts such as punctuated equilibrium, versus the earlier assumptions of uniformitarianism, which increasingly provided inspiration for his many works. See Maria Golia, *Meteorite: Nature and Culture* (London, 2015); Richard Hugget, *Catastrophism* (London, 1997); and Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

2. For the distinctive project of this journal in general and the achievements of Davis in particular, see Perry Anderson, "Ukania Perpetua?" *New Left Review* 125 (September/October 2020): 60–62.

3. See Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ, 1984).

4. Gabriel Winant, "Mike Davis's Specificities: Repetitious and Reductive Appeals to the Universal Never Satisfied," *N + I*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/daviss-specificities/>.
5. Charles Bergquist's *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Columbia* (Stanford, CA, 1986), inspired by the new social history and world-systems analysis, is particularly noteworthy in this regard. For an important appreciation, see Forrest Hylton and Catherine G. Legrand, "Charles W. Bergquist (1942-2020)," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (2021): 491-96.
6. See Roger Keil's beautiful essay, "Mike Davis: Remembering a Giant of Generosity," *Azure* (January 30, 2023).
7. Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (New York, 2018), 4. See also Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, 1991), 282-88.
8. Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, x.
9. See also Angela B. Cornell and Mark Barenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Labor and Democracy* (New York, 2022).
10. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, Eric Foner and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. (New York, 2021); Matteo Battistini, "Karl Marx and the Global History of the Civil War: The Slave Movement, Working-Class Struggle, and the American State Within the World Market," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 100 (Fall 2021): 158-85. For an important analysis, which draws on Davis's *Prisoners*, see Dilan Riley and Robert Brenner, "Seven Theses on American Politics," *New Left Review* 138 (November/December 2022): 5-27. For an earlier attempt to grasp these realities, see Mike Davis, "The Great God Trump and the White Working Class," Lance Selfa, ed., *US Politics in an Age of Uncertainty* (Chicago, 2017), 61-84, and Mike Davis, "Trench Warfare: Notes on the 2020 Election," *New Left Review* 126 (November/December 2020): 5-32. See also Eric Rauchway, "Neither a Depression Nor a New Deal," Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), 30-44.
11. Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, xiii.
12. For a recent important work exploring similar themes, see Tariq Omar Ali, *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).
13. Mike Davis, "The Stop Watch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World," *Radical America* 9, no. 1 (January-February 1975): 69-95. Mike Davis, "'Fordism' in Crisis," *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations* II, no. 2 (Fall 1978): 207-69. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, 2018).
14. "An Interview With Mike Davis," Michael Frommer, *Chicago Review* 38, no. 4 (1993): 38.
15. Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City* (New York, 2000); Justin Akers Chacon and Mike Davis, *No One is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence at the U.S.-Mexican Border* (Chicago, 2006); Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (New York, 2007); Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene V. Debs* (Chicago, 2007); Mike Davis, *In Praise of Barbarians: Essays Against Empire* (Chicago, 2007); Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York, 2007). Most recently, Davis co-authored (with historian Jon Wiener) *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the 1960s* (New York, 2020) and published *The Monster Enters: COVID 19, the Avian Flu, and the Plagues of Capitalism* (New York, 2022).
16. Most recently, see Jan Breman, *Fighting to Become Free Again* (New Delhi, 2023), Jan Breman and Ganshyam Shah, *Gujarat, Cradle and Harbinger of Identity Politics: India's Injurious Frame of Communalism* (New Delhi, 2022), and Ashwani Saith, "A Defiant Sociologist and His Craft: Jan Breman; An Appreciation and Conversation," *Development and Change* 47, no. 4 (July 2016): 876-901.
17. Mike Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory* (New York, 2018), xvi-xvii, 1-2. "History in the 'Age of Extremes': A Conversation with Eric Hobsbawm," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (March 2013): 19. See also, Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (New York, 1994, 2010), and Mark R. Beissner, *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion* (Princeton, NJ, 2022).
18. Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums," *New Left Review* 26 (March/April 2004): 30.
19. Davis, "Planet of Slums," 33. For an update, with a focus on the centrality of Africa, see *Washington Post*, Max Bearak, Dylan Moriarty, and Julia Ledur, "Africa's Rising Cities: How Africa Will Become the

Center of the World's Urban Future," (November 19, 2021) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/inter-active/2021/africa-cities/>, as well as the important assessment by Giovanni Arrighi, "The African Crisis: World Systemic and Regional Aspects," *New Left Review* 15 (May–June 2002): 5–38. On the radically different experience of China and East Asia, see Ju Li, *Enduring Change* (Berlin, 2019), Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai, *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers* (Chicago, 2020), Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21st Century* (New York, 2009), Ivan Franceschini & Christian Sorace, eds., *Proletarian China: A Century of Chinese Labour*, London: Verso & Made in China Journal, 2022.

20. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 20–21.

21. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 7. For two more recent contemporary explorations of the implications of our so-called neoliberal present, see David G. Blanchflower, *Not Working: Where Have All the Good Jobs Gone?* (Princeton, NJ, 2019), and Carl Benedikt Frey, *The Technology Trap: Capital, Labor, and Power in the Age of Automation* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).

22. Since attempts at such periodization are fewer than might be hoped for, future scholars might fruitfully interrogate the work of Davis through the lens of Giovanni Arrighi's "Marxist Century, American Century: The Making and Remaking of the World Labour Movement," *New Left Review* 179 (January/February, 1990): 29–64; "World Income Inequalities and the Future of Socialism," *New Left Review* 189 (September/October 1991): 39–66, as well as assessments of the trajectory of the labor movement in this journal. For the latter, see "Scholarly Controversy: Global Flows of Labor and Capital," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 49 (Spring 1995): 1–55, with contributions by Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, Aristide R. Zolberg, E.J. Hobsbawm, Lourdes Beneria.

23. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 31–33, 136–43.

24. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 143.

25. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 123–27. Gary Cross, *A Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840-1940* (Berkeley, CA, 1989).

26. See especially, Mike Davis, "Ward Moore's Freedom Ride," *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 2011): 385–92.

27. See the important work of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst: <https://peri.umass.edu/component/k2/item/1404-impacts-of-the-reimagine-appalachia-clean-energy-transition-programs-for-west-virginia>, Craig Calhoun and Benjamin Y. Fong, eds., *The Green New Deal and the Future of Work* (New York, 2022) *The Climate Book*, created by Greta Thunberg (New York, 2023), and Mike Davis, "Who Will Build the Ark?," *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, especially 217–22. See also Rob McFarland, Georg Spitaler, and Ingo Zechner, eds., *The Red Vienna Sourcebook* (Rochester, NY, 2020).

28. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 52, 51–55. For an important recent exploration in the aftermath of the global Me Too Movement, see *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 19, no. 1 (March 2022), Special Issue on Class and Consent, ed. Christopher Phelps.

29. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 101–03. See Flora Tristan, *The Workers' Union*, trans. and intro. Beverly Livingston (Urbana, IL, 2007 [1843]); Sandra Dijkstra, *Flora Tristan* (New York, 2019); Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca, NY, 2003); Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CT, 2021).

30. For four powerful works here, see Shelton Stromquist, *Claiming the City: A Global History of Workers' Fight for Municipal Socialism* (New York, 2023); Robert M. Fogelson's, *The Great Rent Wars, New York, 1917-1929* (New Haven, CT, 2013) and *Working-Class Utopias: A History of Cooperative Housing in New York City* (Princeton, NJ, 2022); Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (New York, 2021).

31. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 21.

32. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 153.

33. See Mike Davis, "Nuclear Imperialism and Extended Deterrence," *New Left Review*, ed., *Exterminism and Cold War* (New York, 1982), 35–64, and *Dead Cities* (New York, 2002).