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City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles**Mike Davis**

Vintage Books: New York, 1991

Reviewed by Cædmon Staddon**What is Los Angeles?**

There is a quote at the beginning of Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* which, in effect, sums up the organising thread of the entire work. Citing Morrow Mayo, a prominent *L.A. Times* critic during the 1930s, Davis underlines the notion of Los Angeles as the archetypical expression of a capitalist political economy:

Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a *commodity*; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash.¹

Despite the attempts of utopian visionaries, whether socialists like the Young People's Socialist League, or "benevolent" capitalists like Henry Kaiser, the 'lebensraum' maintained in the "City of Angels" is one which is firmly founded upon the zero sum promise of economic prosperity through capitalist exchange. This is the thread which connects General Otis, one of the original nineteenth century promoters of LA as an idyl-by-the-sea, to Henry Kaiser, and finally to the Bloods and Crips of our own era, whose new empire of crack induced violence can now be seen as merely another phase in the increasingly brutal Faustian exchange of soul and community for power and financial gain. Davis assures us that however complicated the actual realities of L.A., in the end its struggles are indelibly *class* struggles.² In fact in Davis's view LA is the place where the full force of late capitalism, and of postmodernism, find their most 'advanced' expressions - a terrifying thought for those coping with the aftermath of recent riots in south central LA and other American cities.

City of Quartz is divided into seven chapters, introduced by a short prologue. The prologue tells us that "the best place to view the Los Angeles of the next millenium is from the ruins of its alternative future". These Davis finds in the ruins of the "General Assembly Hall of the Socialist City of Llano del Rio", the focal point for a pre World War I socialist utopia, and his model of an "anti-LA". Chapter one reviews the place of LA in the

changing intellectual landscape; charting the profusion of images of LA which have been produced by its "boosters", "debunkers", "noirs" and "exiles". The next two chapters present an historical geography of LA's political landscape, at the macro and micro scales respectively. Together these first three chapters complete the 'background' for the remaining four, each of which presents an aspect of LA startlingly resonant in the context of the April 1992 LA riots. (I will return to the relations between Davis's self-proclaimed "excavations" and the current realities in LA in the epilogue to this review.)

In chapter four Davis shows us a Los Angeles subjecting itself to a new form of spatial "Haussmanisation". Everywhere he turns, public spaces are disappearing and/or being carefully policed by helicopter SWAT teams which orient themselves with military issue infrared sensing systems as well as the street numbers painted on the rooftops of many Angelino properties. Under the constant surveillance of \$5/hour rent-a-cops, banks of video screens and even citizen vigilantes, LA neighbourhoods are being transformed into permanent police zones where all intruders are assumed to be dangerous until proven, however temporarily, to be otherwise. Public space -if we can still use the adjective "public" at all- is reconfigured to permit only a very narrow band of possible uses. As Davis puts it:

The American city... is being systematically turned inside out - or rather outside in. The valorised spaces of the new megastructures and super malls are concentrated in the center, street frontage is denuded, public activity is sorted into strictly functional compartments, and circulation is internalised in corridors under the gaze of private police. (Davis, p.226)

But this spatial control is about more than just the redefinition of a 'public' sphere in terms of the private exchange of surplus value (malls as quasi-public spaces). It is also about optimising the *circulation* of different actors within the LA space economy. Like the "family of eyes" which haunted Baudelaire as he quaffed coffee on one of Baron Haussmann's redesigned Paris boulevards, those marginalised from full participation in these bourgeois play-pens nevertheless remain critical to its smooth operation.³

The last three chapters of *City of Quartz* give us three vignettes of contemporary Los Angeles. In the "Hammer and the Rock" (chapter five) Davis shows how the LA business and law enforcement communities have

systematically redefined the image of the drug addict-dealer community as the ultimate pariah for all of society's problems, "like the tramp scares of the nineteenth century, or the Red scares in the twentieth" (Davis 270). Of course Davis does not deny that the rising tide of gang violence has been induced, partially, by the extremely lucrative trade in drugs like crack and speed. The point is, rather, that the business and law enforcement communities have cynically manipulated a drug problem endemic in the Black and Latino communities to drive yet another wedge into the abilities of those communities to organise collective political action.⁴ That police and state officials could count on support from a not inconsiderable number of Black and Latino leaders, including leaders of a highly conservative Catholic Church (Chapter Six), with a stake in the status quo has lent extra fuel to the ferocity of the police attack on the now universally despised and feared enemy. After one "Hammer" raid, directed by the now infamous LAPD Chief Daryl Gates, damage was so extensive that the Red Cross was actually called in to provide emergency disaster relief (Davis 276)!

In the final chapter "Junkyard of Dreams", we have returned, thematically, to the originary point of Davis's journey through LA. Here we find that quintessentially American fantasy of LA as a capitalist Elysian Gardens confronted, in a Benjaminian sense, with the "wreckage" of its own inexorable logic. The "Inland Empire", once an ex-urban community of fruit growers, then a steel working town built on the financial wheedling of Henry Kaiser, has now become just another homogeneous suburb engineered by bankers and accountants. As Davis himself says:

...Fontana...provides a parable: it is about the fate of those suburbanised California working classes who cling to their tarnished dreams at the far edge of the LA galaxy. (Davis 376).

Not surprisingly, the irony of this extreme reluctance to relinquish these "tarnished dreams", is especially apparent from the ruins of Llano del Rio, inhabited now only by sagebrush and the occasional illegal migrant seeking after his or her own fortunes in "el norte".

City of Quartz and Contemporary Social Theory

It is my opinion that *City of Quartz* is a remarkable, and perhaps even landmark, achievement in critical social science. One highly positive attribute of Davis's book is its ready acquaintance with so many intimate

details of its object of study. After all, *City of Quartz* begins on the ruins of a long forgotten and moribund socialist community, moves back to the original machinations of California's cowboy capitalists, such as the *LA Times's* General Otis, before tracing the "lines of power" through successive city councils, churches, universities, intellectual hang-outs, and street corners - especially street corners - up to the present day. And his depth of historical familiarity is matched by a breadth of geographical knowledge; a knowledge of the myriad and shifting spatial relations which have bound council chambers to Kaiser's steel plants, to La Placita church, to Crip territory and, finally, to the steel and glass towers of LA's business community. The skill with which Davis balances these sensitivities, to the empirical as well as the theoretical, to the geographical as well as the historical, is all the more impressive when considered in the context of recent attempts to read the same landscapes. Edward Soja's (1989) *Postmodern Geographies*, to take a well known example, remains throughout mired in an awkward academic argument about the "reassertion of space in critical social theory" before finally launching into an analysis of the contemporary restructuring of Los Angeles whose Archimedean essentialism has been the subject of much criticism.⁵

Of course, 'LA as the epitome of a new epoch' is not a new line of argument. Indeed, LA has had a peculiar hold on literary as well as academic imaginations, from Raymond Chandler's and Ridley Scott's noir to Steve Martin's campy celebration in "LA Story". Recently the theme, 'LA as epitome' has provided the basic organising principle for a number of important books including Soja's *Postmodern geographies*, Storper and Walker's *Capitalist imperative* (1987), and also what Davis refers to as the "L.A. School" of urban geography (p.86ff). Yet Davis's book is very different from anything thus far produced within this genre. Though they have many merits, the works of Storper, Scott, Soja, et al have tended to remain remarkably untouched by the grassroots realities of life in the (post)modern city.⁶ In sharp contrast Davis presents us with a series of vignettes of communities constituting themselves in accordance with their own inevitably partial and contested understanding of the challenges facing them. Class conflict is not some transcendental reference point, some metaphysical Word, waiting to be revealed by the apostles of contemporary social theory. Instead, the realities of capitalist social relations are shown by Davis to exude from the very cracks in the pavements of LA's Skid Row, the well manicured and strictly policed lawns of Beverly Hills, and all the other spaces which conspire to make, and unmake, LA.

I have thus far extolled Davis's empirical achievements in *City of*

Quartz. But what of his theoretical achievements? As was suggested by some of the commentators at an "Author Meets the Critics" session at the April 1992 Association of American Geographers Annual Meetings, Davis's book incorporates several important tendencies in critical social theory. First, Davis departs from academic convention by *not* prefacing his analysis of contemporary Los Angeles with the obligatory, and generally turgid, "theory" chapters. Instead, his entire effort is a rich suffusion of "theoretical" insights and immediately accessible "empirical" analyses. While it is not necessary for an engagement with Davis's arguments, it is very clear that he owes significant debts to seminal thinkers such as Foucault, Simmel, and Wirth. To take just one example, his discussions of LA as a "carceral city" are without doubt Foucauldian in origin. For the reader familiar with Foucault's work on penology, especially *Discipline and Punish*, Davis provides a welcome and well thought out attempt at contemporary application. Along the way Davis provides much grist for a critical reading of both LA (at the empirical level) and Foucault (at the theoretical level) which is far more important than trying to provide the definitive text on either.⁷

It is here that I might best articulate a few critical objections to Davis's achievement. First, I do wonder if there is not an impulse towards a nihilistic pessimism not at all dissimilar from that of the Frankfurt School some of whom observed LA during their WWII American exile. This point is significant because of Davis's explicit attempt (in the only section of the book which is *explicitly* "theoretical") to locate his project somewhere between that of the Chicago and Frankfurt Schools (pp.83ff). By the end of the book, though, we have a deeply disturbing and compelling portrait of LA, but nowhere is there any sense of the possibilities for emancipatory resistance. In the age of cybernetic economic and social systems which LA apparently presages, Davis seems to be saying that there is virtually no hope of meaningful and progressive change. Yet the lebensraum expressed in the recent redevelopment of LA should be radically different from the totalising modernisms of Haussmann's Paris and Robert Moses's New York. If the globalisation of capital has as one correlate the diffusion of a NIMBY and "beggar-thy-neighbour" localism, then might there not be some form of emancipatory localism? Why are these possibilities not discussed in *City of Quartz*? With, Lash and Urry (1987), Laclau and Mouffe (1984) and of course Foucault, I am not yet ready to give up a struggle which Davis implies is already over.⁸

This lacunae is all the more puzzling given that some of Davis's other work actually landmarks a broad range of local progressivisms. *Fire in the Hearth: the radical politics of place in America* and *Reshaping the US Left: popular*

struggles of the 1980s⁹, for which he was a co-editor, explicitly seek to commemorate the "living legacy of activism" in local politics and to provide useful material for progressive activists. While there are of course no quick fixes for the terrible predations of capital upon local captured populations, there are valuable lessons to be internalised. Arguing for a sort of enlightened localism, David Diaz, in an essay in *Fire in the Hearth*, states that "[a] key to a successful strategy is the realisation that political isolation in pursuit of self determination is a road to political oblivion."¹⁰ One implication of this point, learned in the rough and tumble of East LA politics and elsewhere, is that progressive activists must develop the skills for making oppressive systems visible in their strategic and cooptive interconnections. And this, as I have already observed, is one of the paramount achievements of Davis's text! Given Davis's proven concern for progressive politics then, perhaps *City of Quartz* is somewhat poorly positioned with respect to the reading public; it might too easily be seized upon as an excuse for inaction and non-involvement.

The second critical point I want to raise involves the increasing tendency to examine the possibilities and perils of our age through the optic of LA. Even though LA and its environs has a population nearly equal to that of Canada, it is only one place among a multitude. More to the point, since LA itself is not one place but many, each proceeding from a different mode of "being in the world", the specific constitution of LA as an object of analysis by Davis requires more justification than it gets in his book. For these reasons, among others, it seems that *this* L.A. optic may well obscure as much as it illuminates. For example, Cindy Katz has sagely commented that Davis's object of enquiry is intimately wrapped up with the attempt of a native *son* to return home, something especially obvious in the last chapter 'Junkyard of Dreams'.¹¹ Much of what Davis identifies as new or different, Katz argues, is only new or different to a *male* point of view. Yet only the male point of view is valorised. Recalling the quotation about public spaces used earlier, one may fairly wonder why there is no discussion of the differential gendering of public and private spheres, especially since so much feminist research has demonstrated that this is a critical juncture in the development of both patriarchy and capitalism?¹²

Still, let me say categorically that *City of Quartz* is a book which *must* be read. While there is something in it which will appeal to most specialist tastes, it is the whole which makes it remarkable. It may well become a benchmark against which other arguments about fin de siècle urbanism will be assessed.

Epilogue

This review was originally written prior to the April riots in LA and other American cities precipitated by the bizarre exoneration of four police officers in the videotaped beating of Black motorist Rodney King. In this epilogue I will indicate some points of tangency between Davis's analysis and those events.

Where Davis is perhaps at his most prescient is in his discussion of the feelings of disenfranchised Black youth in south central Los Angeles (Davis 293ff). With an allusion which provokes uncomfortable parallels Davis invites us "to meet LA's 'Viet Cong'." He shows us some of the ways in which the dangers, both real and trumped up, posed by gang violence are very much of our own making. As early as 1960 the belligerent LAPD Chief Parker was claiming that Blacks and Latinos were "only one step removed from the wild tribes of Mexico" (p.295). The brutality and scare mongering of local politicians and the police have worked to make the vision of the urban gang-terrorists something of a self fulfilling prophecy. Of course inter-gang violence *has* escalated alarmingly, as rivals have fought a pitched battle over territory, influence and the drug trade during the past two decades. But, as Davis rightly points out, the focus on the "gang problem" by policy makers and the mainstream media conveniently whitewashes the more complex but important issues surrounding the confluence of race and class as bases of social stratification.¹³

Davis illuminates many of the ways in which the social and political economy of the twentieth century American dream has engendered, necessarily, those convenient pariahs: Blacks, Latinos and their gangs. Understated in his argument however is an examination of the terrifying heterotopias that these collectivities are constructing from the options left to them. Territorial conflict is no longer seen by many gang leaders as a purely local thing, increasingly attention is being turned to the regional and national correlates of local conflicts. In some measure this has been effected through the rapid proliferation of the gang controlled crack trade; a network which now links virtually all urban agglomerations along the Pacific seaboard, from San Diego to Vancouver, into an illicit economic space. But equally important are the linkages between immigration, marginalisation and local development. Indeed this latter may be of more relevance in understanding the seemingly indiscriminate violence against *all* spaces (Black tenements, Korean businesses, the streets), during the April riots. The revolution against all spaces was rendered logical and necessary by the collective recognition on the part of many blacks, latinos and even some whites, of these spaces' disciplining functions. Indeed, as

Mamalou Chinyelu recently reported, many participants saw comprehensive demolition as the necessary first step in the community's own version of President Bush's cynically conceived "Weed and Seed" initiative.¹⁴

But the rearticulation of these spatial relations in terms of class and race relations by an increasingly restless lumpenproletariat portends possibilities which should keep political and business decision-makers awake at night. The big irony with the "Weed and Seed" programme is that much of what the *community* is "weeding" out, is precisely what the Bush administration wants to "seed" in. This time the community may not be so easily bought off by the embourgeoisement of a few locals. When President Bush announced that the "victory" against Iraq finally put to rest the haunting legacy of Vietnam, he not only demonstrated a near complete lack of comprehension of that conflict, but he also displayed a remarkable lack of understanding of the situation within his own borders. In a recent article in *The Nation*, Davis quotes a long time Black activist as saying:

That ole fool Bush think we as dumb as Saddam. Land Marines in Compton and get hisself re-elected. But this ain't Iraq. This is Vietnam, Jack.¹⁵

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

Endnotes

- 1 Davis 1990: *City of Quartz: excavating the future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books) p.17 All subsequent references to this book are contained in the text of the review.
- 2 This note has been unmistakably sounded by the geographers Edward W. Soja and David Harvey as well in their recent volumes on urbanism under late capitalism. See Edward Soja 1989: *Postmodern Geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* (New York: Verso); David Harvey 1989: *The Condition of Postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, (New York: Blackwell).
- 3 For Baudelaire on the "family of eyes" see Marshall Berman 1984: *All That is Solid Melts into Air: the experience of modernity* (New York: Penguin), pp.148ff. For further investigations of circulation and

modern urbanism, see Michel de Certeau 1984: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press) pt.3 and Didier Gille 1988: "Maceration and Purification" in *Zone 1/2: the city*

- 4 A realisation which caused Lewis Lapham, writing in 1991 in *Harper's Magazine* 279(1675) to refer to the "War on Drugs" as "a folly and a menace".
- 5 For critiques of Soja's essentialism see Doreen Massey 1991: "Flexible Sexism" in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 9 and also Derek Gregory's 1990: "Chinatown Part 3: Soja and the missing spaces in social theory" *Strategies* 3, The same sort of essentialism has also been observed in Jameson's classic 1984 essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" *New Left Review*, an essay which set the tone for much of this genre.
- 6 See Davis's comments on this point pp.223. Micheal Dear and Jennifer Wolch are to some degree exceptions to this rule. See their 1989: *The Power of Geography* (New York: Unwin Hyman); and also 1987: *Landscapes of despair*.
- 7 It would no doubt chagrin Foucault greatly to see the amount of ink currently being spilled in the cause of "getting him right"!
- 8 Scott Lash and John Urry 1987: *Disorganised capital*; (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press); Ernesto Laclau and Chantelle Mouffe 1985: *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (London: Verso).
- 9 See the essays in Davis, Hiatt, Kennedy, Ruddick and Sprinker 1990: *Fire in the Hearth: the radical politics of place in America* (New York: Verso); and Davis and Sprinker 1988: *Reshaping the US Left: popular struggles of the 1980s* (New York: Verso).
- 10 in Davis et al 1990, p.283
- 11 Cindy Katz, "Author meets the critics" session, American Association of Geographers Annual Meetings, San Diego April 1992.
- 12 See Massey 1991, and also the article by Roslyn Deutsche "Boystown" in the same journal.
- 13 See also Mike Davis 1992: "LA Inferno" in *Socialist Review* 22(1),

and for a recent discussion of the debate about race and class see David Brion Davis 1992: "The American Dilemma" in *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 1992.

14 Mamalou Chinyelu 1992: "The Nation's Mayors Take it to the Streets" *In These Times*, May 27, 1992.

15 Mike Davis 1992: "LA: Burning all Illusions" *The Nation*, June 1, 1992.

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