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THE DESIRE CALLED DYSTOPIA

Lisa Brawley

Planet of Slums by Mike Davis. London: Verso, 2006. Pp. 228. $24.00 cloth, $16.25 paper.

"The slums have a brilliant future" (151). This is the stark assessment of Mike Davis's most recent book, an account of the "worldwide catastrophe of urban poverty" (21) that catalogs with impressive concision the brutal disparities of contemporary urbanization at a time of the world-historic shift from a majority rural planet to a majority urban one. Yet, as Davis notes, this emerging urban world is not what an earlier generation of urbanists imagined it would be: "Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay" (19). As a portrait of the urban present, Davis's account is bleak—one out of every three people who live in cities lives in poverty—but the book is driven by a vision of an even more forbidding crisis looming on the near horizon. "Slum populations are growing by a staggering 25 million people each year, yet the frontier of squattable land has closed, replaced by squalor for rent at rising prices, and the informal economy, which provides poor people their limited livelihood, is becoming as densely overcrowded as the slums themselves." What are the geopolitical implications of vast, unprecedented concentrations of poor people living in deplorable and deteriorating conditions in sprawling impoverished "cities without jobs"? This is the animating question of Davis's book, the question that gives his book its

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palpable urgency and drives its pacing and prose.

The impetus for *Planet of Slums* was a 2003 United Nations report that Davis identifies as the "first truly global audit of urban poverty" (20). The landmark report coordinated the work of more than 100 researchers, synthesizing statistical data from more than 231 cities and incorporating that with household-level survey data. Davis first drew attention to the UN report in an essay he wrote for the *New Left Review,* and that 2003 essay contains in miniature the arc and argument of the present book. Davis nods to the fraught heritage of his book's key term, but he largely sidesteps the analytic problem of defining "the slum" by adopting the operational definition that guided the UN study. The UN study, he suggests, discards the "Victorian calumnies" that attended nineteenth-century studies of urban poverty but preserves the "classical definition of a slum, characterized by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure" (23).

With the UN study as a starting point, Davis has scanned and synthesized a truly astonishing array of the available scholarly literature on global urban poverty; he has condensed this research into a stark and at times breathless account of just over two hundred pages. His pages brim with foreboding statistics and charts as he recounts the uneven process of slum urbanization in the "exploding cities of the developing world" (5). All across the Global South, slums are growing faster than cities, and cities are growing faster than the population itself. Mumbai is predicted to have 10 million slum dwellers by 2015. And by that same year, Africa is expected to have 332 million slum dwellers, "a number that will continue to double every fifteen years" (19). More than 78 percent of the developing world lives in slums. The starkly uneven process is amplified by the unprecedented pace of urbanization itself: in the single decade of the 1980s, China urbanized more rapidly "than did all of Europe (including Russia) in the entire nineteenth century!" (2).

Davis describes both the sprawling urban agglomerations that are engulfing their regional peripheries at unprecedented rates and the new modalities of urbanization—"dramatic new species of urbanism" (10), the "pathologies of urban form" (128)—that such rapid urban expansion has spawned. He cites the example of the "the giant amoeba of Mexico City," which is extending "pseudopods that will eventually incorporate much of central Mexico . . . into a single megalopolis with a mid-twenty-first-century population of approximately 50 million people—about 40 percent of the national total" (5). Throughout the world's fastest-growing cities, a diffuse and expanding urban substrate erodes the distinction between "rural" and

"urban" as urbanization "collides" against countryside, creating a "hermaphroditic landscape" that is "neither rural nor urban but a blending of the two" (9). Davis cites the example of southern China, where many of the planet's most rapidly expanding cities are located and where the "countryside is urbanizing *in situ*." Cities in this part of China are sprawling outward at such a rate that "rural people no longer have to migrate to the city; it migrates to them" (9).

Davis draws particular attention to a facet of contemporary urbanization that is especially disturbing: the "radical decoupling" of urbanization from industrialization—megacities without jobs. The vast, sprawling cities of the Global South present very few opportunities for formal employment for the streams of people flowing into them. Thus, Davis argues, the slums of today are importantly unlike those of nineteenth-century industrial cities in Europe and North America described by Friedrich Engels, Charles Booth, and Jacob Riis. The nineteenth-century slum housed new wage laborers, the emergent proletariat of the industrial revolution; by contrast, the "postmodern slums" (19) serve to "warehous[e] this century's surplus humanity," housing those for whom there is no formal work, and form a "vast mass of surplus labor" (201). Davis suggests that this phenomena of urbanization without industrialization confounds classical social theorists "from Karl Marx to Max Weber" who understood urbanization as a result of industrialization and thus also as a component of economic growth and capitalist modernization. Decoupled from economic expansion, however, current breakneck rates of urban growth do not signal a coming metropolis, but the opposite: in many of the fastest-growing cities of the planet, this mode of urbanization has meant "the death of the formal city and its institutions" (194).

"The slum was not the inevitable urban future" (61), Davis insists, but is rather the direct result of specific initiatives and contingent alignments that took shape during the second half of the twentieth century. As Davis chronicles the mass production of global urban poverty, two interlinked moments stand out as decisive: the failure of postcolonial states to provide housing and jobs for their poorest citizens, and the financial instruments and policy directives emerging from the "Washington Consensus." Davis argues that "with a handful of exceptions the postcolonial state has comprehensively betrayed its promises to the urban poor" (69). He cites examples drawn from three continents in which state-funded housing initiatives benefited middle classes rather than the poor, and in which "slum improvement" programs provided the excuse for evicting poor people and bulldozing their neighborhoods. He quotes a Nairobi slum dweller who describes

the extent of the abdication of the state from social provision: "The state does nothing here. It provides no water, no schools, no sanitation, no roads, no hospitals" (62). Davis's chapters are punctuated by account after account of missing, crumbling, or privatized urban infrastructure: of private roadways for the wealthy in Buenos Aires, of a single toilet serving more than six thousand people in a shantytown in Beijing, of vendors in Mumbai who rebottle municipal tap water and sell it to slum dwellers without access to water systems at unthinkable profits, at up to 4,000 percent of cost (145). Davis cites a 1996 World Health Organization study that reports that at any given time more than half of the Global South's urban population is suffering from diseases associated with the lack of the most basic provisions for safe water and adequate sanitation (144).

While Davis identifies one key source of slum urbanization in the "broken promises and stolen dreams" of the postcolonial state, he directs his most strident critique at the ideologies and institutions that emerged in the late 1970s as part of the "Washington Consensus." Davis describes the role played by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that, under the mantle of laissez-faire deregulation and in the name of poverty reduction, forced open newly national Third World economies to global finance. Davis draws on the World Bank's own subsequent studies to conclude that the so-called structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s not only made many poor countries poorer, but also eroded the fragile social networks upon which the urban poor depend to survive in conditions of extreme and increasing poverty.

Davis is at his most emphatic when he refutes the ideas of neoliberal modernizers such as Ferdinand de Sota who champion the "informal sector" as offering solutions to urban poverty. Davis refutes as "myth" the idea that the informal sector is composed of "heroic self-employed workers" who lift themselves out of poverty by transforming refuse into trinkets or hawking products on crowded streets. In truth, argues Davis, the majority of the people who scrape by in the informal sector work for other people, forming a scattered proletariat, one deprived of a factory floor as a base of potential political solidarity. Moreover, Davis argues, the very informality of labor in the informal sector—the absence of contracts, structures of accountability, or regulations—often exacerbates exploitation, increases inequality, and exposes the most vulnerable of poor people to even greater levels of vulnerability. Women and children are especially subject to the informal sector's hyper-exploitation, and Davis does not shy away from invoking the more macabre industries that such sub-subsistence urbanism has

spawned, such as parents who sell their children into slavery and the traffic in human organs (187, 190). Davis also argues that the sheer number of new migrants to the world's poorest cities threatens to swamp whatever capacity the informal sector might once have had as a route out of poverty. Davis cites the example of Kinsasha, where fewer than 5 percent of the population earn a regular wage, and where the informal sector will have to absorb a full 95 percent of the people looking for work (191).

In the final pages of his globe-spanning survey, Davis arrives at the stark conclusion: "The late-capitalist triage of humanity, then, has already taken place" (199). "Apart from the de Sotan cargo cult of infinitely flexible informalism," Davis argues, "there is no official scenario for the reincorporation of this vast mass of surplus labor into the mainstream of the world economy" (199). Davis argues that while neoliberalizers pursue the pipe dream of an infinitely elastic informal economy, military strategists are studying the global slums with "coldblooded lucidity" (205). Davis cites war planners who see the "'feral, failed cities' of the Third World" as the breeding grounds of terrorist insurgencies and who predict the slums will be "the distinctive battlespace of the twenty-first century" (205). "The future of warfare . . . lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, industrial parks, and the sprawl of houses, shacks, and shelters that form the broken cities of our world" (203). Armed with dark visions and a developing set of military training protocols—Military Operations on Urban Terrain—U.S. soldiers have actively begun to train for the coming war in and for the planet's growing slums. In the book's final sentences, Davis sketches a nightmare vision of the planet as it is being shaped by the conjoined practices of neoliberalization and the global war on terror: "Night after night, hornetlike helicopter gunships stalk enigmatic enemies in the narrow streets of slum districts, pouring hellfire into shanties or fleeing cars. Every morning the slums reply with suicide bombers and eloquent explosions. If the empire can deploy Orwellian technologies of repression, its outcasts have the gods of chaos on their side" (206).

Planet of Slums, in short, depicts a darkly dystopic picture of a planet brutally divided into warring zones: securitized enclaves for the few, and sprawling, impoverished zones of disease and despair for the many. Over the course of his numerous books, Davis has fine-tuned the urban apocalyptic as a genre of critique. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the dystopia that Davis develops in *Planet of Slums* is precisely a *diagnostic* one—or even that it is Davis's own. For all of its impressive amassing of statistics and synthesis of others' research, the dystopia that unfolds here is a

borrowed one: plucked from the pages of UN studies, development agency reports, World Bank policy papers, and finally U.S. Army War College propaganda. In *Planet of Slums,* Davis ratifies—and often explicitly quotes—these agencies' own most dire warnings: that urban poverty will become the "most significant, politically explosive, problem of the next century" (20). Yet it is precisely this dystopic image and the conceptual terrain it captures—of a flat planet, of incomplete or failed development, of corrupt or missing democratic regimes—that launched and sustains the development and military training protocols against which Davis so rightly aims his invective. If dire images of "feral cities" presently animate the training manuals and ignite the imaginations of soldiers in the mounting global war on terror, what do these same bleak images inaugurate when uttered by Davis? If it is this borrowed dystopia that saturates Davis's text with a palpable sense of urgency, what does Davis urge, precisely?

At its best, the secondhand dystopia of *Planet of Slums* aims to recalibrate the political agendas of a floundering left project and to place the "global catastrophe of urban poverty" at the center of left struggles against the devastations of global capitalism. It insists that a central tactic of that struggle must be to de-legitimate and decenter neoliberalism as a political project with global ambitions. (This is also the critical force of Davis's more recent edited volume, *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism,* also from Verso.) In this way, Davis can be seen to offer a counter-apocalyptic to visions of planetary meltdown that mobilize the emerging political movement to address climate change. Davis's dark portrait of the ongoing political catastrophe of global poverty intervenes to insist that the planetary threat posed by global warming is less an ecological problematic than a *political* ecological one. Finally, Davis's account of the mass production of slum urbanization very powerfully serves to reorder the priorities of those who study the forces and trajectories of contemporary urbanization, interrupting discussions of "iconic architecture" and "smart growth," and placing cities of the Global South at the center rather than the periphery of the study of the city.

Davis's vivid critical appraisal stops short of grasping the world as anything other than a closed system, careening inexorably toward violent collapse. And thus, at its worst, the secondhand dystopia of *Planet of Slums* can be seen to confirm the modernizer's lament: to urge a more thoroughgoing development, to corroborate the premises of those who would wage war on global poverty, to advocate a more efficient incorporation of the world's poor as the solution to their marginalization within global capitalism, and to

(tacitly) ratify the conception of historical transformation embedded within a modernizing trajectory. One could invoke Fredric Jameson to diagnose the closed circle of Davis's critique: "radical alternatives, systemic transformations, cannot be theorized or even imagined within the conceptual field governed by the word 'modern.'" Jameson continues: "What we really need is a wholesale displacement of thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia."[1] What, then, is one to make of the desire called Dystopia?

The chief failing of *Planet of Slums* is that in it Davis occludes from view—his as well as ours—the world as it is made by the people who live in the conditions he catalogs with such impressive concision. The question of the historical agency of the growing mass of people who live in unlivable conditions makes only a few brief, late appearances in this book, even while Davis insists that there are no doubt "myriad acts of resistance" and that "the future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism" (202). Indeed, the freight of his examples works against Davis's own assertion, made late in the book's 206 pages, that there "is no monolithic subject or unilateral trend in the global slum" (202). In a fundamental sense, *Planet of Slums* is an incomplete undertaking—half of a book—which Davis in fact acknowledges in the end. We learn in the epilogue that Davis is working on another book, which will address the "history and future of slum-based resistance to global capitalism" (207). This book will not be crafted as a synthetic account of studies and surveys, but will be based on "concrete, comparative case studies," and grounded in "real political sociology" (201). For this sequel, Davis plans to enlist the help of activist-scholar and political anthropologist Forrest Hylton, whose understanding of slum urbanization has been shaped by time spent "behind a barricade in the Andes" (207). Thus we must wait for this next book to discover with Davis the forms of historical agency that his globe-spanning survey of slum urbanism elides. One wonders whether Davis will allow the concrete experience of slum-based resistance to retroactively revise the conceptual framework of the present book and crack open the closed circuit of its despair. Is another world still possible? Davis can only reply, for now, another book is coming.

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NOTES

1. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 215.