

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



# A Hero from Capitalism's Hells Mike Davis and the Fighting Spirit of Socialist Possibility

Bryan D. Palmer

Volume 91, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102171ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0012>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Palmer, B. (2023). A Hero from Capitalism's Hells: Mike Davis and the Fighting Spirit of Socialist Possibility. *Labour / Le Travail*, 91, 227–285.  
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0012>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2023

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

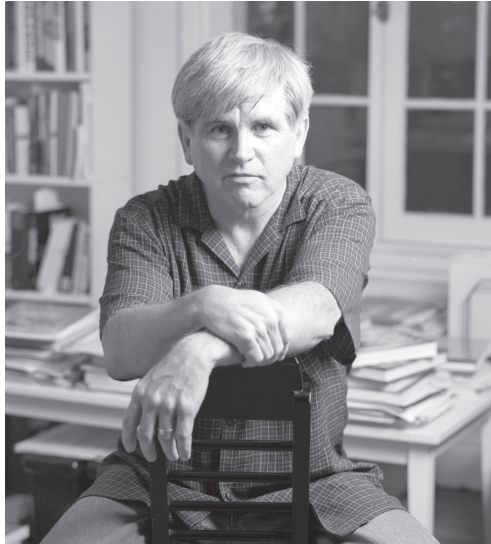
<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

# A Hero from Capitalism's Hells: Mike Davis and the Fighting Spirit of Socialist Possibility

**Bryan D. Palmer**, Trent University

“Fasten your seatbelts. It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”  
—Bette Davis, *All About Eve* (1950)



**Mike Davis, Pasadena, 1998.**  
Courtesy of Anne Fishbein.

SUFFOLK COUNTY, NEW YORK, OCTOBER 2000 was my introduction to the brutalizing racist blood sport of “beaner-hopping.” I spent one early morning chauffeured around small Long Island towns by Mike Davis. He took me to corners where dozens of Latino men gathered, shoulders hunched in the chilly

autumn morning air, waiting for vans to pull to the curb, size up the muscle available, and direct a chosen few labourers to cram themselves into what space was left inside the vehicle. They would then be taken to various job sites, paid off the books a minimalist wage for a day of drudgery, hauling, heaving, hammering, and handling whatever they found themselves tasked to work with. Mike explained how these largely undocumented workers would make their way to 5:00 a.m. modern-day “shape-ups” week after week, many times returning to their cramped, unsanitary living quarters empty handed. Their thoughts were of home, knowing that families and extended kin in Mexico or Guatemala might go hungry that week for lack of a remittance.

Violence was on the rise against this floating reserve army of labour, which subsisted beneath the surface relations of dominantly white, seemingly affluent, communities. Anglo youth gangs from privileged high schools had taken to randomly targeting the immigrant, largely Spanish-speaking poor, running the often bicycle-riding newcomers off the road, taunting them and pelting beleaguered human targets with beer bottles tossed from tire-squealing cars. The harassment and physical intimidation, according to Mike, was escalating: pepper-sprays, beatings with baseball bats, even potshots with BB guns were not unusual. He told me this with anger and despair as we discussed his most recent book, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* (2000). That study explored the consequences of putting the new Latin American immigrants “where they clearly belong: in the center of debate about the future of the American city.” It ended with Mike’s characteristic belief that class struggle and class organization could overcome the burden of oppression carried by all peoples of colour, including Suffolk County’s 21st-century “tired, poor, huddled masses” of downtrodden, displaced peoples from the Global South. They would rise, he felt, as they had to, creating a “labor-Latino alliance” like the one that surfaced in Los Angeles in the late 1990s. “Class organization in the workplace,” Mike concluded in *Magical Urbanism*, was “the most powerful strategy for ensuring the representation of immigrants’ socio-economic as well as cultural and linguistic rights in the new century ahead. The emerging Latino metropolis will then wear a proud union label.” But Mike knew full well that Suffolk County, and much of America, was a long way from LA. As he glanced out the window at the often forlorn-looking street corners, their massed “menials” desperate for just one day of miserably remunerated work, Mike’s shoulders drooped and his countenance darkened. There was in his demeanour a worried acknowledgement of what Suffolk County’s Latino immigrants were up against.<sup>1</sup>

Cause for concern was clearly warranted. As I would later learn, the inevitably inadequate official crime statistics suggested that between 2003 and 2007 anti-Latino hate crimes jumped 40 per cent across the United States. In

1. Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* (London: Verso Books, 2000), 9, 149.

2008 an Ecuadorian immigrant, Marcelo Lucero, was murdered in the Suffolk County village of Patchogue, New York. The killing of Lucero, a 37-year-old dry-cleaning store worker who wired money home to his relatives regularly, was carried out by a marauding mob proclaiming themselves the Caucasian Crew. They assailed their victim for hours, stalking him, frustrated when he evaded their intimidations and racist slurs. Eventually Lucero's tormenters came across him again, cornering the now terrified man menacingly; when Lucero struck back with a belt, a seventeen-year-old star football and lacrosse player pulled a knife and fatally stabbed the Ecuadorian worker. The "beaner-hopping" that Mike told me about in 2000 became national news. "I don't do this very often," one of the juvenile killers told police, "maybe once a week." At least it was not a *daily* routine.<sup>2</sup>

I was with Davis because of a tragic death of a different kind. The Humanities Institute of the State University of New York at Stony Brook was hosting a conference titled "Radical Ideas in Conservative Times," commemorating the life's work of Michael Sprinker, at which I was presenting a paper. Sprinker died in 1999 from a massive coronary brought on by an almost decade-long battle with cancer. A Marxist literary critic of breadth, indefatigable editorial outreach, and boundless generosity, he was the co-founder, with Mike Davis, of Verso's Haymarket series, a publication project dedicated to expanding left-wing understandings of the North American experience. Many of us felt Sprinker's loss acutely, but it hit Mike Davis particularly hard. Davis thought Sprinker "the best friend I've ever had" and considered his death "simply an obscenity." Mike valued people over all else. Once he befriended someone, a conscious act that usually entailed a political assessment, Mike's loyalty was rock solid.<sup>3</sup>

The recent recipient of a MacArthur "Genius Grant," Davis was teaching in Stony Brook's history department at the time of the Sprinker conference and asked me to lecture to his students. After our reconnaissance of Suffolk County we went to lunch at a suburban diner and, done with the fare, departed for his afternoon class. As Mike pulled out of the parking lot onto a two-lane thoroughfare, I realized we were going in the wrong direction. I saw an arm jerk the steering wheel, and before I knew it the truck bounced over a median. We travelled across a grassy boulevard, dodging shrubs, and after a few seconds of uneasy rattles and a final clanking descent, we were back on the road, proceeding in the opposite direction.

2. See the account of the Southern Poverty Law Centre, "Climate of Fear: Latino Immigrants in Suffolk County, N.Y.," 1 September 2009, <https://www.splcenter.org>.

3. Sam Dean, "Mike Davis on Trucking," outtakes from an interview with the *LA Times*, 26 July 2022, <http://samdean.com>; Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso Books, 2000), x. Many sources detail Mike's loyalty to friends, but see, as one example only, Rubén Martínez, "Glimpses of a Homegrown Revolutionary: In Praise of Writer Mike Davis: Prophet, Burr, Spellbinder and Friend," *Capital & Main*, 17 August 2022, <https://capitalandmain.com>.

The truck was apparently none the worse for wear. I was probably more shaken, although I tried not to show it. With Mike it was always a bumpy ride.<sup>4</sup> He did not just “Question Authority,” he abhorred it. His radicalism rejected officialdoms of all kinds, often with irreverent mockery. If Mike did not always disdain face-to-face encounters with those in positions of political power, especially if he thought his influence might result in some good, he had no liking for them, telling Los Angeles journalist Jeff Weiss, “You can hardly believe these people. So many of them are just absolute nincompoops.” Offered an excursion to Bohemian Grove, a 2,700-acre stand of virgin forest north of San Francisco that served as a men’s-only retreat for the Reaganite rich to unleash their inner “Iron John” selves, Davis declined. He had no interest in hobnobbing with George Shultz and other plutocrats, whom he was convinced spent their time at the elite wilderness spa “peeing on redwoods and acting like 7-year-olds.” Invited by heads of state and the Vatican to discuss his book *Planet of Slums* (2006), Mike did not deign to reply, expressing no desire to sit down with the president of Argentina or the Pope.<sup>5</sup> Strictures and conventions, unless they related to traditions associated with family life or were laid down to advance struggle and revolutionary resolve, meant little to Mike. Rules were, in general, there to be broken, risks to be taken.

## Mike and the Mythologies of Mercurialism

THIS DID NOT ALWAYS wear well at the Soho digs of Verso Books and *New Left Review* (NLR), where I first met Mike in 1981. I turned up, unannounced, at the 7 Carlisle Street offices of the radical publisher (which would later move to its current 6 Meard Street location in 1985), where Davis was working. Mike was affability itself.

4. For a recollection by another friend of Mike’s of him driving down a restricted mountain road outside of San Diego on the way to a hated toll road, see JoAnn Wypijewski, “Mike, in Memory,” *Sidecar* (blog), *New Left Review*, 4 November 2022, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar>, where she ends a particularly touching remembrance with a bumpy ride: “We’d found ourselves in territory that was uncharted to Mike though not to some previous travelers, because in an instant Mike noticed a spot where [a] fence had been nearly flattened. He was racing to it now, and quick, quick, he said, jump out and hold that part of the fence down over the ditch on the other side. The vehicle’s weight did the rest, I hopped back in, and in a flash we were clambering over dirt, careening round a cement block, finally onto the shoulder and thence to the toll road proper, sprinting alone to the nearest exit. Mike whooped like an old-time outlaw.” See, as well, T. J. Clark, “On Mike Davis,” *London Review of Books* 44, 22 (17 November 2022): 30–31, for a night ride in Los Angeles.

5. Jeff Weiss, “TheLand Interview: Mike Davis,” *TheLand* 2, 2 (2020), <https://thelandmag.com>; Sam Dean, “Mike Davis Is Still A Damn Good Storyteller: Mike Davis on Death, Organizing, Politics, Climate Change,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2022, <https://www.latimes.com>; Jon Wiener, “Mike Davis: 1946–2022: A Brilliant Radical Reporter with a Novelist’s Eye and a Historian’s Memory,” *Nation*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.thenation.com>.

We went out to lunch “on the firm.” Pizza and beers turned into an afternoon of imbibing and the telling of tall tales. Mike’s were far more elevated than mine, ranging from his arrests and strike experiences to Black Panthers he had known. We ended up going over to see Brigid Loughran, whom Mike had met and married in Belfast a few years before. There was much talk of “the Troubles” that dominated Northern Ireland of the time, of the hunger strikes, and of Bobby Sands’ death at HM Prison Maze, regarded as murder at the hands of Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. At some point, Mike reached into a terrarium – the small London flat contained a number of them – and lifted a greenish translucent serpent lovingly out of the container. I gaped in wonder as he began affectionately stroking the snake’s head, its tongue flicking in and out, seemingly in adoring appreciation. Welcome to Mike’s world.<sup>6</sup>

At that point in time, this world was not what it would become. Virtually all of Mike Davis’ fame and notoriety was ahead of him, his celebrated texts years away. I knew him, by reputation, from his articles in *Radical America* and in *Review*, the journal of the State University of New York at Binghamton’s Braudel Center.<sup>7</sup> The latter essay, a 60-plus-page critical analytic excursion through Michel Aglietta’s regulation school of capitalist crisis in the United States, no doubt caught the eye of Perry Anderson, *NLR* editor. Others in the journal’s orbit – managing editor Quintin Hoare, later to be an award-winning translator; the Croatian socialist historian Branka Magaš; and the political

6. Mike tired of journalistic and gossip accounts of his serial monogamy, his five marriages eliciting raised eyebrows. An inveterate, and captivating, storyteller, a singular rule was that he rarely discussed lovers, and he resented – as the Old Left he so admired would have – intrusions into his private sphere. In one 2008 interview Davis insisted that despite his personal “yarning” he was “more allergic to memoir (especially those that betray family honor or the confidence of old friends and lovers) than poison oak.” See Lucy Raven, “Mike Davis: An Interview,” *BOMB*, 1 July 2008, <https://bombmagazine.org>. The personal was of course political to Mike, whose relationships were always forged on the basis of left-wing sensibilities. But each of these relationships was also intensely personal, and Mike guarded that private sphere. His second wife, the SDS activist and future director of the Southern California Association of Non-profit Housing Jan Breidenbach – married to Mike in his years at UCLA, in the 1970s – remembered him as “probably the smartest person I’d ever met.” Possessed of a “photographic memory,” he was capable of processing “great blocks of information” and assembling them in an amazingly impressive and imaginative sweep. Yet “he couldn’t remember to buy mayonnaise.” Asked why he married so often, Breidenbach replied, “it’s the triumph of hope over experience.” See Lewis MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms: The Lives and Dark Prophecies of Mike Davis,” *LA Weekly*, 25 November 1998, <https://www.laweekly.com>. I introduce this issue here, and will return to Mike’s family at the end of the essay, but largely refrain from comment on Mike’s marriages.

7. Mike Davis, “The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World,” *Radical America* 9, 1 (1975): 69–95; Davis, “Fordism in Crisis: A Review of Michel Aglietta’s *Regulation et crises: L’expérience des États-Unis*,” *Review* 2 (Fall 1978): 207–269. Davis had also recently published two articles in *New Left Review*: “Why the US Working Class Is Different,” *New Left Review* 123 (September–October 1980): 3–46; “The Barren Marriage of Labour and the Democratic Party,” *New Left Review* 124 (November–December 1980): 43–84.

activist and future distinguished public intellectual Tariq Ali – already knew Mike through the International Marxist Group (IMG). Davis joined the IMG late in 1974, while living in Scotland, recruited by Ali and Chris Bambery after a Chile Solidarity Campaign meeting. Anderson, perhaps attracted to a kindred intellectual spirit with a comparable “gift for mapping large trends,” eventually persuaded Mike to come to work in the *NLR* office in 1980.<sup>8</sup> The ride soon got bumpy.

Robin Blackburn, who took over as *NLR* editor in 1983, thought Mike’s “robust, American working-class style” charming but acknowledged, understatedly, that “tact wasn’t his strong suit.” Davis’ correspondence with those communicating with the *NLR* could shock some members of the editorial committee. Adam Shatz, who wrote a widely read *Lingua Franca* piece on Davis in 1997, was told that Mike was “very in-your-face about his identity” during his time at *NLR*. There were those working in the offices of the left-wing publisher who could be quite harsh in their judgements of Mike. Long-time *NLR* figure Alexander Cockburn was more understanding. “Mike is a very romantic guy,” Cockburn said, adding that he “has this image of himself as a working-class revolutionary.” Things got rather raucous toward the end of Mike’s mid-1980s tenure at the *NLR*. In the midst of a personal argument entirely separate from *NLR* work, Davis, whose terraria of exotic creatures had been relocated to the top-floor flat above *NLR*’s and Verso’s new Meard Street offices, overturned a glass container of snakes. As the reptiles slithered across the carpet, Mike’s colleagues were not amused. Pleas for Mike to return the serpents to their captivity bounced off books by Lucio Colletti, Chantal Mouffe, Sebastiano Timpanaro, and other Verso authors. It wasn’t his finest hour, as Mike laughingly noted: “If anyone was guilty of wild or outrageous behavior, it was me,” he confessed.<sup>9</sup>

Looking back at these years toward the end of his life, Mike would say, “I ended up staying most of the eighties in London, totally wrapped up in the whole strange world of the *New Left Review*. Some of the worst years of my life. I couldn’t wait to be back in Belfast. The real warmth in the British Isles, the real grit, is all in the north of England and Scotland. And Belfast.” Homesickness and an at-times-troubled private life were part of this melancholic assessment of his London sojourn, but Mike’s time at Carlisle and Meard Streets was not always smooth sailing either. Interviewed by Sam Dean for the *Los Angeles Times* in July 2022, Mike recalled that by the end of his stint with the *NLR*

8. See, for instance, Chris Bambery, “Mike Davis (1946–2022): A Class Fighter – Obituary,” *Counterfire*, 26 October 2022, <https://counterfire.org>; Adam Shatz, “The American Earthquake: Mike Davis and the Politics of Disaster,” *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life* 7 (September 1997), <https://www.adamshatz.com>.

9. Quotes in this paragraph from Shatz, “American Earthquake,” a wonderful profile that nonetheless may have taken too many of Mike’s statements at face value.



he had “totally OD’ed with intellectuals and academia.”<sup>10</sup> In what may have referred to a later factional controversy, Davis claimed to have basically been “forced out of Verso” after an internal split, that the publisher closed down the Haymarket series without bothering to consult with him or Sprinker – a pronouncement that others at the editorial helm of *NLR*/Verso would challenge. Mike was never entirely comfortable within the tight-knit *NLR* group, intimating to Shatz that among plebeians and patricians there were bound to be gulfs separating perspectives and politics. Differences in political sensibilities were evident, for instance, when Tariq Ali told Shatz, “Mike is an exceptionally astute analyst of the enemy, but if I were an American trade union leader I wouldn’t go to him to ask which way forward.” What Ali’s assessment missed was that Davis considered himself a revolutionary critic of such ensconced leaderships. No friend of the trade union bureaucracy, Mike was part of a long tradition of oppositionists hostile to “the misleaders of labour” that included William Z. Foster, James P. Cannon, and James Connolly. Mike’s proletarian origins, and the politics and posture that he was crafting out of them, thus existed in constant creative tension with a number of other *NLR* editors, however much they might agree on any number of important matters. In a moment of self-mockery, Mike allowed that “I’ve always had a sort of truck-stop attitude toward effete intellectuals.”<sup>11</sup>

Still, there was much good that came out of Mike’s London years, including how he envisioned writing of Los Angeles and the California he loved but feared was being destroyed. Working in the *NLR*/Verso offices put him in touch with a range of writers and thinkers on the left, including expatriate *NLR* royalty residing in the United States, like Alexander Cockburn, who had made a name for himself publishing in the *New York Review of Books*, *Harper’s*, *Esquire*, the *Nation*, and the *Village Voice*, and Anthony Barnett, who would go on to found openDemocracy in 2001. Mike and Alex would be fast friends in New York, although they would later fall out, their disagreements registered in political collisions over a number of matters.<sup>12</sup> Barnett, a long-time contributor to *NLR*, remained close to Mike for the rest of his life.

As Davis left the *NLR*/Verso offices to return to the United States, he remained a valued and diligent contributor to the journal’s team and, for decades to come, a star in Verso’s stable of distinguished writers. Between 1980 and 2020,

10. Sam Dean, “Mike Davis on Belfast (and Getting Asked to Leave),” and “Mike Davis on Trucking,” outtakes from an *LA Times* interview, 26 July 2022, <http://samdean.com>.

11. Shatz, “American Earthquake”; Dean, “Mike Davis on Belfast”; Dean, “Mike Davis on Trucking.”

12. Hints of the Cockburn-Davis friendship appear in Wypijewski, “Mike, in Memory”; Forrest Hylton, “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat: Mike Davis, 1946–2022,” *CounterPunch*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.counterpunch.org>. For the eventual sparring that would lead to a break between the two friends, see the unsigned editorial, [Alexander Cockburn], “Rough Beast in Bethlehem Already: Mike Davis, Won’t You Please Calm Down,” *CounterPunch* 10, 17 (1–15 October 2003).



Mike Davis contributed 30 articles, editorials, and posts to *NLR*'s print journal and blog. Many of his books commenced as articles in the *Review*, and most of his projects, completed or on hold, were workshopped within the *NLR*. It was there that Mike tested out ideas, received stimulating commentary, and was pushed to clarify his positions and broaden his perspective with suggested readings. If he never quite shook his complex, at times troubled, personal relations with many mainstays of *NLR*/Verso, Mike nonetheless understood well what the publication venture meant to him and so many other left-wingers.

At Meard Street, Mike was also highly regarded, especially as time wore on and his contributions mounted. Over the course of his long 40-year ride with *NLR*/Verso, bumpy or no, Mike Davis was increasingly appreciated. This was not just because he brought many contributors to the *Review*'s and Verso's attention and was always a powerful and memorable participant in editorial committee discussions. Mike was also recognized, admiringly and affectionately, as *sui generis*, an irreverent, resilient, romantic, revolutionary voice whose originality, panache, and brio were as unequalled as they were, in certain circles, venerated.<sup>13</sup>

In this he shared something with another dissident voice who prefigured Davis' sometimes rocky but always productive relations with the *NLR*. Although he differed from a predecessor like Edward Thompson in myriad ways, Mike Davis shared with Thompson a capacity for defiant refusals and adamant stands that shocked many at the same time they were exalted by others. Both Thompson and Davis insisted that *anger*, so often considered a deforming lapse among those in erudite circles who should be striving for objective and judicious intellectual contributions, was a legitimate emotion, one capable of expressing, even driving, the necessary passion of research and writing, as well as principles of political opposition. Davis was blunt in a 2020 interview: "What you need is a deep commitment to resistance and a fighting spirit and anger. Anybody who mortgages their activism to something like the success of a [Bernie] Sanders campaign, that isn't commitment." Like Thompson, Davis clearly thought the communication of anger a *genuine* response to a history that so often demanded indignation.<sup>14</sup> Mike pulled no punches. His comment on the much-maligned Los Angeles chief of police, William H. Parker, in *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (2020) makes this abundantly clear: "1966 was a grim year for social justice, but it had one bright spot. At a testimonial dinner in July and in front of hundreds of guests, Chief Parker keeled over dead." Outrage at the tens of millions killed by Empire's

13. Much of the history touched on in the above paragraphs was detailed long ago in Shatz, "American Earthquake." See also Lois Beckett, "Mike Davis, California's 'Prophet of Doom,' on Activism in a Dying World: 'Despair Is Useless,'" *Guardian*, 30 August 2022, <https://theguardian.com>.

14. On anger, see Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso Books, 1994), 60–61; E. P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution I," *New Left Review* 9 (May–June 1961): 25; Weiss, "TheLAnd Interview."



New York, 1999.

Courtesy of Alessandra Moctezuma.

constructed famines animated Davis' writing in *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (2000). The book that Perry Anderson regarded as "Mike's masterpiece" and that Tariq Ali praised as "a veritable Black Book of liberal capitalism," was written to establish that "imperial policies toward starving 'subjects' were often the exact moral equivalent of bombs dropped from 18,000 feet."<sup>15</sup>

Conservative historians found this kind of thing disquieting. Gertrude Himmelfarb, for instance, excoriated Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), declaring, "Thompson is not merely *engagé* ... he is *enragé*." Rather like some might describe Mike. Both Thompson and Davis were well known for tearing strips – most well deserved, a few not – off comrades whom they felt "had gone astray." Eric Hobsbawm said of Thompson that he had the gift of genius and for this his "admirers forgave him much. ... His friends forgave him everything."<sup>16</sup> Again, not unlike Mike.

15. Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 242; Alex Callinicos, "Mike Davis, 1946–2022 – We've Lost a Super Marxist When We Needed Him Most," *Socialist Worker*, 27 October 2022, <https://socialistworker.co.uk>. See also Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 22; "Mike Davis on the Crimes of Capitalism and Socialism," interview by Meagan Day, *Jacobin*, 23 October 2018, <https://jacobin.com>; Amartya Sen, "Apocalypse Then: The Little-Known Story of Drought, Famine and Pestilence That Killed Millions at the Turn of the Last Century," review of *Late Victorian Holocausts* by Mike Davis, *New York Times*, 18 February 2001.

16. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "A Tract of Secret History," *New Republic* 150 (11 April 1964): 24–26; Anthony Arnove, "Mike Davis, presente!" *Tempest*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.tempestmag.org>; Eric J. Hobsbawm, "E. P. Thompson: Obituary," *Independent*, 30 August 1993.

## Born under a Bad Sign

MICHAEL RYAN DAVIS, always known as Mike, was born on 10 March 1946 in Fontana, California, a “gritty blue-collar town” with an “unsavory reputation in the eyes of San Bernardino County’s moral crusaders and middle-class boosters.” Birthplace of the Hells Angels, Fontana’s destiny – in Davis’ later depiction of it as a place of shipwrecked “hopes and visions” – reflected “the fate of those suburbanized California working classes who cling to their tarnished dreams at the far edge of the L.A. galaxy.” Hunter S. Thompson described the kind of setting in which Mike’s early to mid-teenage years would nurture alienations of various kinds, within which was shadowed a precocious, if suppressed, intellectual attraction to natural science, books, and ideas. Post–World War II Fontana, according to Thompson, was founded on a class quest, not for order but for privacy, a need to “figure things out. It was a nervous, downhill feeling, a mean kind of *Angst* that always comes out of wars ... a compressed sense of time on the outer limits of fatalism.” Fontana, according to Davis, was a “loud, brawling mosaic of working-class cultures,” where “designer living” meant a Peterbilt rig “with a custom sleeper or a full-chrome Harley hog.”<sup>17</sup>

This was a background that would stay with Davis for decades. During a 2003 tour of Bostonia’s El Cajon Boulevard, near San Diego, where the Davis family would relocate in the 1950s, Mike guided a bemused journalist interested in his story toward Dumont’s Tavern, a biker hangout in which the bartender sported Hells Angels colours. “You don’t mind if we get beat up, do you?” asked Davis mischievously. The figure from the Fourth Estate, sweating buckets in the hot Californian sun, came to the conclusion that Mike “stands with those of whatever stripe who picket, subvert, refuse allegiance to and revolt against the corporate, cultural, and political interests that control our lives.” This included biker outlaws, with whom the celebrated radical author shared a “kindred vision.” A founding Fontana member of the Hells Angels offered a pithy rendition of the gang’s oppositional optic: “We’re bastards to the world, and they’re bastards to us.” Or, in the words of Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, “Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.” This seems a fitting inscription on the tombstone of Fontana’s asphyxiated aspirations. The El Cajon that Davis grew up in mimicked this miasma: a racist frontier, part white cowboy, part militarist, and part downright degenerate, the town exuded evil. Looking back on his childhood, Davis told an interviewer in 2008, “I actually believe that I have seen the devil or his moral equivalent in El Cajon.”<sup>18</sup>

17. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso Books, 1991), 375–376; Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1967; New York: Ballantine, 1991), 81.

18. Thomas Larson, “Under Our Perfect Sun: Profile of Mike Davis,” *San Diego Reader*, 17 October 2003, <https://thomaslarson.com>; Davis, *City of Quartz*, 402–403; Orhan Ayyüce, “Meeting Mike Davis,” *Architect*, 12 October 2009, <https://architect.com>; Thompson, *Hell’s Angels*, 104; Wypijewski, “Mike, in Memory”; Raven, “Mike Davis”; “Fight with Hope, Fight

What was a boy brought up in this milieu to do? Certainly nothing good. Mike's parents, who supposedly had fled Ohio and hitchhiked to California in search of the sunshine dream during the Great Depression, were not the types to resign themselves to his increasingly questionable behaviours, which spelled trouble. In Mike's high school years an initial attraction to the armed forces – and an ideological affinity with American Cold War prejudices – was quickly overtaken by the lure of hellraising, especially if it involved fast cars. His mother and father were at their wits' end as Mike's carousing, and fixation on hot rods, took a detour into delinquency. But they were not entirely in sync in terms of how to handle a rebellious-without-a-cause teenaged offspring. His father, Dwight, a Protestant of Welsh background with a passion for geology that he passed on to his son, was a meat-cutting trade unionist who voted the Democratic ticket; Mike's mother, Mary, was a tougher-than-nails Irish-Catholic Republican who had political eyes only for Calvin Coolidge.

A month shy of his eighteenth birthday, Mike was injured in his own personal Valentine's Day massacre, in which the main victim was supposedly a powder blue Chevy he plowed into a wall when drag racing with friends. As Mike recovered in hospital, his father brought him a copy of Ray Ginger's *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Debs* (1949), hoping to wean him off the dragster pulps that monopolized his son's reading time. Paperbacks like Henry Gregor Felson's *Street Rod* (1953) were not really appreciated in the Davis household, whose texts of choice were the Bible and *Reader's Digest* collections in patented faux-leather bindings. Dwight Davis no doubt thought published pap that might be read as glamorizing wild teenagers in souped-up cherry red roadsters contributed to his offspring's dangerous nighttime escapades. A little Debs couldn't hurt, thought Davis' father, even if the old socialist was hardly lionized in Democratic Party circles. Mary Davis, no "mushy liberal," had a different perspective. She hinted that a stint in juvenile detention, or even some hard time at San Quentin, would do her son more good. Yet, glancing at the Debs volume, she did allow that her Republican daddy had nurtured a soft spot for the beloved Gene, voting for the Socialist candidate when he ran for the presidency from his jail cell in 1920.<sup>19</sup>

---

without Hope, but Fight Absolutely: An Interview with Mike Davis," interview by Maria Christina Vogkli and George Souvlis, *Researching Sociology @ LSE* (blog), 1 March 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/researchingsociology>.

19. I say supposedly, since many of the tales Mike told of his youth were not above embellishment. I have seen reports of this same incident that indicate Mike was sixteen at the time of the crash, which involved a truck. I follow the account in Mike Davis, "Introduction: Let the 'Red Special' Shine Its Light on Me," in Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Debs* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2007), xi–xvii. On Mike's affection for Felson's *Street Rod*, see Wypijewski, "Mike, in Memory"; Davis, "Crash Club: What Happens When Three Sputtering Economies Collide," the first chapter in *Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), which opens with this recollection: "When my old gang and I were fourteen or fifteen years old, many centuries ago, we yearned for immortality in the fiery wreck of a bitchin' '40 Ford or '57 Chevy. Our J. K. Rowling was Henry Felsen, the ex-Marine who

Mike's cultivation of the persona of a hot-rodding hellion was also well underway in his mid-teens, but it may have been accelerated and then channelled in new directions by a family crisis. Dwight Davis suffered a near-fatal heart attack when Mike was sixteen, his hospitalization depriving the family of a traditional breadwinner's earnings and, along with mounting medical bills, placing it in precarious circumstances. Mary Davis pulled her boy out of school for a semester so he could earn some now much-needed money working for a Bostonia meat plant owned by Mike's uncle. The young Davis ended up driving a delivery truck. An old friend of his father, Lee Gregovich – a blacklisted Communist who sold the Wobbly paper, the *Industrial Worker*, as a boy – was working at a Chicken Shack outlet on Davis' route. Mike would stop in and have political conversations with his "Red godfather."

Race, as much as class, however, animated Mike's early transition from western redneck to 1960s radical, with family connections again a catalyst. His involvement in the civil rights movement and, in particular, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), was prompted when a cousin married the Black activist Jim Stone, who introduced Mike to the struggle against segregation and racial discrimination. A 1962 CORE demonstration at the lily-white Bank of America in downtown San Diego proved to be what Davis later referred to as a "burning bush" moment in his political evolution. He came close to actually going up in flames. Some yokel sailors sprayed lighter fluid on CORE placards, threatening to set them ablaze. Davis sat down on them as an act of preservation. He too was doused with the accelerant, the racist mariners flicking their Zippo lighters in the background. Mike claimed he was rescued by the paramilitary security wing of the Nation of Islam, whose crisply uniformed members, while not participating in civil rights demonstrations, often monitored them to ensure the safety of their dominantly African American participants. Under Stone's tutelage, a teenaged Mike worked in the San Diego offices of CORE, an experience he would later describe as life-altering. Gregovich, proud of his friend Dwight's son and the young man's turn to civil rights activism, nonetheless urged him to take his politics to another level. "Read Marx," the seasoned socialist advised.<sup>20</sup>

## Sixties Schoolings

DAVIS DID NOT EXACTLY immerse himself in the works of "the Moor." He did finish high school and then made his way to Portland's Reed College in 1964,

---

wrote the best-selling masterpieces *Hot Rod* (1950), *Street Rod* (1953), and *Crash Club* (1958)."

20. The above paragraphs draw on Mike Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory* (London: Verso Books, 2018), ix–x; Bill Moyers, "Author Mike Davis: Interview," *Bill Moyers Journal*, 20 March 2009, <https://billmoyers.com>; Troy Vettese, "The Last Man to Know Everything: The Marxist-Environmental Historian Mike Davis Has Produced a Rich Corpus Critical of Capitalism," *Boston Review*, 25 September 2018, <https://bostonreview.net>; Weiss, "TheLand Interview"; Shatz, "American Earthquake."

the first in his family to attend university. But he was soon enveloped in a crisis of class confidence. "I couldn't write a word and I was just overwhelmed," he recalled. Convinced that he lacked the ability to cut it among the literate sons and daughters of the liberal-arts college milieu, Davis disappeared from classes in a haze of rule-breaking sex and drinking. Mike and his girlfriend – the daughter of a Harvard Medical School professor – were expelled for the antiquated violation of "intervisitation," a medieval-sounding prohibition that kept men and women from crossing the cohabitation threshold in their respectively segregated dormitories. Mike was actually ahead of the 1960s radicalization curve. May 1968 had its origins in Nanterre protests against University of Paris restrictions on dorm visits. Mike was on his way to "1968" a few years ahead of his Parisian confrères.

Unable to face his mother, who was outraged that her son, graced with a college acceptance, was wasting his chance at an education and was dropping out (Mike may have failed to tell her about the intervisitation imbroglio), a footloose Davis took the advice of Jeremy Brecher. The future labour historian with a flair for popularizing high points of class struggle was a proponent of the fledgling Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). He pointed Mike in the direction of a new vocation, organizing radical youth, telling the expelled student he was not really college material anyway. SDS needed help in its national office. Davis boarded a Greyhound bus for New York City as fall gave way to winter in 1964.<sup>21</sup>

There he became a full-time rabble-rouser in the beginnings of the American New Left. Mike's description of his SDS duties was eloquently self-deprecating: he was a "star envelope-stuffer and mimeograph-masseur."<sup>22</sup> Along with Todd Gitlin and others, Davis organized an anti-apartheid rally and sit-in that targeted Chase Manhattan Bank's complicity in sustaining the segregationist order, bailing out South Africa in the aftermath of the Sharpeville Massacre's economic fallout. SDS buttons reading "CHASE MANHATTAN, PARTNER IN APARTHEID" began to be sported on all kinds of apparel in New York City. The bank, flustered in the face of this public shaming, actually went to court to enjoin the student organization from distributing the embarrassing insignia and encouraging it to be worn by those sympathetic to the anti-apartheid cause. But with tens of thousands of the protest badges in circulation, the attempt to stifle the mobilization against American capital shoring up a racist regime fizzled. The 19 March 1965 demonstration at the Wall Street headquarters of the Rockefeller-owned bastion of finance capital was a united front "Blow for Freedom." It was endorsed by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), CORE, the Pan-African Student Organization, the

21. Jeremy Brecher's signature statement as a labour historian would be Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), released in a 50th anniversary edition in 2020 by PM Press.

22. Raven, "Mike Davis."



Organization of African Unity, the American Committee on Africa, the National Student Christian Federation, the Newark Community Union Project, and other bodies. Gitlin and 40 or so others, "mannerly, well-dressed, with arms linked," sat down on the sidewalk in front of the Chase Manhattan building until they were lifted into paddy wagons, transported to jail cells, and processed in the legal system. Onlookers chanted "Fascist cops!"<sup>23</sup>

No one in SDS thought of Mike as a writer. He considered himself "functionally illiterate" at the time, maintaining that it was not until the mid-1970s that he began to overcome this limitation. Mike claimed that as a child his family was worried by his staccato-like speech delivery. His words seemed to jumble into one another, and there was concern that the youngster might be afflicted with developmental problems. Carl Ogelsby, SDS president at the time, whom Mike admired as a mentor, leader, and riveting orator, described Davis as an organizational foot soldier, the most "meat-and-potatoes guy" in a student-based movement that boasted too few proletarian proponents. Ogelsby, like Davis, came from a working-class background, his "face cratered from a poor white childhood" lived in the shadows of Akron, Ohio, rubber plants, where his father, a migrant from the hills of North Carolina, worked.<sup>24</sup>

As SDS grew, a peripatetic Davis would tramp the country on its behalf, touching down in Texas but spending the bulk of his time in Los Angeles. When Watts imploded in 1965, Davis furnished the organization's offices with street purchases of typewriters and various fixtures, courtesy of some market-minded looters. An ill-fated attempt to set up an SDS community project in African American West Oakland came to naught. Davis made a pilgrimage to Jackie Robinson's mother's house, hoping to be helpful in the struggle against the construction of a Pasadena freeway bisecting a historic Black district. The meeting ended with the matriarch of the neighbourhood metaphorically patting the well-meaning Mike on the knee and saying, "I think it would be better for you to go organize some white kids against racism. This community can take care of itself."

Davis' SDS days in Los Angeles mushroomed into connections with a remarkable group of multiracial radicals and organizers. First among a distinguished corps of militant equals was the formidable and dedicated South Central activist Levi Kingston, Mike's "Mephistopheles," who showed the young radical "the ropes in LA," introducing him to the city's activists. Fifty years later Mike would dedicate *Set the Night on Fire* to Kingston. Los Angeles City College radical Ron Everett, later known as Ron/Maulana Karenga and founder of US

23. Mike's account of this period and commemoration of Malcolm X, assassinated in Manhattan on 21 February 1965, is in Davis, "America's Black Shining Prince," *Socialist Review*, no. 294 (1 March 2005), <https://socialistworker.co.uk/socialist-review-archive/>. See also SDS *Regional Newsletter* 1, 7 (22 February 1966); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 2, 179, 317; Shatz, "American Earthquake."

24. MacAdams, "Jeremiah among the Palms"; Mike Davis, "Carl Ogelsby: A Mentor & Leader," *Against the Current*, no. 155 (November–December 2011), <https://againstthecurrent.org>.



Organization, the largest Black cultural nationalist group that consolidated in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts Rebellion, also crossed paths with Davis. The young organizer learned a great deal from two formidable and charismatic SDS women, Margaret Thorpe at the University of Southern California and Patty Lee Parmalee at the University of California, Irvine. Finally, there was the legendary Chicana activist Betita Martínez, a.k.a. Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, formerly head of the Friends of SNCC, NY chapter, who remembered Mike as “that little kid from New York.”

As the days and nights of meetings, rallies, protests, and schmoozing blurred into one another, Mike's romance with revolutionary possibility blossomed. At the summer 1965 anti-Vietnam War teach-in at Berkeley, Mike was electrified by hearing Isaac Deutscher, the Polish Marxist and biographer of Leon Trotsky, whom he thought for a moment actually was Trotsky. After years of Cold War restriction on his right to speak in public during research visits to the United States, Deutscher was finally allowed to address American audiences. His presentation to 15,000 protesting students was mesmerizing, a brief oration that Davis thought a kind of séance with a world entirely foreign to the young activist, a communing with dead revolutionaries and conjuring of memories and meanings of “betrayed revolutions.” To Mike, the talk was nothing less than “an assertion of intellectual sovereignty of a kind I had never seen before.” He would later suggest that the Deutscher speech lived with him for the rest of his life and perhaps propelled him onto subsequent paths of inquiry. Davis also claimed to have gotten drunk with Herbert Marcuse, who was evidently tiring of graduate students and welcomed Mike and a small contingent of antiwar working-class militants to his home. The heralded Frankfurt School thinker provided beer and wondrous stories of running messages for Rosa Luxemburg in 1918 that captivated Davis and his comrades.

Burning his draft card, the young SDSer without a school was inevitably involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement. He was outlaw enough – in spite of a crewcut and phobia about recreational drugs – to hook up with some rampaging teenagers from the Palisades High School. Their riotous evenings on LA's Sunset Strip would be forever etched in Mike's memory: “The battle over the urban night had joined forces with the revolution.” Davis ended the 1960s in a police bus, arrested at San Fernando's Valley State University, now known as California State University, Northridge. A peaceful November campus sit-in, where 3,000 students and SDSers protested the college administration's banning of all demonstrations and rallies, culminated in the largest mass arrest of the decade, with 286 youths corralled into custody and transported to jail. Davis remembered the ride to the hoosegow 45 years later: “The girls started singing. ‘Hey Jude, don't be afraid.’ I fell in love with all of them.”<sup>25</sup>

25. The above paragraphs draw on many sources, including conversations over the years with Mike Davis, as well as specific accounts in Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview”; Gillian McCain and Ariella Thornhill, “Setting the Night on Fire: An Interview with Mike Davis,” *Please Kill Me: This Is What's Cool*, 2 November 2020, <https://pleasekillme.com>; Wiener, “Mike Davis”;

## A Stalinist Sojourn

LIKE MANY 1960s RADICALS, Davis was in motion toward Marxism. Students for a Democratic Society was never a paying gig that provided even enough to live on. Moreover, as the mobilizing initiatives of the mid-to-late 1960s descended into the performative acts of the Weather Underground, a wing of the newly christened Revolutionary Youth Movements, Davis departed the movement in 1968 disaffected with the political trajectory of SDS. Wild was all right, but as a politics of opposition it demanded the hard, day-to-day grind of Depression-era organizers or 1960s civil rights Freedom Riders. Davis never forgave the Weather Underground, regarding them as “rich kids, along with some ordinary kids, playing ‘Zabriskie Point’ for themselves.” He resented their role in the New Left’s denouement, which registered on his class-inflected political radar screen as a defeat.<sup>26</sup> Retrospectively, Mike was looking for the left-wing way, appreciating the need for “organizations of organizers.” He may have been attracted to Maoism, but in 1968 it was the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) that drew him into its ranks.<sup>27</sup>

No one influenced Mike more than the First Lady of California Communism, Dorothy Healey. Under her guidance, and alongside Angela Davis, Mike joined the Communist Party, noting Healey’s “bold opposition to the Soviet murder of the Prague Spring” and the Party’s “multiracial membership.” Again, it would prove a bumpy ride, involving ongoing arguments with Healey over a wide range of issues, but Davis never lost his admiration for her or the intransigent class-struggle politics of Third Period Communist militants he thought represented one of the best strands in the historic weave of American radicalism.<sup>28</sup>

---

Davis, “Drunk with Marcuse, Dazzled by Deutscher,” Verso Books blog, 28 October 2022, <https://versobooks.com/blogs>, originally published in *Drawbridge*, no. 5 (2007); David Cate, *Isaac & Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 33; Mike Davis, “Wild Streets: American Graffiti versus the Cold War,” Marxists Internet Archive, accessed 17 February 2023, <https://www.marxists.org>, originally published in *International Socialism* (Summer 2001). The 1969 arrest was one of a number over the course of Davis’ life. See Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview”; MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms”; Warren Montag, “Remembering Mike Davis,” *Left Voice*, 31 October 2022, <https://www.leftvoice.org>; Davis, “Failure to Disperse: The LA Police Riot,” *Against the Current*, no. 28 (September–October 1990), <https://againstthecurrent.org>. A detailed account of the 1969 “Valley State” events and arrests is in Davis and Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire*, 503–523.

26. Dean, “Still a Damn Good Storyteller.” *Zabriskie Point*, a 1970 film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, is a laboured attempt to side with the militancy of American protesters in the late 1960s. It ends up as a representation of the infantilization of youth radicalization.

27. Dean, “Still a Damn Good Storyteller”; Diana Ionescu, “Mike Davis on Life, Politics, and Mortality,” *Planetizen*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.planetizen.com>. On Davis and Maoism, I am indebted to discussions with Alan Wald. Wald, email communication to the author, 7 November 2022.

28. Mike Davis, “Dorothy Healey,” *Nation*, 24 August 2006, <https://www.thenation.com>; Davis and Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire*, p. 642.

For a time, Mike ran the CPUSA's Los Angeles storefront operation, the Progressive Bookstore. Squirrelled away in the basement of the shop was Mike's rifle. At night he might sneak off into the desert for target shooting practice, blasting away at watermelons, or so he told me. Something of a self-identified "wild man" in the movement, Davis' most serious indiscretion, however, was not so much his adventurism as his non-sectarian inclinations. As a Communist Party member, his "deviant" ideas may well have included attraction not only to the liberalizing push of the Prague Spring but to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. He was ordering literature the entrenched Stalinist Russophiles thought suspect at best, heretical at worst. Doing his utmost to appeal to a broad and youthful left seeking out all sides of the revolutionary road, Davis found a place for Trotsky and Bukharin, Mao and Marcuse, on the shelves he stocked.<sup>29</sup>

Mike's days of drawing a Party stipend were undoubtedly numbered. Whether he was finally given the heave-ho for a physical altercation with a Soviet emissary, as he liked to suggest, or expelled as part of a loose Maoist "faction" remains an open question. According to Davis, his days in the Communist Party came to a grinding halt when he mistook a Soviet attaché for one of the FBI guys whose offices were nearby. These meddlesome types used to pop in to let the Party know tabs were being kept on it. The Russian official, dressed in dark suit, white shirt, and tie like one of Hoover's men, spent an inordinate amount of time in the store, taking notes of titles on display. No one other than the Feds, thought Mike and an ex-navy friend who also harboured a rifle in the bookstore basement, wore these kinds of clothes and had an interest in writing down titles of what was for sale in a Party storefront operation. They decided to physically toss the suspected federal agent to the curb. Later that evening, Healey phoned Davis. "You've always wanted to be a working-class hero. Now you have to go out and get a job and become one. ... You're fired!" Turns out the Soviet cultural attaché wasted no time in letting Gus Hall, CPUSA chairman, know that he had been "attacked by young Trotskyists or Maoists in the Party's bookstore." Mike had to get a day job.<sup>30</sup>

### ***"A Working-Class Hero Is Something to Be"***

UNDAUNTED BY THIS ENCOUNTER with Moscow, Mike camped out in a dilapidated commune squat on Crown Hill, where he was befriended by a small-town gambler who resembled a character out of John Fante's semi-autobiographical Depression-era novel, *Ask the Dust* (1939). This new acquaintance regaled Mike with tales of LA's Downtown and Bunker Hill before the slum clearances of the 1960s and the invasion of the body-snatching freeways. To cash a paycheque, Mike enrolled in a Teamster training program and learned to

29. McCain and Thornhill, "Setting the Night on Fire"; Wald, email communication.

30. McCain and Thornhill, "Setting the Night on Fire."

drive an eighteen-wheel truck. His first job put him in the cabin of a concrete mixer, but Mike was fired when he lost his concentration. Mesmerized by the iron workers traipsing across steel girders to build skyscrapers, whom he thought more enthralling than the circus, Mike let his load spill down a major LA north-south artery, Figueroa Street. No matter, those were the days when jobs were there for the taking. He landed on his well-paid feet, delivering Barbie dolls throughout Southern California for the toy distributor Pensick and Gordon.

Davis was in his element. He worked 80-hour weeks nine months of the year, earning big money for the early 1970s, and had the post-Christmas winter slack time off to hike in the San Gabriel Mountains. As summer smog gave way to the allure of early autumn and he picked up work in the lushness of spring, the terrain was breathtaking and Mike found the long hauls "beautiful." Always interested in geography and geology, Davis recalled decades later, "I loved doing that job." But the warehouse supervisor, a charismatic Korean War veteran with ties to the Mexican American White Fence gang of the Boyle Heights neighbourhood, engineered an employment grab: his buddies from East LA moved into the better-paying trucking jobs. This left Davis and others whose cavalier attitude toward seniority – they liked their winter weeks off – open to displacement. Lesson One in the protocols of proletarianization: it was not so much what you know as who you know, and in Los Angeles the ties that bind were often racial and ethnic.

Soon Mike was driving a tour bus, guided toward the job by a Black organizer with the Teamsters, who gave him a heads up that the Gray Line Company was hiring. He offered sightseeing visitors to Los Angeles an endless patter on the fantasy sites of Disneyland and Hollywood by Night, all the while cultivating an alternative rap on the underside of the city. The normal practice for new hires at Gray Line was to purchase a set of tour talking points from one of the established drivers. This haughty lot regarded knowledge of Los Angeles as a proprietary sheet, to be sold for a whack-load of money. Bucking this tradition of commodification, Mike constructed his own commentary, some of which borrowed from anecdotes and accounts passed on by his hard-living Crown Hill friend. But he also began to read LA history seriously for the first time, starting with Carey McWilliams and Louis Adamic. As his store of knowledge increased, Mike supplemented the routine tour stops and commentaries with, for example, new visits to where white mobs massacred scores of Chinese in 1870 or talks on how the McNamara brothers bombed the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910. The blue-rinse, suited-up side of Gray Line's clientele was not always amused with Mike's tales of working-class dynamiters, picket line stands, or bloody battles; more often than not, they seemed distressed. Yet there were longshore and plantation workers from Hawaii who warmed to Mike's pitch. Their union sponsored group holidays and contracted them with the tour company. Kibitzing with this more proletarian element endeared Davis to the job. "I just absolutely had a ball with them," he enthused decades

later. The seeds of Mike's Tartarean view of the City of Flowers and Sunshine lay in these years.<sup>31</sup>

Davis got into trucking as a kind of individualized "industrialization," as it would be known in the new communist movements of the 1970s. The Teamsters, with an early rank-and-file push for more democratic unionism in the making, seemed fertile ground for cultivating labour resistance. Mike had no luck on this front. As a political influence on his brothers in the over-the-road teamster fraternity he was a dud. Reading Marx, Sartre, and Marcuse when he could scrape some time together, Mike found his working-class counterparts anything but left wing. "At night we'd go out to topless bars and I'd blurt out, 'I'm a communist,' and they'd say, 'Dick's a Jehovah's Witness. Let's have another drink.'" Nonetheless, Davis found that his "coveted niche in the trucking industry" would be cut out from underneath him in a nightmarish descent into the violence never far from the surface of American class relations. At least that is the lore, which may well owe something to Davis' willingness to embellish the truth with a "fabulist" finish. He was fond of saying that it startled him "to find out that some tall tales I told are actually true."<sup>32</sup>

Gray Line was a small outfit, likely family-owned, and as they moved to sell the firm its status as a cab drivers' local suddenly loomed as a liability. Breaking the union became a priority. When the inevitable strike ensued, Gray Line turned to an army of for-hire strikebreaking bus drivers who cycled through the industry in the United States, leaving locally ensconced unions in tatters. One of these scabs drove into a picket line, knocking down a Gray Line striker. Mike was arrested, charged with assault and battery for allegedly hitting a professional strikebreaker with a union sign. He found himself in a room with 39 other angry drivers. Many of them were, in Mike's later estimation, "pretty shady" characters. They decided to each ante up \$400, hiring a pair of hit men to kill the leader of the blacklegs. Class struggle had a way of turning even the most conservative and seemingly cautious of workers into rough-riding militants. In what he maintained was "the best speech" of his life, Mike tried to reason with his fellow strikers. Insisting that solidarity was the answer, and that much could be gained by secondary picketing and convincing organized labour not to cross their lines, Mike pleaded with his co-workers to step back from their murderous conspiratorial folly. They were having none of it. "We've just gotta kill the motherfucker," was the consensus of the room. Davis thought many of these bus drivers, with their permanent-press outfits and standardized, conventional tour commentaries, "namby-pamby." When he later discovered that one of them had been a Flint sit-down striker, he was shocked. His arguments rejected, Mike was outvoted 39 to 1. He put up his

31. The above paragraphs draw on MacAdams, "Jeremiah among the Palms"; Dean, "Mike Davis on Trucking."

32. Sam Dean, "Mike Davis on an Unfinished Project and the American West," outtakes from an *LA Times* interview, 25 July 2022, <http://samdean.com>.

\$400, swore eternal secrecy on what the brotherhood of Gray Line drivers determined to do, and stood firm. Only the incompetence of the hired killers, whose plot was foiled before it even had a chance to unravel, saved a young Mike Davis and his out-of-control counterparts from serious jail time. As part of the strike settlement, Davis was fired, the court charges against him dropped.<sup>33</sup>

## Marxist Maverick

MIKE RETURNED TO UNIVERSITY in the fall of 1973. Enrolling in the University of California, Los Angeles, at the age of 27, he already knew a number of scholar-organizers who had backed the Gray Line strikers. Among them was visiting professor Jon Amsden, who campaigned to unite student groups, staff members, and campus workers into one big union.<sup>34</sup> In the history department, Robert Brenner was offering a seminar on Marx's *Das Kapital*, reading it in the context of debates within Marxism on agrarian class struggles and the transition from feudalism to capitalism, crisis theory, and 20th-century economic history. "It was an exhilarating experience and gave me the intellectual confidence to pursue my own agenda of eclectic interests in political economy, labour history and urban ecology," Davis would later write.<sup>35</sup>

Mike was moving from the eclectic radicalism of an SDS activist into the clarifications of revolutionary politics. He remembered visits to San Francisco's Mission District, where he crashed in the loft of Seymour Kramer, a comrade of Brenner's and later a leader of the Bay Area's School Bus Drivers Union. The two spent long nights arguing about the Portuguese Revolution and the latest articles in *New Left Review*, drafting manifestos and "circulating tracts by a certain Belgian economist," Ernest Mandel. Mike would later describe the two of them as the smallest political party in the world: "I forget whether he was Lenin and I was Trotsky, or perhaps it was Abbot and Costello; but in any event we considered ourselves to be the apostles of regroupment to the Trotskyist left." Any vestiges of Maoism were now gone. Davis and Kramer attended a demonstration at San Francisco's dilapidated International Hotel, where elderly Filipino and Chinese bachelor immigrants – their lives constrained by racist "anti-miscegenation" laws – resided. The I-Hotel, a landmark of the city's once-thriving "Manilatown," was earmarked for development by the gentrifying Four Seasons Corporation. Poor and elderly tenants were

33. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, xii; Shatz, "American Earthquake"; MacAdams, "Jeremiah among the Palms"; Dean, "Mike Davis on Trucking."

34. Jon Amsden would contribute to the *NLR* under the *nom de guerre* Jean Monds. See Jean Monds, "Workers' Control and the Historians: A New Economism," *New Left Review* 97 (May–June 1976): 81–104.

35. See Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," *New Left Review* 104 (July–August 1977): 25–92; Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, xii.



threatened with eviction. Activist groups such as I Wor Kuen, We Min She, the Asian Study Group, and the Union of Democratic Filipinos mobilized, but to no avail. The I-Hotel was ultimately demolished in 1977–78. At the protest he attended, Davis was alarmed to see rival political collectives break into kung-fu fighting among themselves. As he turned incredulously to Kramer, his wry friend was nonchalant: “Hit anyone you like. They’re all Maoists.”<sup>36</sup>

Restlessness, and a sense that an apprenticeship in Marxism was best served in the Old World, in those days roiled by labour militancy, got the better of Davis. A 1974–75 research scholarship from his father’s meat cutters’ union funded a year’s study in Scotland. A Glaswegian trucker warned Mike off living in Edinburgh, where his bursary was tenable at the large university, telling him the place was a deadly class purgatory. Glasgow, with its long tradition of labour militancy, seemed a more congenial setting. Mike touched base there with a young American grad student, Suzi Weissman, future biographer of Victor Serge, when he submitted an article on Preobrazhensky to *Critique*, a Marxian journal she was editing with Hillel Ticktin. Suzi was enthusiastic about meeting this precocious left-wing student from California, welcoming him into her circle of revolutionaries and refugees. Soon Mike was sharing her cold, damp Glasgow flat, crowded with Trotskyist MA and PhD candidates and Chileans fleeing the coup d’état that deposed the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, replacing it with a *junta* under the leadership of General Augusto Pinochet. Weissman and her *compañero* Roberto Naduris would be Mike’s lifelong friends.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, it was Belfast that really drew Mike, who began visiting frequently from Scotland, hunkering down for much of his scholarship year in the library to research the Depression-era outdoor relief protests, when Catholics and Protestants rioted together. Even after that research period had run its course, he would return to Belfast from the United States, reconnecting with his mates and widening his social and political contacts. He lived for a time in Belfast’s Holylands district behind the university – the streets were variously named Palestine, Jerusalem, Damascus, Cairo – finding love with Brigid Loughran, who grew up in the war-torn neighbourhood of Ardoyne. “The Troubles” hung over everything, of course, but Mike found himself at home in a working-class community where he “formed some of the deepest friendships of my life.” He was moved deeply by the “unadorned eloquence and moral

36. The above paragraphs draw on Mike Davis, “Remembering a Friend,” *Against the Current*, no. 188 (May–June 2017), <https://againstthecurrent.org>; Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso Books, 2002), 113–114. Mike was also almost certainly drawn away from Maoism by former Socialist Workers Party members Milt and Edith Zaslow, who are acknowledged in Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso Books, 1986), xi.

37. Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The Course Is Set on Hope* (London: Verso Books, 2001); Suzi Weissman, “Mike Davis: A Personal Remembrance,” *Solidarity*, 27 October 2022, <https://solidarity-us.org>.



clarity” of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. From the rooftop of Belfast’s Busy Bee Market, she delivered an inspirational address “the apocalyptic day the hunger striker Bobby Sands died.” The atmosphere of a nation at war was all pervasive: “I felt like we were existentialists in the French Resistance, because my friends faced extraordinary risks and really didn’t worry about it too much ... we stayed up all night ... playing the guitar, telling stories, slagging and being slagged.” His love of Belfast notwithstanding, Mike’s 1980s would be spent, for the most part, in London.<sup>38</sup>

### **At New Left Review**

CONTACTS WITH IMG MILITANTS in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast, and London during the 1970s proved to be Mike’s letter of introduction to *NLR*. He first met the journal’s editor, Perry Anderson, in the autumn of 1976, when the two men were brought together by Branka Magaš. Mike recalled a long talk in which he spoke of “this idea I had for writing a book about the American working class.” His scholarship year having come to a close, Mike returned to Los Angeles, intent on finishing his undergraduate degree, the thought of writing a history of American labour taking shape but by no means fully developed. In December 1976, Mike received a letter from *NLR* asking him to write on the US left.

Davis replied in January 1977 with twelve pages of closely typed theses – “a sample of the *form* of analysis that I think needs to be made.” At the crossroads of a new historical period, American labour seemed “lost in a troubled sleep.” Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky had “clung to a spontaneist optimism” that the US working class would “catch up” in giant strides, claiming its “rightful place” in the leadership of the world labour movement. Only a few fragmentary writings grasped the specificity of American conditions: Gramsci in “Americanism and Fordism” and Trotsky in his last writings on trade unionism in the epoch of imperialist decay. A historical assessment demanded taking into account the relation between the strong and stable bourgeois-democratic structures of the United States, on the one hand, and the intense state repression and ruling-class violence routinely inflicted on workers, on the other. At the same time, the class itself was in a constant state of turbulent re-composition, through immigration and internal migration. Though the working class of the United States had not produced an independent labour party, it was nothing less than a “laboratory par excellence for the invention of militant forms of struggle and organization,” encompassing the municipal general strike, the sit-down strike, and the boycott. In response, *New Left Books/Verso* offered a contract and a \$1,000 advance.<sup>39</sup>

38. Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, xii; Dean, “Mike Davis on Belfast”; Davis, “Carl Ogelsby.”

39. Mike Davis to *NLR*, 20 January 1977 (courtesy *NLR*), with Davis offering a slightly different version of developments in Dean, “Mike Davis on Belfast.”

Mike later claimed to be concerned that he could actually complete the study. For a time, he returned to truck driving, but his enthusiasm for the job soured. Irish friends came to visit him on the West Coast, and he travelled to Belfast, further nurturing his attraction to the city and the relationships forged there, including with Brigid Loughran. When, in 1980, Anderson invited Davis to relocate to London to work on his book and help edit *NLR*, Mike accepted the offer. He once again departed California, but this time without any clear date of return. During his 1980s work with the *Review* and its book-publishing arm, Verso, Davis began to hone his skills as a writer, developing a unique style that was both captivating and combative. He published a stream of articles in the London-based journal, starting with his two-part study of the history of the American working class, followed by a path-breaking analysis of Reaganite neoliberalism – “Like the Beast of the apocalypse, Reaganism has slouched out of the Sunbelt, devouring liberal senators and Great Society programmes in its path” – and a prescient study of the political-economic shocks heralding the arrival of a new, post-Fordist regime of accumulation, based on overconsumption and low-wage employment.<sup>40</sup>

Davis joined the *NLR* editorial committee in the early 1980s at a moment of intensive debates over Edward Thompson’s “Exterminism” theses on Reagan’s new-generation nuclear weapons and the escalation of the arms race, with its threat of star wars. Thompson championed the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) movement. Mike contributed a forceful essay on the subject, insisting that the politics of disarmament must extend to the truly international realm, recognizing that global instability in the nuclear age was hardly confined to the Cold War animosities freezing the Soviet Union and the United States in an escalating arms race trending toward Armageddon. Refusing to limit the purposes of the peace movement to the “restoration of a lost European or Northern civilization,” Davis called on those mobilizing against potential nuclear annihilation to nurture “the deepest levels of human solidarity.” Like Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* it was crucial to “point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.”<sup>41</sup>

Arguments were raging during these years in *NLR*’s pages and on its editorial committee. Among the contentious topics were the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, *Solidarność* in Poland, the Falklands War, the nature of the state,

40. Respectively, Davis, “US Working Class Is Different”; Davis, “Barren Marriage”; Davis, “The New Right’s Road to Power,” *New Left Review* 128 (July–August 1981): 28–49; Davis, “The Political Economy of Late Imperial America,” *New Left Review* 143 (January–February 1984): 6–38. Davis would note in 2022 that “the *New Left Review* was an early influence on my writing, and in some ways a bad one.” This ungenerous assessment spoke to the ambivalence Mike maintained throughout his life with respect to his time spent working with *NLR* and Verso in the 1980s. See Dean, “Still a Damn Good Storyteller.”

41. Mike Davis, “Nuclear Imperialism and Extended Deterrence,” in *New Left Review*, ed., *Exterminism and the Cold War* (London: Verso Books, 1982), 35–64, 64.

the origins of women's oppression, the question of eco-socialism and "postmodernity" – "the cultural logic of late capitalism," as Fredric Jameson defined it in a landmark *NLR* essay.<sup>42</sup> One of Jameson's prime examples was the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, with its reflector-glass cladding, towering atrium, miniature lake, and revolving lounge. In a polite but devastating reply, Mike retained the idea that such examples of a futuristic built environment held a key to deciphering larger patterns but set the Bonaventure within the tougher-minded political-economic periodization that his studies of Reaganism were developing: reckless overbuilding, as symptom of global capital flight from the developing world and the rise of new international rentier circuits, culminating in the definitive abandonment of the ideal of urban reform as marker of a stark class polarization in the United States. Above all, Mike stressed the savagery of the mega-hotel's insertion into the surrounding city, where child labour and sweated homeworking were re-established amid levels of super-exploitation among inner-city LA's million-strong undocumented migrant population.<sup>43</sup>

This initial encounter with Jameson bridged Davis's 1970s-initiated examination of class formation and the political malaise of the American working class with his future studies of Los Angeles. *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (1986), Mike Davis' first book, was a product of these transatlantic happenings. It was an unconventional study steeped in conventionality. The argument percolated through the long-asked question of why the working class of the United States was different and had not formed a labour party or developed a socialist consciousness. Unlike the trend in left progressive academic scholarship of accenting the autonomies evident in proletarian districts and the seeming decision-making capacities of skilled labour in the workplaces of 19th- and early 20th-century capitalism, Davis chronicled the political immolation of a working-class captive of the American Dream, whose most effective prison-house was the Democratic Party and its legion of ideologues. Roosevelt and the New Deal were not, as they are presented in so many contemporary academic accounts, the saviours of working people, advancing the cause of trade unionism, but a lethal, bourgeois blow struck at the militant industrial organizing campaigns of the 1930s. American workers, acclimatized to decades of defeat and disillusionment, opted by the 1980s, according to Davis, for electoral abstentionism.

Described by one commentator as "the great antisentimentalist," Davis wrote against a background of Reaganism's successful assault on labour, "a grim coda" that left the prospects for revived class struggle politics slim indeed. Something of a cold shower visited on the pioneering histories of

42. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984): 53–92.

43. Mike Davis, "Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 151 (May–June 1985): 106–113.

Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, *Prisoners of the American Dream* presented a sweeping cartography of class formation: the exhilarating wave of Debsian socialism that Mike insisted derived from an immigrant proletariat exploited economically and disenfranchised politically was absorbed by the Fordist “Americanization” of the 1940s and 1950s. This destroyed the social and cultural base of nascent forms of socialism and communism. Forged through its compounded historical defeats, the US working class in this view acquired a “distinctly contradictory, battered, and lumpy form that could not be evened out by appeals to abstraction,” as one commentator summarized. Only radical protest – akin to the uprisings and direct-action tactics of the early to mid-1930s and 1960s – could resuscitate a genuinely left-wing labour movement, bringing the enervated trade unions back to life. This would only happen, however, to the extent that class struggles and the solidarity they would engender and depend on took an internationalist and antiracist turn, making common cause with liberation movements in the developing world *and* aligning unequivocally with Black and Latino communities of the United States. “The long-term future of the US left,” concluded Davis, “will depend on its ability to become both more representative and self-organized among its own ‘natural’ mass constituencies, and more integrally a wing of a new internationalism.”<sup>44</sup>

## Writing the Modern Macabre in Southern California

MIKE’S MOTHER LOOKED at *Prisoners of the American Dream* and asked, “You think anyone in the working class could possibly understand this?”<sup>45</sup> Her judgement was unduly harsh. Yet it may well have prodded her son to greatness. In the years to come, Davis engaged in “learning to write.” He insisted it was “the most difficult thing I’ve ever done.” Beginnings of articles or books stalled and sputtered as Davis agonized to strike just the right note in an introductory sentence; whole days at his desk evaporated as pages and paragraphs were

44. The above paragraphs draw on Shatz, “American Earthquake”; Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, esp. 314; Gabriel Winant, “Mike Davis’s Specificities: Repetitious and Reductive Appeals to the Universal Never Satisfied Him,” *n+1*, 16 November 2022, <https://www.nplusonemag.com>. For examples of the labour history of Gutman and Montgomery in this period, see Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976); David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For a synthetic sweep across two centuries of American labour history situated as a revisiting of his 1986 book nearly four decades later, see “Mike Davis Revisits His 1986 Labor History Classic, *Prisoners of the American Dream*: An Interview,” interview by Daniel Denvir, *Jacobin*, 31 October 2022, <https://jacobin.com>.

45. MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms.” A *Newsday* review dismissed *Prisoners of the American Dream* as being written in “the sometimes impenetrable style of the social scientist.” Neil Genzlinger, “Mike Davis, Who Wrote of Los Angeles and Catastrophe, Dies at 76,” *New York Times*, 26 October 2022.

rejected, and entire chapters once judged finally finished were condemned to the wastebasket. The rewards were tremendous. Mike would ultimately produce writing on Los Angeles that “surges off the page irresistibly, exciting and compelling in equal measure.” A trio of books that appeared in the 1990s won Davis wide recognition, financial windfalls, and a reputation as the single most important theorist slicing through the dystopian dimensions of American capitalism’s urban deformation.<sup>46</sup>

The first of these studies, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, is perhaps Davis’ finest book, a tour de force that counterposes the mythologies of the celestial city to the actualities of a hellish, human-engineered environment of predation and class-orchestrated confinement. Los Angeles, so often depicted as cosmopolitan, cultured, and chic, is presented by Davis as carceral. For Mike, the true ruler of the City of Angels was Lucifer: a mélange of ominous trends in which security systems, segregated spaces, brutalizing and intrusive policing, and ecological irrationality all contributed to the lethal oppression of a multi-ethnic working class.<sup>47</sup>

The book opens with Davis standing “on the sturdy cobblestone foundations of the General Assembly Hall of the Socialist city of Llano de Rio – Open Shop Los Angeles’s utopian antipode.” The first sentence of his excursion into the despair that he imagines orchestrated the evolution of LA insists that “The best place to view Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future.” Mike visited what was left of the desert sanctuary, abandoned in 1918, to “see if the walls would talk to me.” They did not. Instead, the conversation came from two 20-year-old labourers from El Salvador, tramping California’s frontier of housing starts, camped out for a time in what was left of Llano’s old co-operative dairy. When Mike informed them that they were squatting in the remains of a *ciudad socialista*, the peripatetic tradesmen asked whether “rich people had come with planes and bombed them out.” They might as well have: the colony’s credit collapsed.

So begins a tour of Tinseltown and its environs, the very un-socialist Los Angeles. Chapters on authors who have socially constructed the city lead into discussions of moneyed power, monopolized land development, and watered dividends; the retrenchment of homeowners and white backlash; the fortress mentality that structures urban architecture and the mindset of the infamous

46. Dean, “Still a Damn Good Storyteller”; Jack Hamilton, “I Still Don’t Understand How Mike Davis Could Write like That: A Marxists Whose Books Did It All,” *Slate*, 26 October 2022, <https://slate.com>.

47. Note the laudatory review of *City of Quartz* in Alexander Cockburn, “The Power of Sunshine,” *London Review of Books*, 10 January 1991, 13. There was a sharp contrast between Mike’s representation of LA and that of Fredric Jameson, whose *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) appeared a year after *City of Quartz*. Mike presented the city as a capitalist cul-de-sac of coercion, a Chinatown-like reservoir of repression. In Jameson’s reading, the sensuality of LA’s art and architecture triumphed over a more granular social reality.

LAPD; and the political economy of urban gangs. LA is represented as a community of containment.

*City of Quartz* is a book like no other: against the boosterism of the mega-developers and their kept intellectuals, Mike lays bare a story of expropriation and exploitation, violence and venality, greed and gruesome pursuit of subordination, recounted with rare relish. LA, in this telling, has been pushed toward a *Blade Runner*-style descent into a guerrilla war fought on a diversity of fronts, from UCLA to the streets of Compton. "In Los Angeles there are too many signs of approaching helter-skelter," Davis warns, adding that "everywhere in the inner city, even in the forgotten poor-white boondocks with their zombie populations of speed-freaks, gangs are multiplying at a terrifying rate, cops are becoming more arrogant and trigger happy, and a whole generation is being shunted toward some impossible Armageddon." Imaginative and rivetingly presented, *City of Quartz* closes with Davis' birthplace, the "junkyard of dreams" that was Fontana, where homeboys proclaim their lot in life: "Eat shit and die." Bourgeois hubris and hectoring insistence on prioritizing profit brought the Californian Dream's roller coaster ride to a threateningly bumpy terminus, highlighting the "conflagrationist potential" of a city that would soon be engulfed in the flames of the Rodney King riots.<sup>48</sup>

On publication, *City of Quartz* gained immediate recognition as a terrific text, sold reasonably well, and drew critical acclaim. The acquittal of the four white policemen who viciously beat Rodney King changed everything. As Los Angeles erupted in the incendiary rage of the dispossessed, *City of Quartz*'s popularity soared. Mike's reputation took a quantum leap forward. Seen as something of a seer, Davis apparently received a \$160,000 advance from Knopf for a book on the riots. He decided to pass on the project because he was becoming close to former gang member Dwayne Holmes and others, advising them in their efforts to orchestrate a truce among the competing Bloods and Crips. Davis' notoriety in American society, and within an international left, increased exponentially as he spent time hooking up unlikely African Americans whose lives constituted a constant battle against police and governing policies with political figures like two-time California Governor Jerry Brown and an old SDS connection, Tom Hayden, now a Democratic Party member of the state assembly, 44th district. In the words of LA journalist Jeff Weiss, *City of Quartz* became "everyone's favorite Rosetta Stone for translating the civic unrest." The class enemies Davis eviscerated in *City of Quartz* no doubt seethed, but they were largely silent.<sup>49</sup>

48. The above paragraphs draw on Davis, *City of Quartz*, esp. 3, 12, 316, 429; David L. Ulin, "The Master of Urban Dialectic: Mike Davis Wrote the Vernacular of Los Angeles," *Alta*, 26 October 2022, <https://altaonline.com>; Jon Wiener, "The Key to Mike Davis's Brilliance: He Never Fit In," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 October 2022.

49. Weiss, "TheLAnd Interview"; John Ganz, "R.I.P. Mike Davis (1946–2022), Remembering an Intellectual Hero," *Unpopular Front*, Substack, 26 October 2022, <https://johnganz.substack.com>.



Not so with the second instalment of Mike's apocalyptic analysis of Los Angeles' disaster trajectory, bankrolled by a \$50,000 advance from Metropolitan, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998) outraged the city's powerful development/real estate lobby, and it fought back. The book opens with what was now Davis' trademark stylistic flair: "Once or twice each decade, Hawaii sends Los Angeles a big wet kiss." That this puckering up brought destruction in its wake did not have to be said. (As I prepare this text for publication, millions of Californians are fleeing their homes or sheltering in place, besieged by torrential rains, unprecedented flooding, car-eating sinkholes, marauding mudslides, and trees toppling out of their waterlogged roots.) Shoring up the panache of this prelude was Mike's turn to what he would subsequently, in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, dub "political ecology," a marriage of environmental history and Marxist political economy. For the substance of Davis' metaphor was the ruin of irregular, but inevitable, storm systems that sweep warm, water-laden air from the Hawaiian archipelago eastward, hurling massive rainfalls on the Sunshine City. As turbulent storm fronts collide with the mountain wall surrounding the Los Angeles Basin, the ferocity of the consequent rainfall – the equivalent of half of the city's annual precipitation – can exceed even that of tropical monsoon belts. Devastation results. And so the stage was set for a depiction of LA as a city of potential calamity, an environment that inspires alarm. This did not go over well among those whose expense accounts, sales commissions, and extravagant living derive from the sunny imaginary of the City of Angels. They depend on boosting LA's paradisiacal portfolio.<sup>50</sup>

This crowd did not exactly cotton to chilling tales of capitalism's defiance of commonsensical care in building skyscrapers atop earthquake fault lines; casting caution to the winds of downpours and their destructive potential to unleash floods of biblical proportions; overdeveloping the natural habitat of potentially man-eating critters; or destroying biodiversity to the extent that waterlogged snakes wash up on prime beachfronts. Following Walter Benjamin, Mike presented Los Angeles as a dualistic dialectical fairy tale. In Part 1, "a relentless chain of slaughter and extinction stretching from the casual brutality of nineteenth-century ranching and market-hunting practices to the systematic predator extermination campaigns of the twentieth century, mounted in the name of 'scientific' game management," saw roughly 11,000 bountied kills of mountain lions in Southern California between 1907 and 1950. Capital and the state strove to tame the wild natural environment of the West, cleansing a habitat the better to sanitize it for profit-taking. Part 2, however, saw the survival of nature's wild offspring, "led by the astonishingly adaptive cougars of the Sierra Madre." A habitat's flora and fauna, slotted for

50. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 5; Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 15; Shatz, "American Earthquake."



domestication, even extinction, “begin to bite back, with often startling social consequences.” Reports from Descanso and Pasadena of large cats ambushing the residents of rich suburbs were bad enough. When Mike declared that wildlife’s evolutionary adaptations might presage the “emergence of nonlinear lions with a lusty appetite for slow, soft animals in spandex,” it was neither amusing nor good for business. Definitely in bad taste, whatever the cougars might have thought.

For Mike, however, the small, ordinary mammals of the chaparral belt posed greater threats to human life than the celebrated cougar. Rats, mice, and other vermin, vectors rather than predators, were a grave danger. Plagues and pandemics were in the making. Virus-carrying rodents threatened to overtake suburban tranquility, while tick-infested deer mice unloaded Lyme disease on an unsuspecting country-club set. Insects posed yet another menace: an Africanized bee population was apparently poised to marshal a deadly cyclone of winged killers unleashing an epidemic of anaphylaxis. As nature uncorked its resentments at humanly orchestrated violations of its realm, Davis closed his presentation of Los Angeles as the poster child of calamity with a glimpse of how the Californian conurbation might have looked from outer space during the riots of 1992. “The city that once hallucinated itself as an endless future without natural limits or social constraints” appeared from such Olympian heights as an urban setting of extraordinary inflammability. Los Angeles had all the “eerie beauty of an erupting volcano.” This was a stupendous sight, viewed from afar, but living atop an implosion in the making was quite another thing.<sup>51</sup>

Admittedly a tad over the top, all of this was less disturbing to the capitalist mindset than Mike’s signature chapter in *Ecology of Fear*, the searing exposé of LA’s class-ordered political economy of fire. In “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn,” Davis juxtaposed how the overcrowded tenement and welfare apartment-hotels of LA’s Westlake district, the city’s equivalent of Spanish Harlem, and the gilded coast of Malibu’s perfect beaches, impeccably outfitted cappuccino bars, and exorbitantly overpriced seaside estates confronted seemingly common incendiary destinies. LA’s Downtown district of poorly ventilated garment sweatshops and overcrowded, oven-like tenements was, by the 1970s, a slumlord’s dream. Rapacious rentier capital jammed families of *recién llegados* from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala into firetrap bottom-end housing, where regulations, safety provisions, and maintenance were ignored. Between 1947 and 1993, roughly 120 people died in 14 fatal blazes within a one-mile radius of the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa. Meanwhile, across the class divide, in roughly the same time period, Malibu was the wildfire capital of North America: 13 massive, 10,000-plus-acre firestorms destroyed over 1,600 high-priced homes and took 16 lives, while approximately 2,000 smaller

51. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 197–271, esp. 249–250, 422.

fires burned with less destructive intensity. The rich and the poor, apparently, were torched alike.

Mike took this lowest-common-denominator evasion of essential class difference and exploded it with scornful eloquence. Describing a 1993 conflagration that engulfed the Malibu coastal hills, burning celebrity mansions to their foundations and ensnaring the Pacific Coast Highway with a crawling parade of firefighting vehicles and fleeing Bentleys, Porches, and Jeep Cherokees, Davis reached into a deep, wry reservoir of class analysis. A couple of housewives of the rich and famous loaded their jewels and designer dogs into kayaks and took to the sea, rescued eventually by some fawning Baywatch boys from Redondo Beach. Davis' punchline told it all. The women saved their pets and pendants but left their Latina maids on the beach. From there, the domestic servants made their perilous way to a safe coastline haven, but that outcome was by no means certain. That Davis failed to mention that the maids may not have been swimmers, perhaps fearing the ocean as much as the raging fire, and might not have wanted to accompany their employers in what they regarded as rather flimsy vessels, outraged critics. The elementary point remained: the low-paid help were left to their own devices while four-legged friends were cradled into kayaks. Class mattered in the fire zones of LA. It was the great divide, and being on the wrong side spelled disaster and death.<sup>52</sup>

Malibu existed as a natural wildfire ecology, a precarious habitat the rich colonized, developed, and sustained at a cost of hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, of dollars annually. This was a social expenditure that capitalism – especially its financial sectors, like insurance and banking, and servile state authorities – was always willing to justify in neutral discourses of public safety, natural hazards, and protections necessarily and supposedly extended to all Californians. Where the urban wilds of Westlake were concerned, however, these same powerful class interests regarded welfare as a dirty word, immigration restriction as a rallying cry, and slumlord responsibilities to maintain buildings and keep them safe something to be sidestepped with a wink and a nod. Fire, an inevitable natural phenomenon in the coastal hills of Malibu, largely destroyed privatized property, which could always be rebuilt, the rich subsidized by the social provisioning of the public purse. Downtown LA, in contrast, burned not because it had to, but because it was profitable to allow it to go up in flames. This “disaster algorithm” registered in the deaths of tenement dwellers and lined the pockets of the owners of buildings blatantly in violation of almost every section of the minimalist building, safety, and fire codes.

With capital simply getting away with murder, Mike made the case, obviously somewhat tongue-in-cheek, for letting Malibu burn. It was inevitably going to. Investing in the infrastructure of the inner city, no natural inferno, so that it would not incinerate the poor was obviously the logical counterpart

52. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 128.

to this position. But when rational choice ran headlong into capitalism's appetite for accumulation, it hit the brick wall of material interest. His hyperbolic header aside, Davis' point was glaringly obvious: Why build and rebuild ostentatious palaces for the most conspicuous consumers and run up the tally of recurring costs associated with insuring and protecting them, when the cycle of natural wildfires was only going to necessitate having to go through the same thing again and again? It seemed a political economy of indulgent insanity.<sup>53</sup>

This was too much. As *Ecology of Fear* topped best-seller lists for seventeen weeks in 1998, a Malibu realtor initiated a crusade to discredit Davis. He pored over the book's 484 pages and 831 footnotes and set up a website claiming *Ecology of Fear* was based on fabrications, his findings publicized under the subdued title "Research Exposes ... Mike Davis as Purposively Misleading Liar." Soon the mainstream media – the *Economist*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* – jumped on the bandwagon. In the feeding frenzy that followed, Davis was depicted as a fraud; one columnist denounced his work as "fake, phoney, made-up, crackpot, bullshit." What resulted from a mountain of heavy-handed claims, however, was a rather small molehill of minor, understandable, often inconsequential error and the inevitable clash of oppositional political readings of evidence.<sup>54</sup>

Mike's entire history was now subject to hostile investigation. Charges that he was prone to make things up gained traction when it surfaced that Davis, always irreverent and defiant of rules, had concocted a 1989 piece for the *LA Weekly* on the Los Angeles River that purported to be an interview with an advocate of natural waterways – a dialogue that never took place. The subject of the essay, Lewis MacAdams, was in the late 1980s an ecology activist and leading figure in an advocacy group known as Friends of the Los Angeles River. MacAdams, who barely knew Davis and had engaged in conversation with him only in passing, was somewhat taken aback when Mike showed him a draft of the interview before publication. It was based on the two supposedly meeting at the Fremont Gate entrance to Elysian Park, a place MacAdams never frequented. Davis described MacAdams as showing him a tattered old map prepared for the Los Angeles city engineer, when, again, the social activist had never laid eyes on any such document. The interview Davis fabricated was, however, brilliantly and convincingly done. It presented MacAdams as an authority on the history of the river, the map that was unknown to him

53. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 93–148. Interviewed roughly 20 years later, Davis stated, "I'm infamous for suggesting that the broader public should not have to pay a cent to protect or rebuild mansions on sites that will inevitably burn every 20 or 25 years. My opinion hasn't changed." See Alissa Walker, "Mike Davis Was Right," *Curbed*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.curbed.com>.

54. Jon Wiener, *Historians in Trouble: Plagiarism, Fraud, and Politics in the Ivory Tower* (New York: New Press, 2005), 106–116, is an outline of the attack on *Ecology of Fear* and a strong defence of Davis.

and that Davis unearthed at the Huntington Library rich in the kind of detail that would allow environmental groups to challenge the damaging and ill-conceived bureaucratic approaches to flood control. As Mike explained his semi-fictionalized approach, the flabbergasted environmental campaigner was won over. "I was the expert and the activist," MacAdams later wrote, "but it was Davis who had put in my hands the blueprint for the restoration of the wetlands of the Los Angeles River." MacAdams thought "the words he put in my mouth made me sound like I knew a lot more about the Los Angeles River than I actually did. I told him to go ahead with the piece just the way it was." Both Mike and the *LA Weekly* would later admit that running the story in the way that Davis wrote it was wrong, but MacAdams was on board. For all the carping, Davis weathered these storms, becoming, in the words of Tom Hayden, "an oppositional figure" in the firmament of LA's literary world, "a counterpoint to the bullshit that passes for intellectual discussion in this town."<sup>55</sup>

The booster critics tried their damndest, but they could not really tarnish what was now the aura surrounding Davis. Funded by his MacArthur fellowship in 1998, Mike and his new *campañera*, Alessandra Moctezuma, were able to spend time in Pāpaʻaloo, Hawaii, where Davis loved to write. *Magical Urbanism*, the third of his 1990s works of radical Southern Californian urban ecology, was more joyously open-ended than either *City of Quartz* or *Ecology of Fear*. Counterposed to the violence of the immigration system, militarization of the border, and racist attacks à la Suffolk County, Mike argued that growing Latino populations were bringing redemptive energies to US labour struggles, revivifying public areas in inner-city districts, and "tropicalizing cold urban space."<sup>56</sup>

Mike's enemies in the LA real estate industry may have contributed to scotching his chance of landing academic appointment in his home state. The University of California, Los Angeles, advertised a senior position in the history of California/the West. When Davis applied, UCLA did not deign to shortlist him for an interview. At USC a few years later Davis, not the developers, may well have done himself in, although his history did come back to haunt him. Mike apparently told the hiring committee they would have "intractable problems" if they brought him on board. USC, a private university Mike would come to describe as "such a fucking evil place" – and colloquially known as the University of South Central/University of Scared Caucasians – apparently offered him an endowed chair but rescinded the offer. The backtracking came either because word got out that in his SDS days Davis had participated with the W.E.B. Du Bois Club in spray-painting the campus with graffiti, running up a vandalism bill of \$22,000, or because Mike, on the eve of his appointment, put his proverbial political foot in it. As his hiring was being finalized,

55. MacAdams, "Jeremiah among the Palms."

56. Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 61; Weiss, "TheLAnd Interview."

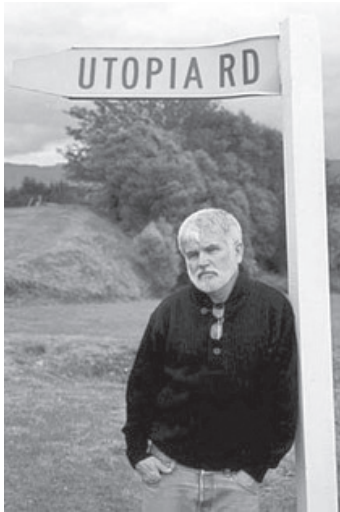
the university was embroiled in a battle with its kitchen staff. Mike proved unable to hold back. He lambasted USC as “the most reactionary institution in L.A.” A top administrator went ballistic, accusing Davis of slander. The job went to someone else.

Nor did Mike’s pedagogical venturesomeness – some would say irresponsible recklessness – appeal to university administrators. He was his own LA disaster waiting to happen, a nightmare for any college’s Risk Management Department. Patching together a teaching position at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, Davis liked to send students out into the LA night, an assignment geared to break down prejudicial barriers. A student Crown Prince of Fiji ventured into Hollywood, spending the early morning hours with crack addicts and drug dealers, among whom he had a marvellous time – *for a time*. Then an internecine struggle broke out among rivals, and in the melee a member of Fiji’s royalty was knifed. Mike visited him in the hospital, apologetic for putting the young man in harm’s way, truly sorry for his stabbing. The prince was having none of it. He thanked his instructor for a classroom assignment resulting in an experience unlike anything he was able to imagine. Davis, almost fired for the incident, later confessed with a smile, “I had to lie low for a while after that.”

Not low enough to find tenured university employment in Los Angeles, however. Davis retreated to Stony Brook. When he did return to California, roughly half a decade later, taking up a teaching position in the Department of History at UC Irvine, he had *Late Victorian Holocausts* under his publishing belt. The book garnered Mike international scholarly accolades. It was praised in the *New York Times* by Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (with some demurrals) and extolled by the president of the World History Association as an exemplary study, a model of pioneering, innovative, interdisciplinary global history.<sup>57</sup>

Mike thought teaching in a university a “cushy” job, even if employment was only part-time and precarious. “In a few hours of blathering in a classroom, I earned almost as much as a 60-hour week unloading oak desks and fighting fog on I-5,” he once confessed. Yet he was never comfortable in an academic setting. Davis would eventually leave Irvine and teach creative writing at University of California, Riverside. He remained frustrated and disturbed, firing off rude missives to top administrators. Time spent with mainstream academics did not generally endear them to him. He told one young historian, “you know, the real problem with so many of these people is a mysterious disease called elephantiasis of the reputation, for which there is as yet no cure.” Eventually, in 2014, tiring of the 200-mile round-trip commute to Riverside from San Diego, where his family was settled, and wanting to spend more

57. The above paragraphs draw on Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview”; MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms”; Clark, “On Mike Davis,” 31; Neda Ulaby, “Writer, Truck Driver, Meat-Cutter, and Prophet of Compassion Mike Davis Dies at 76,” *NPR*, 26 October 2022, <https://npr.org>; Sen, “Apocalypse Then.”



**New Zealand, 2001.**

Courtesy of Alessandra Moctezuma.

time with Alessandra and his young twins, James and Cassandra, Mike decided to take his leave from classroom teaching, although “health bills” would necessitate that he work part time at the University of San Diego in 2020.<sup>58</sup>

### Global Political Ecology

WITH THE success of his 1990s books on Los Angeles, Mike’s métier was now clear: he was a writer for the revolutionary movement. “I spent most of my life thinking I was an organizer,” he declared in 1998, “but looking back

soberly, I see I was a rotten organizer, and I’m still a rotten organizer. It’s been nice in the last seven or eight years to find some competence in something.”<sup>59</sup> That self-realization, a recognition of his skills and value as a writer, carried him to his last days. Davis found himself addicted to the process, reading voraciously and pounding on a keyboard into the night, churning out short pieces and long with verve.

Between 2000 and 2007 the Davis assembly line of output went into overdrive. Books rolled off this accelerating conveyor belt with Taylorist tempo and Fordist fanfare. *Magical Urbanism* and *Late Victorian Holocausts* both appeared in 2000, followed by an exceedingly dark, even for Davis, collection of essays gathered together under the rubric *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (2002), reprinting material that had appeared previously in various left-wing journals – *New Left Review*, the *Nation*, *Socialist Review*, *International Socialism*, *Capital*, *Nature*, *Socialism* – and edited collections. A young adult adventure book was published in 2003. One of the protagonists was an Irish schoolboy, Jack (the name of Mike’s second child), attending James Connolly Secondary School in Dublin. *Land of the Lost Mammoths* drew on Mike’s longstanding fascination with Greenland, narrating the adventures of four teenage scientists, recipients of United Nations scholarships to work at an Arctic wildlife research station. Their epic encounters with screaming ice, a band of marooned Vikings, an Arctic hurricane, and a collapsing ice

58. Christopher Hawthorne, “Tribute: Mike Davis (1946–2022), L.A.’s Prescient Truth-Teller,” *Architectural Record*, 1 November 2022, <https://www.architecturalrecord.com>; Hylton, “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat”; Davis, email communication to the author, 9 October 2017; Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview.”

59. MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms.”



cave had something of the *Ecology of Fear* transposed to a land of glaciers and ghosts. Young readers learn the importance of solidarity, friendship, and non-violence. A sequel to *Land of the Lost Mammoths*, set on a mysterious Arab island, entitled *Pirates, Bats, and Dragons: A Science Adventure*, followed in short order, published in 2004.<sup>60</sup>

How to characterize the totality of this Davis oeuvre? Put simply, it defied conventional categorization, transcending boundaries of classification and shattering interpretive paradigms. Davis wrote for audiences local and international, directing his studies to specialist scholars and generalists alike, writing for the sophisticated sage and the avant-garde, as well as the young reader. Mike's prodigious appetite for research was complemented by an amazing capacity to recall everything that he read (and he devoured the written word with breakneck speed) and an acute sense of historical context. A uniquely pugnacious style brought metaphorical flourish to a relentless refusal to concede an inch to the corrosive powers of capital. The consequence was a cavalcade of imaginative works that few have equalled. The resulting shelf of critically acclaimed radical studies is awe inspiring. It offers a grand, collective arc, sustained by a clear set of conceptual and analytic frameworks packing a powerful, often troublingly prophetic, intellectual and political punch.<sup>61</sup>

Mike broadened the canvas of his Southern California-inspired trilogy in the first decade of the new millennium to produce three more imaginative and rigorously researched studies of global political ecology. They extended his geographical reach, stretching his intellectual project of excavating the politics of class formation and urban ecologies in the United States into a solidarity with the world's poor that had always been decisive in his personal politics and activism. These writings were also marked by a synthetic correlation of empirical and conceptual terrains encompassing the natural, social, and human sciences demanded in an age of tragically synchronized climactic and capitalist crises.<sup>62</sup> Animated by the resurrection of a childhood interest in the natural sciences and geology, the innovative genesis of Davis' studies of this period owed much to his attendance at a 1998 Chapman Conference on "mechanisms of millennial-scale global climate change," organized by the American Geographical Union in Snowbird, Utah. It was, he acknowledged in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, "an exhilarating experience." But this analytic turn had been foreshadowed by an extraordinary synthesis of asteroid studies,

60. Davis, *Magical Urbanism*; Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*; Davis, *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (New York: New Press, 2002); Davis, *Land of the Lost Mammoths: A Science Adventure* (Santa Monica: Perceval Press, 2003); Davis, *Pirates, Bats, and Dragons: A Science Adventure* (Santa Monica: Perceval Press, 2004).

61. For a useful survey, see, for instance, Vettese, "Last Man to Know Everything."

62. See, for instance, a later statement: Mike Davis, "Taking the Temperature of History: Le Roy Ladurie's Adventures in the Little Ice Age," *New Left Review* 110 (March–April 2018): 85–129.



chaos theory, and historical materialism. In “Cosmic Dancers on History’s Stage,” a 1996 essay in *New Left Review*, Mike raised fundamental questions about how relevant findings in the natural sciences pertained to Marxism’s capacity to explore the dialectic of catastrophism and revolution, the importance of addressing ecological destruction in the age of climate change, capitalist globalization, and an appreciation of the cosmic causes of previous experiences of mass extinction.<sup>63</sup>

At the Chapman Conference, Mike heard about the findings of two Colorado meteorologists. They correlated the devastating rounds of drought and famine between the 1870s and 1890s that afflicted zones from Brazil and Southern Africa to India, China, Egypt, and the Philippines, with episodes of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), studied meticulously by a UCLA colleague, Jacob Bjerknes. Bjerknes had unlocked the mystery of the monsoons in 1969, with his research into fluctuating temperatures and trade winds within the equatorial heat engine of the Pacific Ocean, where ENSO emerged. ENSO was a vast, fluctuating oceanic air mass extending from the eastern tropical Pacific to the Indian Ocean. It brought droughts at one end of the temperature scale and floods at the other. Mike discerned that science had discovered that “ENSO’s messy fingerprints were all over the climate disasters of the Victorian period,” but it would take his fertile mind, insatiable curiosity, and Marxist sensibilities to fuse weather systems, colonial famine reports, the advance of world markets, imperialism’s callous practices, and the popular rebellions of the late 19th century. *Late Victorian Holocausts* is driven by a polymathic understanding of political ecology, in which the insights of Nikolai Kondratiev on the cyclical nature of capitalist economies, Bjerknes’ theorizations of climatic swings, and writings on imperialism by J. A. Hobson, V. I. Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg structure the analysis. The result is an epic history of one of capitalist globalization’s opening chapters, the end result of which was a bifurcation of the world into have and have-not nations and political economies.<sup>64</sup>

In a narrative bearing comparison to the great historical passages of Marx’s *Capital*, Mike outlined the human costs of three great waves of drought, famine and disease – from 1876 to 1879; 1889 to 1891; and 1896 to 1902 – resulting in between 30 and 50 million deaths. The subjects of *Late Victorian Holocausts*, the largely peasant populations of Brazil, China, and India, were “ground to bits between the teeth of ... massive and implacable cogwheels of modern history.” The meshing of extreme events in the global climate system with the emerging imperial-capitalist world economy through the medium of an international grain market meant that “suddenly the price of wheat in Liverpool and the rainfall in Madras were variables in the same vast equation of human survival.” Famines, Davis wrote, were “wars over the right to

63. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, ix; Davis, “Cosmic Dancers on History’s Stage? The Permanent Revolution in the Earth Sciences,” *New Left Review* 217 (May–June 1996): 48–84.

64. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 6–7, 13–15.

existence." If starving peasants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not submit passively to the new imperial order, the human carnage of the struggles they waged against their incarceration in a system of starvation was devastating and the consequences, in the final accounting, destructive beyond belief. The great millenarian uprisings of the period – from China's Boxer Rebellion to the Canudos War in Brazil – "derived much of their eschatological ferocity from the acuity of ... subsistence and environmental crises." Rainmaking processions in northern China took up the rebellious chant "See the rain does not come/The sky is as brass/Foreign blood must be spilt/Or the season will pass." As *Late Victorian Holocausts* concludes, "We are not dealing with 'lands of famine', becalmed in stagnant backwaters of world history, but with the fate of tropical humanity at the precise moment (1870–1914) when its labour and products were being dynamically conscripted into a London-centred world economy. Millions died, not outside the 'modern world system,' but in the very process of being forcibly integrated into its economic and political structures." The Victorian famines, engineered as colonial administrations callously hoarded grain while peasants and their children wasted away, were intensifying "accelerators of the very socio-economic forces that ensured their occurrence in the first place." Climate's hard blows were harnessed to regimes of accumulation and profit. The famous "prisoners of starvation," whom the *Internationale* urges to arise, were as much modern inventions of the late Victorian world as electric lights, Maxim guns, and "scientific" racism. A key thesis of Davis' study of famine and its imperialist uses is that the fatal division of world living standards between a rich core of capitalist nations and a vast, impoverished, developing so-called "Third World" was constructed in the period from 1870 to 1914. Humanity was "irrevocably divided."<sup>65</sup>

More than any other account, *Late Victorian Holocausts* takes us inside the depredations of that division, an interpretive equivalent of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* (1562) repositioned to the Age of Empire. Its historical forging of a novel political-ecological understanding of capital's predations in an era of high imperialism, unleashing and accelerating processes of human devastation and unanticipated forms of revolt, provided a grounding for Mike's future writing. His next books would take the analysis into the present, portents of troubled times.

## Pandemics and Slums

A NEW CHAPTER IN MIKE'S FOCUS on capitalism's destruction of biodiversity and the potentially lethal consequences for peoples of the world, appeared in 2005. *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* outlined how corporate agribusiness, fast-food conglomerates, the malfeasance and corruption of servile states, the proliferation of slum populations, and the greed

65. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 9, 16, 186.

of pharmaceutical companies located in and only attentive to the profitable markets of the core capitalist countries were creating a petri dish of conditions cultivating a viral apocalypse. Once again, Mike combined the latest scientific findings – virologists’ fears that zoonotic diseases, specifically bird flu transmitted to humans, might mutate into a super-contagious pandemic – with a vivid sense of social geography and a trenchant historical-materialist critical assessment. Few works this century have been as prescient.

“With a real Monster at our door – as terrible as any in science fiction – will we wake up in time?” asked Davis plaintively. Seemingly catastrophic at the time – at least to Westerners who largely escaped the 2002 SARS epidemic – and fortunately disproved in the case of the 2003 avian flu scare, Mike’s prophetic pessimism proved devastatingly accurate over the long run. *The Monster at Our Door* essentially predicted the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, shooting a warning flare into the obviously compromised night vision of the World Health Organization. Fifteen years later, Mike could pen a tragic sequel, “The Monster Enters,” in which he struck a hard blow at the ways in which the poor of the Global South were the collateral damage of the pandemic. To date, the official worldwide death toll of the eerily resilient and adaptive COVID-19 virus approaches 7 million and, of course, the real human loss has certainly been much greater.<sup>66</sup>

Published in 2006, *Planet of Slums* extended Mike’s ecological-urban studies to a widening global scale. Its starting point was the 2003 United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) report *The Challenge of Slums*, which integrated multiple urban case studies with international household-survey data. Mike likened the publication to the first truly global audit of poverty. As *Late Victorian Holocausts* made abundantly clear, the countryside traditionally housed the world’s poor, but at the start of the 21st century this “dubious distinction” was passing to urban slums, whose populations were growing at the astounding rate of 25 million a year. Mumbai, with nearly 12 million squatters and tenement dwellers, was the “global capital” of slum residents, followed by Mexico City and Dhaka with 10 million, while Cairo, Lagos, Karachi, and São Paulo were each in the 6 to 8 million range. No longer an inner-city phenomenon, slums were spreading on the urban outskirts of the developing world, arising atop garbage dumps or toxic waste sites, traversing flood plains, snaking their way up unstable hillsides, and rambling along rivers clogged with sludge. Mexico City’s phenomenal population growth over the course of the 1980s and 1990s was driven by poor women building dwellings on unserviced peripheral land. In the Amazon, arguably the world’s

66. Mike Davis, *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (New York: New Press, 2005), 177; Davis, “The Monster Enters,” *New Left Review* 122 (March–April 2020): 7–14; Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview.”

fastest-growing urban frontier, shantytowns were emerging in locales that lacked municipal transport, electricity, and basic sanitation facilities.<sup>67</sup>

Mike wrestled with how to explain this unprecedented late 20th-century slummification, with its exponential expansion of the urban dispossessed. Especially perplexing was that the slums of the Global South did not appear to be growing because of industrialization and the presence of better-paying jobs. African conurbations, for example, were swelling in numbers of people by 8 per cent annually, while their economies were contracting. "How could Lagos in the 1980s grow twice as fast as the Nigerian population, while its urban economy was in deep recession?" Mike wondered. Another fracturing realignment of the world was happening, he suggested. Like *Late Victorian Holocausts*, *Planet of Slums* looked to the structural imperatives of capitalism's redivision of the global economy. "The brutal tectonics of neoliberal globalization since 1978," Davis concluded, "are analogous to the catastrophic processes that shaped a 'Third World' in the first place." They are wreaking "an equally fundamental re-shaping of human futures." Urban poverty's "Big Bang" came in the late 1970s and 1980s with the structural adjustment programs imposed on debtor states by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Debt became "the forcing-house of an epochal transfer of power from Third World nations to the Bretton-Woods institutions controlled by the United States and other core capitalist countries." The World Bank's officialdom was "the postmodern equivalent of a colonial civil service." By slashing agricultural subsidies and gutting rural infrastructure, the IMF and the World Bank drove subsistence farmers into a losing competition with capitalist agribusiness, forcing the impoverished and increasingly dispossessed populations of the countryside into cities where meagre state spending on infrastructure and welfare was cut to the bone. Urban populations exploded as austerity-driven retrenchment became the ideological recourse of governance, constrained by powerful global capital and its accommodating agencies of fiscal "responsibility." As a "recipe for the mass production of slums," this insured that the proliferating urban poor of the Global South lived in locations that were hazardous and diseased, afflicted with lethal levels of contaminants and substandard sanitation. An estimated 80 per cent of African deaths from preventable diseases other than HIV/AIDS were attributed to unsanitary living conditions.<sup>68</sup>

Class formation took a detour into new depths of dependency, precariousness, and impoverishment. As big capital dined out in the developing world on the surplus value and super-profits of productive resource extraction, from mining to plundering the rainforest, or fattened on maquiladora-like

67. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso Books, 2006), 151, 201, 23. Davis first road-tested his approach to this explosion of slum populations in "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat," *New Left Review* 26 (March–April 2004): 5–36.

68. Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 14–17, 30–31, 50, 139, 151–154.

sweatshop enterprises, within the slums themselves traditional forms of secure wage labour often seemed an endangered employment species. Petty capital was granted free reign in corrupt political economies of extortion and tribute taking, and incomes were ruthlessly subdivided as virtually all work was casualized and reduced to sub-subsistence remuneration. *Planet of Slums* was especially scathing about the World Bank's use of microcredit to turn workers into penny entrepreneurs, based on a "nested set of epistemological fallacies" blind to the hierarchies of exploitation within the now dominant informal economy. In India, *dalals* – the word translates as either middlemen or pimps – parcel out undeveloped land to squatters, for a price. The poor then pressure local governments to provide services that, if they are installed, only increase the value of squatted property, lining the pockets of the *rentier* class and upping the price of survival for the most desperate of the slum population.<sup>69</sup>

Are these mega-slums social volcanoes, waiting to erupt? This was the fear of early 20th-century reformers, and it registered with more progressive capitalists. Even the pre-World War I Canadian Manufacturers' Association saw the slum as a menacing environment, a breeding ground for the dangerous classes: "Out of the slums stalk the Socialist with his red flag, the Union agitator with the auctioneer's voice, and the Anarchist with his torch." Mike would have applauded their appearance, but he resolutely avoided any wishful thinking. Resistance, he submitted, was not trending in anti-capitalist directions. The left was still largely missing from the slums of the Global South; Pentecostal Christianity or Islamic populism occupied social spaces analogous to those of early 20th-century socialism or anarchism. Davis noted that US military planners were more alert than economic think tanks to the realities of what they called "feral, failed" super-slums. They were already preparing for "military operations on urbanized terrain" in the alleyways of Baghdad. This, Mike concluded, was the true "clash of civilizations." But it was not all one-sided: "The delusionary dialectic of securitized versus demonic urban place in turn dictates a sinister and unceasing duet. 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."<sup>70</sup>

Mike planned a companion volume to *Planet of Slums*, to be co-authored with the Latin Americanist Forrest Hylton. It was to address "governments of the poor," exploring the history and future of resistance through case studies of self-activity in the slums. That book didn't happen. But in 2007, Mike came

69. Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 164, 168, 178–184.

70. Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 206. The 1912 quote is from the Canadian Manufacturer's Association, in *Industrial Canada* (May 1912): 1064.

out with *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb*, in which he explored the history of this "triumphant modern technology," noting that it had become as "generically global as the iPod and HIV/AIDS," with US-occupied Iraq its epicentre. Taking his title from the anarchist Mario Buda's blowing up of a wagon packed with dynamite on Wall Street in 1920, Davis detailed how the US war on terror sowed the seeds of reciprocal savagery, in which "all sides now play by Old Testament rules and every laser-guided missile falling on an apartment house in southern Beirut or a mud-walled compound in Kandahar is a future suicide truck bomb headed for the centre of Tel Aviv or perhaps downtown Los Angeles." This was a catastrophism cut with the explosiveness of conflicts that congealed class grievance and national oppression, in a conjuncture overdetermined by rampant military imperialism. "Buda's wagon truly has become the hot rod of the apocalypse," Mike concluded.<sup>71</sup>

Davis eased himself back into the racial and class divisions of Empire itself with another 2007 publication, a historical discussion of California's racist and vigilante anti-immigration activities in the 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries. This comprised the first part of a book co-authored with Justin Akers Chacón, *No One Is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. White savages like the Manifest Destiny-guided Glanton Gang expropriated Indigenous land in the 1850s. Plundering adobe villages, killing viciously, and enslaving with discriminating calculation, such predatory agents of accumulation wrote early regional chapters in a tome of terror inflicted subsequently on the Chinese, Japanese, Wobblies, Okies, industrial unionists of the 1930s, African Americans, and waves of "chili-eating bastards." This last contingent, zeroed in on by anti-zoot suiters of the 1940s and shadowy paramilitary clots of racist ranchers and "Aryan warriors" known as Minutemen since the mid-1990s, were the objects of many a latter-day cleansing crusade. A bigoted history of fanatical and often murderous "redeemerism," Davis shows, charts the course of acquisitive individualism, property, and capital accumulation on the West Coast. It has migrated from the gold rush frontier and farm valleys to the streets of Los Angeles and into conservative suburbs and border towns awash in irrational fear and loathing of "the Brown Peril." Such neo-vigilantism may now appear as the farcical "last gasp of a dying culture." But with such deep roots, Mike worried it could sprout again.<sup>72</sup>

*In Praise of Barbarians: Essays against Empire*, a 2007 collection of essays, picks up on this theme with Davis' pithy commentaries on contemporary developments. They include tirades on the disaster capitalism associated

71. Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (London: Verso Books, 2007), 6–7, 195.

72. Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, *No One Is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexican Border* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2007), 7–86 (esp. 14), 88. See also Mike Davis, "That Last Little Dollar: The Private Governments of San Diego," in Mike Davis, Kelly Mayhew, and Jim Miller, eds., *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See* (New York and London: New Press, 2003), 17–144. For a tour of San Diego, see Raven, "Mike Davis."



with Hurricane Katrina and evocative, historicized judgements on films like Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*. Arnold Schwarzenegger's gubernatorial victory in 2003 prompted Davis to upbraid "the predominantly white voters of California's inland empires and gated suburbs." Economic populism combined with the celebration of "dark, sexualized fantasies about omnipotence" led them to anoint "a clinically Hitlerite personality" the saviour of "outwardly affluent but inwardly tormented commuter-consumers." The Californian-birthing prison-industrial complex that Davis was one of the first to seriously conceptualize in the 1990s was revisited a decade later, all the worse for wear. The sunshine gulag, he wrote, routinely devours "\$7 billion of state revenue in order to generate inhumanity on a scale normally associated with only the most evil, totalitarian societies." *In Praise of Barbarians* closed with an essay, "Riot Nights on Sunset Strip," originally published in *Labour/Le Travail* and describing itself as "an alloy of research and memory" that was also "the first small installment in a projected history of LA's countercultures and protesters."<sup>73</sup>

### The Romance of the 1960s

IF DAVIS RANGED GLOBALLY in much of his writing from 2000 to 2010, the Los Angeles that captivated his attention in the 1990s and established him as the *bête noire* of the captains of local capitalism was never far from his thoughts. His last major book was a study of the tumultuous 1960s in LA, when Davis was simultaneously witness to, participant in, and agitational gadfly with respect to most of the upheavals and uprisings of the decade. *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*, co-authored with his friend and long-time advocate Jon Wiener, takes its title from The Doors' anthem to the romance and rebellion of turbulent times: "The time to hesitate is through/No time to wallow in the mire/... Try to set the night on fire." The band's drummer, John Densmore, interviewed for the book, wanted no part of either commodifying the decade or selling it short. He stressed that resilient seeds of the civil rights, feminist, and peace movements were planted in '60s struggles. They were, according to Densmore, "big seeds," and if they were taking a long time to reach fruition, they demanded the continued nurturing of all radical-thinking people.

Davis and Wiener agreed, providing a kaleidoscopic sweep across a diverse human landscape of movements and mobilizations, encompassing treatments of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X; struggles to unite the civil rights campaign's fractious components in the early 1960s; the Watts Rebellion and an African American cultural renaissance that arose, phoenix-like, from its ashes, leading to an unheralded 1972 celebration of Black music at the Coliseum that

73. Davis, *In Praise of Barbarians*, 155, 165, 312–329; Davis, "Riot Nights on Sunset Strip," *Labour/Le Travail* 59 (Spring 2007): 199–214. On Davis' early conceptualization of the carceral state and the prison-industrial complex, see Mike Davis, "Hell Factories in the Field: A Prison-Industrial Complex," *Nation*, 20 February 1995, 229–234.

drew 100,000 (and that barred police, security being provided by an entirely African American corps of unarmed festival marshals); bodies such as the Black Congress and the US Organization, initiated by figures like Stokely Carmichael and Karenga; Eldridge Cleaver's incongruous run for the presidency on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket; the war of extermination waged against the Black Panthers; and the inspirational Free Angela Davis Campaign that reached into 1972. Uncovering heretofore largely unacknowledged dimensions of '60s ferment in the City of Angels involving not only African Americans but Asian Americans and Chicanos, gays and women, teenyboppers and teamsters, peaceniks and draft dodgers, Davis and Wiener showed how the war in Vietnam was brought home, into the streets of Los Angeles and America, chronicling as well the plethora of more distinctly local grievances that animated so many. Two of *Set the Night on Fire's* most strikingly original contributions confronted the FBI-influenced internecine violence that fractured Black nationalist movements and the role in '60s radicalization not just of youth but of the truly *young*.

In the case of the deadly rivalry of the Black Panther Party and Karenga's US Organization, Davis and Wiener provided an illuminating correction to the conventional wisdom that a shootout resulting in the deaths of two Panthers, John Huggins and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, at the hands of members of US was premeditated, orchestrated by Karenga. The lethal confrontation, the result of a tragic encounter overdetermined by the FBI's meddling in the rival groups and the fanning of red-hot animosities, lowered the curtain on revolutionary African American activism in Los Angeles. Davis and Wiener concluded that when the two US members were convicted of conspiracy, their railroading to San Quentin a consequence of trial travesties and a biased judge, justice was served up to Hoover's Bureau, albeit not quite as conspiratorially as it has been thought. The FBI understood well that if Black nationalists could be pitted against one another, the less likely it would be that constituted authority in Los Angeles would confront a concerted antiracist mobilization. *Set the Night on Fire*, a finely crafted and meticulously researched account of the Panther-US clash, constitutes nothing less than a revisionist retelling of a seemingly well-understood event. It rests on new and convincing findings. Davis and Wiener provided just the kind of critical accumulation and sifting of evidence that an impartial prosecution should have constructed but failed to undertake.

Another centrepiece of the study is a three-chapter discussion of high school rebellion, the "Blowouts" of 1966 to 1969 that saw students in grades 7 through 12 leave their classrooms to protest a failed and racist educational system. Supported by Students for a Democratic Society and the Communist Party's Che-Lumumba Club, Davis being personally affiliated with or connected to both groups, the high school revolt was spearheaded by a multi-ethnic contingent of rebels. Among them were the activist-inclined student body of the predominantly Black Manual Arts High, enrolment in an institution of

vocational training earning this teenaged contingent the proletarian sobriquet, “The Toilers.”

In chronicling the 1960s revolt, Davis and Wiener inevitably touched down on the repressive police state that, in the 1990s, conducted a vicious “war on drugs” terrorizing LA’s communities of colour. Three decades earlier, as *Set the Night on Fire* makes unambiguously clear, the hated LAPD Chief Parker was nothing less than the “Warden of the Ghetto.” Parker compared his ransacking of a Nation of Islam temple, putting down the 1965 Watts uprising, and vanquishing the Black Panther Party to “fighting the Viet Cong.” His gendarmes, known for their perfection of debilitating chokeholds and no-knock/no-warrant sledgehammer-driven home invasions, as well as violent suppression of street protests and cabaret raids on gay hangouts, were by the late 1960s widely loathed. White teenagers – the sons and daughters of movie stars as well as the kids of truckers and autoworkers – fought curfews on Hollywood’s famed Sunset Strip. They found themselves thrown into a united front with rebellious Chicano and Black students, gays and feminists, SDSers and Communists, their common enemy the “blue fascism” of the police.

When a young Jon Wiener first came to Los Angeles in 1969, he thought he would write about the city and its radicalism for the Liberation News Service (LNS), a movement resource that provided packets of articles and other material to 200 underground, alternative, and college newspapers throughout the country. There was a lot going on: campus antiwar mobilizations, GI organizing and wildcat strikes, the UCLA regents’ firing of Angela Davis, anti-development campaigns, and arson attacks on left-wing bookstores and community centres. Wiener interviewed “a local organizer named Mike Davis. He was intense, eloquent, and a little intimidating.” Fifty years later, Wiener and Davis collaborated to write about what was, in many ways, Mike’s love affair with the 1960s, in which he witnessed tragedies aplenty but also “social miracles and innumerable instances of unheralded courage and defiance.”<sup>74</sup>

## Plain, Old-Time Socialist

AS MIKE WROTE AND PUBLISHED with gusto, the politics of left-wing resistance to capitalism were in flux. Episodic anti-globalization mobilizations bridging the 20th and 21st centuries, such as the 1999 Battle of Seattle, directed against the World Trade Organization, and the 2001 Québec City Summit of the Americas protests, threatened to reconstitute a long-fractured coalition, reminiscent of the New Deal: the combination of teamsters and turtles, hard hats and hippies. A decade later, at the height of the Occupy Wall Street encampments, Davis was enthused by the almost spontaneous appropriation

74. The above paragraphs draw on Davis and Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire*, with Davis’ and Wiener’s recollections, 642, 644. See also Samuel Farber, “The Many Explosions of Los Angeles in the 1960s,” *Jacobin*, 29 June 2020, <https://jacobin.com>.

of “some of the most expensive real estate in the world,” which the mobilization turned into a “magnetic public space and catalyst for protest.” All of this brought into focus the dilemmas arising from the dictates of defiance and the demands imposed by the collectivist nature of struggles against capitalism and its evils. What was required of an advocate of socialism like himself? An admirer of Occupy’schutzpah, he applauded the movement’s initiative. Then he paused, asking for a calming of perhaps overly exuberant expectations. Davis understood that “the movement must survive the winter to fight the power in the next spring.” And he knew well that the forces prepared to take Occupy down were formidable: “if we erect a lightning rod, we shouldn’t be surprised if lightning eventually strikes.”<sup>75</sup>

Implicitly, Davis was asking if Occupy, for all of its momentous achievements, had built its edifice of rebellious refusal on an adequate foundation, one able to withstand what was coming. Such a query highlighted the dialectical reciprocities of struggle and organization that, in so many ways, framed Mike’s life as a resilient, romantic revolutionary. Never one to constrict his gaze to the American scene, Davis extended this analysis with a consideration of the uprisings of *indignados*, European anti-capitalist parties, and the Arab Spring, writing in a *New Left Review* editorial as 2011 gave way to 2012:

In great upheavals, analogies fly like shrapnel. The electrifying protests of 2011 – the ongoing Arab spring, the “hot” Iberian and Hellenic summers, the “occupied” fall in the United States – inevitably have been compared to the *anni mirabiles* of 1848, 1905, 1968, and 1989. Certainly some fundamental things still apply and classic patterns repeat. Tyrants tremble, chains break and palaces are stormed. Streets become magical laboratories where citizens and comrades are created, and radical ideas acquire sudden telluric power. *Iskra* becomes *Facebook*. But will this new comet of protest persist in the winter sky or is it just a brief, dazzling meteor shower? As the fates of previous *journées révolutionnaires* warn us, spring is the shortest of seasons, especially when the *communards* fight in the name of a “different world” for which they have no real blueprint or even idealized language.

Mike’s assessment of the world balance of forces was sober, yet insistent that Marx remained as relevant as ever. Against the lazy ruminations of a fashionable post-Marxist consensus on the obsolescence of proletarian agency, to be replaced by “multitudes, horizontal spontaneities, whatever,” he reminded readers of the “great industrializing society” to the east. “Two hundred million Chinese factory workers, miners and construction labourers are the most dangerous class on the planet,” he wrote. “Their full awakening from the bubble may yet determine whether or not a socialist Earth is still possible.”<sup>76</sup>

During this period Mike was also offering acute analyses of American electoral politics, most of which appeared in *New Left Review*. A capacity for

75. Mike Davis, “No More Bubblegum,” in the pamphlet *Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible*. See also Davis, “Ten Immodest Commandments: Lessons from a Fumbling-and-Bungling Lifetime of Activism,” *The Rag Blog*, 17 November 2011, <https://theragblog.blogspot.com>.

76. Mike Davis, “Spring Confronts Winter,” *New Left Review* 72 (November–December 2011): 5, 14–15.

synthesis, in which demographic and electoral data were synchronized with class outlooks and economic interests, as well as a sure grasp of the geography and history of the United States, were as apparent in these political essays as in anything Mike ever wrote.

Starting with the 2006 midterms, which saw the Democrats retake Congress after the leaden years of Bush's war on terror, Mike anatomized the vote for Obama in 2008, outlining the fractions of capital that backed him and detailing the renewed gridlock characterizing his second term after 2012. Trumpism, predictably, offered Davis a fertile field of commentary, backgrounded by the devastation of the 2007–08 financial meltdown. Writing in 2013, Mike saw something of what the future held, noting that "the destruction of \$19 trillion of personal wealth in the United States since 2008 coupled with the fears of economic stagnation and minority ascendancy have crazed the base of the Republican Party. ... It's the gangrene of imperial decline." America-First-ism Mike regarded as a dangerous "cancer" metastasizing in the body politic of the United States. He subsequently probed the razor-thin margins of the Upper Midwest that took the new apricot authoritarian into the White House, and explored the ground-level sentiments in the Republican exurbs and Texas borderlands as Biden regained the presidency for the Democratic Party in 2020.<sup>77</sup>

In the inaugural issue of a New York-based journal of theory and strategy, *Catalyst*, edited by Robert Brenner and Vivek Chibber, with Davis serving for a short time as an advisory editor, Mike offered a rare, incisive, and convincing demolition of the convenient and rapidly consolidating media-induced explanation of Trump's 2016 electoral victory. Mainstream liberal pundits promoted the view that this surprising outcome was a consequence of the rust-belted white working class defecting from its traditional allegiance to the Democratic Party, instead opting into what might prove to be "the twilight zone of home-grown fascism." Proclaiming that "history has been hacked," Davis showed, through recourse to patient readings of electoral returns, how the birth of deglobalization and the deepening crisis of capital mirrored the bankruptcy of Democrats' policies (guided as they were by the likes of Goldman Sachs and biotechnology giants like Genentech) in the fading industrial heartland of the United States. Trump's victory, anything but a surge, owed less to an alienated lumpenproletariat than it did to other top-down, class-based developments in the political culture. First, Trump managed to hold onto Mitt Romney's respectable, well-heeled Republican constituency. Never enamoured of the poor, deserving or otherwise, this moneyed contingent proved far less outraged by Trump's populist charlatanism than many expected. Second, the Trump campaign succeeded in thwarting the stampede

77. Mike Davis, "The Democrats Return," *New Left Review* 43 (January–February 2007): 5–31; Davis, "Obama at Manassas," *New Left Review* 56 (March–April 2009): 5–40; Davis, "Last White Election," *New Left Review* 79 (January–February 2013): 5–52; Davis, "Election 2016," *New Left Review* 103 (January–February 2017): 5–8; Davis, "Trench Warfare," *New Left Review* 126 (November–December 2020): 5–32; Weiss, "TheLand Interview."

of conservative women and upwardly mobile minorities away from the new president's vile racism, sexism, and misogyny. Mainstream political culture proved entirely able to dress a politics of often hateful arrogant entitlement in the wardrobe of an indiscretion. Third, and finally, Trump and the Republicans exploited an opportunistic opening of the policy-forming door to a fundamentalist Christian throng eager to take over the GOP's platform. With abortion put back on the political table, to be vilified and its status as a legal right challenged, eroded, and ultimately rescinded, the family values that Trump's every utterance and a lifetime of behaviour mocked could be amortized.<sup>78</sup>

Mike's political self-assessment crystallized as these astute commentaries unfolded. In 2009, Davis told the veteran public affairs broadcaster Bill Moyers, that he was an "old-time socialist," standing in "the shadow of [an] immense history of American radicalism and labor" activism. Emphatic that embracing the politics of anti-capitalist dissent in the United States was "not to be an orphan," Davis regarded himself as part of a continuum, "but with the responsibility to insure" the "regeneration" of socialist possibility, premised on "solidarity for the poor," not only in the advanced capitalist economies of the West but in the "ex-colonial world" of the Global South as well.<sup>79</sup> A decade later, pressed by radical Algerian journalist Mohsen Abdelmoumen to explain his sense of himself as a plain, or old-school, socialist, Davis replied, "I suppose I'm making three claims. First, socialism – the belief that the earth belongs to labour – is my moral being ... the values that anchor the commitments that define my life." Second, he added, "old school" meant "putting in the work year after year for the good cause." Finally, he suggested that the term "plain, old-school socialist" expressed identification "with the broad movement and the dream rather than a particular program or camp." Continuing the conversation, Mike elaborated:

I have strong, if idiosyncratic, opinions on all the traditional issues – for example, the necessity of an organization of organizers (call it Leninism, if you will), but also the evils of bureaucracy and permanent leaderships (call it anarchism, if you will) – but I try to remind myself that such positions need to be constantly reassessed and calibrated to the conjuncture. One is always negotiating the slippery dialectic between individual reason, which must be intransigently self-critical, and the fact that one needs to be part of a movement or radical collective in order, as Sartre put it, to "be in history."

If socialists had not yet found the path, Davis was convinced that they were "the only ones urgently looking."<sup>80</sup>

78. Mike Davis, "The Great God Trump and the White Working Class," *Catalyst* 1, 1 (2017): 151–171.

79. Moyers, "Author Mike Davis"; Weiss, "TheLAnd Interview."

80. Mohsen Abdelmoumen, "Prof Mike Davis: 'There Was Once a Generation of Lions,'" *Algérie Résistance* (blog), 12 April 2018, reposted as "Socialists Are Urgently Looking for the Future: American Marxist Mike Davis Talks to Algerian Journalist Mohsen Abdelmoumen," *MRonline*, 25 April 2018, <https://mronline.org>.



He told an interviewer in 2016, “If my mind has an unorthodox and eccentric bent and my temperament inclines toward Celtic melancholia, my core values and self-definition remain soldierly socialist.” But if Davis envisioned himself a soldier in socialism’s cause, what army would he march with, and who were the generals he would follow into battle? Depending on the circumstances, Mike could lean toward the necessity of a disciplined apparatus, a party formation, or alternatively, opt into embracing a more spontaneous, “social miracle”-like explosion of ass-kicking, in-your-face *refusal*. Instinctively gravitating toward the rebellious act, he would at the same time be drawn back to ask, “What’s the next link in the chain (in Lenin’s sense) that needs to be grasped?” Which kind of socialists Mike would have aligned with was usually a work in progress, although almost all of the handful and more of left-wing organizations with which he was associated from the 1970s into the 21st century were Trotskyist-inflected. The truth is that Mike was unlikely to be entirely content in any disciplined political structure, just as he was destined to be somewhat lugubrious apart from such a party. In the end Mike, an advocate of the necessity of organizations of organizers, could probably never be much of an organization man himself. As he told an interviewer in 2022 in a wry, self-mocking, personal assessment, “my true nature is totally petty bourgeois.” Nonetheless, Davis was adamant that organization was essential, and in the last decade of his life he returned, again and again, to the crucial problem confronting the left. It weighed especially on the young: “the lack of organization and structure, particularly of organizers of organizers. There’s no leadership to give direction.” As a consequence, “The biggest single political problem in the United States right now has been the demoralization of tens of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of young activists.” No one was telling them where to go to fight or what to do. “All they get instead, and what I get every day, are 10 solicitations from the Democrats to support candidates ... we’ve forgotten the use of disciplined, aggressive, but non-violent civil disobedience.”<sup>81</sup>

Socialism remained Mike Davis’ touchstone. It grew out old-school sensibilities of mutual aid, epitomized by Eugene Debs and later communists like William Z. Foster and James P. Cannon. These leaders of revolutionary movements were known to give their last dollar or a new suit of clothes to down-and-out comrades they met on the street. Mike drew on this sense of magnanimity as he championed socialism’s instinctual sense of collective responsibility, a guide to everyday human interaction:

Stop and give a hitchhiking family a ride. Never cross a picket line, even when your family can’t pay the rent. Share your last cigarette with a stranger. Steal milk when your kids

81. “Fight with Hope”; Alex Callinicos, “A Tribute to Mike Davis,” *International Socialism*, no. 177, 14 January 2023, <http://isj.org.uk>; Dean, “Mike Davis on Trucking”; “Socialists Are Urgently Looking”; MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms”; Eamon Whalen, “Hero of 2022: Mike Davis, and Learning in Order to Act,” *Mother Jones*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.motherjones.com>.

have none and then give half to the little kids next door (this was what my own mother did repeatedly in 1936). Listen carefully to the quiet, profound people who have lost everything but their dignity. Cultivate the generosity of the “we.”<sup>82</sup>

These sentiments were uppermost in Mike’s mind in the last years of his life. He was an inveterate fashioner of bumper stickers. One of his last creations declared, “Under the shelter of each other, we survive.”<sup>83</sup>

In Mike’s view, this basic collectivity and solidarity must be enriched and extended by class struggle. Transformational change depended on winning masses of people to the realization that acting against capital was decisive; the role of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky in elaborating a politics of strategic critique and of applying this in combative opposition to capitalism was of fundamental importance. “We want class war,” Mike never tired of saying, pressing for labour to become more powerful, for the “noise in the streets” to become louder, and for protests to be buttressed by the structure of an ongoing, evolving apparatus of revolutionaries. The struggle, he insisted, must never be relinquished, “even when the fight seems hopeless,” just as the solidarity it demanded necessarily extended to the poor and downtrodden of all nations, rich and poor alike.<sup>84</sup>

Two long chapters in Davis’ late work *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx’s Lost Theory* (2018) address these issues directly. The first, subtitled “Notes on Revolutionary Agency,” offers a grand tour of proletarian consciousness and culture in the United States and Europe from 1838 (the People’s Charter) to 1921 (the Communist Party of Germany’s March uprising), presenting an “idealized maximum argument” for the traditional working class as the gravedigger of capitalism. The essay invited readers to “imagine, if you will, the proletariat being asked by the World Spirit for a résumé of its qualifications for the job of Universal Emancipator,” which it then delivers. Mike did not, of course, suggest that the working classes of the 19th and early 20th centuries persisted unchanged, but neither did he believe that they had been reconstituted out of existence. The funeral of the “old working class,” proclaimed by so many post-theorists, seemed to Davis premature. Eulogies for a “classical revolutionary subject [that] no longer exists,” delivered with much fanfare, Mike regarded as imprudent. “To put it crudely,” he wrote, the working class “has been demoted in agency, not fired from history.” If it was no longer possible

82. Davis, “No More Bubblegum,” which has often been quoted in Davis obituaries and remembrances, including Ulaby, “Writer, Truck Driver, Meat Cutter”; Weissman, “Personal Remembrance.”

83. Kinsee Morlan, “What Mike Davis’s Family Put into His Ofrenda, and What He Offered Them,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.latimes.com>.

84. See, for instance, “Fight with Hope”; MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms”; Moyers, “Author Mike Davis”; Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview”; Ulin, “Master of Urban Dialectic”; Ciaran O’Rourke, “The Fire Inside Mike Davis,” *CounterPunch*, 5 August 2022, <https://www.counterpunch.org>.

to rely on “a single paradigmatic society or class to model the critical vectors of historical development” – which was taking place in different, but related, ways in Shenzhen, Los Angeles, and Lagos – it was nonetheless mandatory to appreciate how workers such as machinists, nurses, truck drivers, and school-teachers were central pieces in the “puzzle of how heterodox social categories might be fitted together in a single resistance to capitalism.”

To do so required rescuing some of the “mid-level concepts” informing Marx’s analyses of national struggles in 1848. Drawing on a close reading of the paired texts – *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* – that constituted nothing less than an obituary of the February Revolution in France, Davis accents how nationalism, in Marx’s view, was the opium of the two “amorphous social worlds or ‘quasi-classes’ that comprised a majority of the French population.” These distinct strata were made up of urban artisans, shopkeepers, and small merchants, on the one hand, and rural smallholders on the other. In calling not so much for “proletarian nationalism per se but rather socialist assumption of leadership in national defense” that could accelerate “revolutionary change both internally and in neighboring countries,” Marx adopted a terminology of “class fractions,” “coteries,” “conjugation of factions,” “lumpen proletariat,” and so on. This was an “incipient political sociology of the middle landscape between the relations of production and the collision of politically organized economic interests.” Marx’s interrogation of 1848 and its aftermath, for Davis, provides a useful counter to stereotypical formulations of “class *versus* nation,” just as it flies in the face of insistence on the “invariable causal primacy of the relations of production.” Cognizant of the complexities of class formation in contexts of deindustrialization and slummification, this non-reductive perspective of Marx steeled Mike in his claims that much contemporary commentary and theory ran aground in their reification of “the autonomy of the discursive, the cultural, or the ethnic.” The result, he claimed, sustained an all-too-generalized “failure to map comprehensively the entire field of property relations and their derivative conflicts.” The old deity Marx, Mike proclaimed, reinforced the heretical axiom that, in the much-vaunted moment of 21st-century critical theory, “we need *more* economic interpretation not less.” This, of course, was the positioning of a plain, old-school socialist.<sup>85</sup>

The second half of *Old Gods, New Enigmas* initiates a discussion of the impact of climate variability on world history, courtesy of the natural scientist and geographer Prince Peter Kropotkin and the option of an egalitarian green urbanism as the solution to the problem of planetary survival: “Since most of history’s giant trees have already been cut down, a new Ark will have to be constructed out of the materials that humanity finds to hand in insurgent

85. The above paragraphs draw on Mike Davis, “Old Gods, New Enigmas: Notes on Revolutionary Agency” and “Marx’s Lost Theory: The Politics of Nationalism in 1848,” in *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 1–178, esp. 6–7, 21, 163, 165, 171–172, 178.

communities, pirate technologies, bootlegged media, rebel science and forgotten utopias.” What can this possibly have to do with Marx? Or with “plain, old-school, socialism”?<sup>86</sup>

Quite a bit, as readers of Charles H. Kerr’s radical publications of the early 20th century would know. Socialist bookshelves of that era contained titles such as R. H. Francé’s *Germes of Mind in Plants* (1907), translated by the well-known American socialist A. M. Simons; Dr. Wilhelm Meyer’s *The Making of the World* (1906) and *The End of the World* (1905), the latter predicting that “though the earth-life joyous and care-free has developed in upward course since millions of years ago, the decline is bound to come”; Ernest Untermann’s *Science and Revolution* (1910); and the primer *Evolution Social and Organic* (1908) by the popular socialist lecturer Arthur M. Lewis. Old-school American socialists were more likely to have read Charles Darwin, even perhaps Herbert Spencer, than Marx, and evolution played a decisive role in weaning militants away from religious superstition and social patriotism. This then allowed them to gravitate to the conviction that “the philosophy of the proletariat ... furnishes a scientific basis for the realization of the most daring dreams of the thinkers of all ages.” As Untermann declared in *Science and Revolution*, “An evolutionary ethic demands the abolition of all economic, political, and intellectual oppression; [and] a reduction of the struggle for the material requirements of life to a minimum by a collective control of productive processes.” This created the possibility of humanity avoiding being “hurled into the abyss of oblivion” by “conscious promotion of an environment in which an organ of understanding can develop which will succeed in ... its social, terrestrial, and cosmic mission.”<sup>87</sup>

Given such socialist predecessors, Mike Davis’ “political ecology” was part of a long line of “plain, old-school socialism,” just as the “organ of understanding” – the party question – remained a central, if often perplexing, concern.<sup>88</sup> His discussions of climate change in the concluding essays in *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, not to mention the so-called catastrophism of his earlier books and essays, are not so much idiosyncratic sidelines, then, as they are part of a continuous dialogue within the Marxist and anarcho-communist traditions. In addressing the need to act decisively, *and quickly*, so that the world’s poor are not left “to sink or swim with their own resources while rich countries protect their citizens behind climate-defense fortifications,” Davis did not step outside of “old-school socialism.” As he wrote in the preface to *Old Gods, New*

86. Davis, “The Coming Desert: Kropotkin, Mars, and the Pulse of Asia” and “Who Will Build the Ark?,” in *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 179–222, 202.

87. Dr. Wilhelm Meyer, *The End of the World* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1905), 7; R. Ernest Untermann, *Science and Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1910), 191–192.

88. See, for instance, John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

*Enigmas*, “We need to ignite our imaginations by rediscovering those extraordinary discussions – and in some cases concrete experiments – in utopian urbanism that shaped socialist and anarchist thinking between the 1880s and the early 1930s. The *alter monde* that we believe is the only possible alternative to the new Dark Ages requires us to dream old dreams anew.” This was a reiteration of Trotsky’s maxim that “Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones.”<sup>89</sup>

### “We’ll See What Happens”

MIKE’S DEFENCE OF OLD POSITIONS and his charting of new courses was done with his words. They were the weapon he wielded most effectively in the fighting cause of socialism. He would have preferred otherwise, as he revealed in a number of late-in-life interviews. After being diagnosed in 2016 with a rare lymphoma, Waldenstrom macroglobulinemia, Mike confided to a journalist that his one regret was that he would not go out “in battle at a barricade, as I’ve always romantically imagined – you know, fighting.” He recognized that you cannot script your own exit but that it was possible to retain the spirit of revolt, even if your demise could not be timed to coexist with a heroic moment of final resistance. “It’d be nice to die in 1968, or with the liberation of Europe in 1945,” he mused. “You’re on the barricades in 1917, 1919. Go out of life with the red flags flying.” If this did not happen, however, “despair is useless.”<sup>90</sup>

Despair was not in Mike’s vocabulary. When a tumour was discovered in his esophagus, he underwent daily radiation and weekly chemotherapy. In the years that followed, surgeries and ongoing medical treatments were a constant in his life. Mike always expressed great faith in his medical care, claimed to be free of anxiety, and was “totally on board” with his surgeon’s prognosis and competence. In his emails Mike was resilient and upbeat, a note in 2020 joking, “Yes, I’m prime road kill: old, immune suppressed, with chronic respiratory problems .... I’ve moved out to the garage with the dog and a bottle of Baileys, and we’ll see what happens.” As late as mid-April 2022, despite feeling miserable with the extreme fatigue and nausea that accompanied each experimental chemotherapy session, Mike remained in good spirits, even as a new growth was discovered in his thorax. “My roller coaster ride with cancer is now in its fifth year,” he wrote, “and I’m waiting for someone to say (in a mock Yiddish accent) ‘What? You’re not dead yet?’” But a note of resignation had crept into his correspondence; Mike conveyed that – with his wife, Alessandra

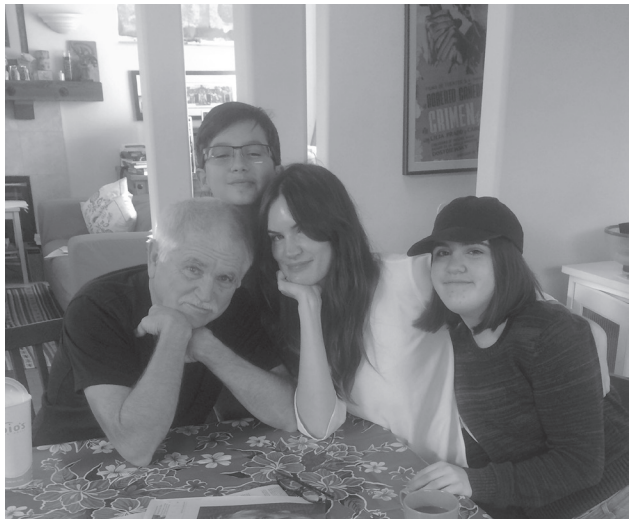
89. Davis, “Coming Desert” and “Who Will Build the Ark?,” esp. 222, xxiii; Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 178. See also Vettese, “Last Man to Know Everything.”

90. Drawing on and quoting from MacAdams, “Jeremiah among the Palms”; Moyers, “Author Mike Davis”; Weiss, “TheLAnd Interview”; Ulin, “Master of Urban Dialectic”; Dean, “Still a Damn Good Storyteller”; Beckett, “California’s ‘Prophet of Doom.’”

Moctezuma – he was weighing the trade-off between continual, and increasingly debilitating, treatment “and letting nature take its course.”<sup>91</sup>

Alessandra, a radical Latina artist and curator, professor of Museum Studies at San Diego’s Mesa College, was Mike’s “rock” in these difficult years. Descended from a daughter of the ill-fated Aztec emperor, her great-great-grandfather General Juan Valentin Amador led the Mexican troops over the walls of the Alamo in 1836; her father, Juan Lopez-Moctezuma, was a pioneering filmmaker, TV journalist, and broadcaster of modern jazz in Mexico City. The love of Mike’s life for a quarter of a century, Alessandra kept him going in what were the best and worst of times.

Also critical was the affection of two older children from previous marriages, Jack and Róisín, and the twins, James Connolly and Cassandra, who enlivened the Moctezuma-Davis household. Mike often said he felt fortunate to be surrounded by boundless love. He was exceedingly proud of all of his family, delighting in his



**With son James and daughters Róisín and Cassandra, San Diego, 2017.**

Courtesy of Alessandra Moctezuma.

role as a benign *pater familias*. Joking about how settled domestic life, old age, and a mortgage were conservatizing him, he was seldom able to send an email without recounting Alessandra’s latest triumphs as gallery director at Mesa College, where her commitment to border art and the documentation of immigrant lives were often on display. A proud father, Mike revelled in boasts about his adult offspring and the enthusiasms of his teenaged twins.<sup>92</sup>

91. Mike Davis, email communication to the author, 22 January 2017, 26 March 2017, 14 March 2020; 13 April 2022; Davis to “Dear Friends,” email, 22 February 2022.

92. For example, Davis, email communication to the author, 5 July 2021. In 1997, Davis wisecracked about himself with journalist Adam Shatz: “Ever since I got a mortgage, I’ve been corrupted. I’ve been dreaming about my lawn and worrying about property values.” Shatz, “American Earthquake.” Mike talked about Alessandra’s family background in Raven, “Mike Davis.”



Quick to assure friends and well-wishers that he was buoyant, Mike nonetheless acknowledged that he was physically sick a lot of the time and that only tiny amounts of writing were possible. Mike's will to live, bolstered by his family, seemed sustained by writing. His metaphorical pen was slowed as he battled various cancers, but it never entirely ran out of ink. It was almost as though Mike wrote to live. During the doldrums of pandemic isolations, he sent to a large list of friends (over 200) a regular, often daily, instalment of "Plague Year News." It contained articles and commentaries Mike gathered from various scientific and left-wing publications, including pieces on COVID-19. Reading well into the night on virology, Mike was also producing short journalistic essays on the unfolding pandemic. These would be incorporated into a new, updated edition of his book on the threat of avian flu. He was always keen to touch base on Canadian issues, telling me in May 2021 that he was watching *The National* and found the accounts of wildfires sweeping British Columbia harrowing: "People need to recognize that the entire North American West is in the midst of an epochal and irreversible transformation of ecologies and landscapes," he warned. "A thousand years compressed into a decade, occurring so fast that many plant communities will have no time to migrate and may become totally extinct. Time to start planting your cactus garden on Vancouver Island while the melting permafrost releases zillions of tons of methane. We can already see what's happening in Siberia." He contributed posts to *NLR's Sidecar* blog when events like the 6 January 2021 riot in Washington commandeered the airwaves, drowning viewers in tears shed for America's desecrated temple of democracy. "Oh, poor defiled city on the hill," he mocked. Against the mainstream regurgitation of an ideological rewriting of history past and strikingly present, Davis saw in the so-called "insurrection" little more than a "dark comedy," albeit one whose last act, the unfolding of which remained to be seen, was almost certain to be a "continuation of extreme socio-economic turbulence." As sick as he was, Mike was secretly at work on an ambitious study "that may fall flat when it's finished," but an undertaking he thought "the perfect diversion from poor health": *Star Spangled Leviathan: An Economic History of American Nationalism*. Life, as Mike knew it, was inconceivable without writing. It was his vehicle for mobilizing dissent, agitating people to resist, fomenting the fight.<sup>93</sup>

When the writing finally really stopped on 25 October 2022, the music died. It had been a long and exhilarating festival, a Woodstock for a post-1960s left that hung on Mike's every note. The physical act of constructing sentences, paragraphs, articles, and books, of course, ended earlier, but Mike was still with us, reading, up to the end, hundreds of pages a day, devouring

93. Davis, email communications, 22 January 2017, 5 July 2021; Davis, *The Monster Enters: COVID-19, Avian Flu, and the Plagues of Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 2020); Davis, "In a Plague Year," *Jacobin*, 14 March 2020, <https://jacobin.com>; Davis, "Riot on the Hill," *Sidecar* (blog), *New Left Review*, 7 January 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar>; Morlan, "What Mike Davis' Family Put into His Ofrenda."

histories of military campaigns and exploration, indulging passions perhaps long suppressed. Mike Davis' death left a vacuum that will not be filled. His anguished reverence for comrades gone was always an essential part of Mike's political being. Now it was part of ours. His regard for those tough-minded and hard-nosed "children of Ellis Island who built the CIO, fought Jim Crow in Manhattan and Alabama and buried their friends in Spanish earth" was expressed in recognition of "an inestimable, heart-wrenching loss." The realization that Mike Davis' voice will no longer punctuate the political scene, that the distinctive sound of his call to confront injustice and refuse to succumb will not be resounding in our ears in new discordant compositions, registers with all on the left in the same way. "His death is simply a hole in the world," Mike wrote of one 1970s friend. We now confront a similar crater.<sup>94</sup>

Mike would not want us to stare too long into the abyss. If our thoughts linger in the chasm, however, we can perhaps pause to hope for a final, Davis-like, fabulist ride. One of Mike's favourite El Cajon happenings was the Church of Unarius, a quaint sect founded by Ruth Norman, known among her flock as Sister Uriel. Her beliefs included absolute human and interspecies equality among our galaxy's

33 inhabited planets. Mike had a soft spot for "these crazy folks with their Tesla Towers and galactic love-ins, all smiling under portraits of Uriel as a beautiful flapper in the 1920s and then as an old but still wonderful mother goddess," who somehow decided that universal reconciliation would happen on



**Admiring the Church of Unarius Tesla Tower, El Cajon, 2008.**

*Courtesy of Lucy Raven/Bomb Magazine.*

the corner of El Cajon's Main and Magnolia, now sporting, suitably, a nifty Starbucks. A cult promotion of innocent faith in science, human progress, and planetary internationalism, the Unarians provided Mike with a theatre of the absurd, a stage on which he envisioned a latter-day Fourierism, complete with a homegrown, El Cajon version of communal socialism, space-age peace, and life in crystal phalansteries. Whenever Mike was depressed about the terminal state of the world he would take a short drive to El Cajon, seeking reassurance,

94. Davis, "Remembering a Friend"; Wiener, "Mike Davis."

as he joked, that “the saucers full of love [were] coming.”<sup>95</sup> Perhaps they have picked him up.

Whatever we might want for him, however, Mike was clear about what he wanted for and from all of us. Asked by the *LA Times*, “How do you hold on to hope?” Mike replied,

To put it bluntly, I don’t think hope is a scientific category. And I don’t think people fight or stay the course because of hope. I think people do it out of love and anger. Everybody wants to know: Aren’t you hopeful. Don’t you believe in hope. To me, this is not a rational conversation. I try to write as honestly and realistically as I can. And you know, I see bad stuff. I see a city decaying from the bottom up. I see the landscapes that are so important to me as a Californian dying, irrevocably changed. I see fascism. I’m writing because I’m hoping the people who read it don’t need dollops of hope or good endings but are reading so that they’ll know what to fight and fight even when the fight seems hopeless.<sup>96</sup>

Wish fulfillment Davis regarded as a poor substitute for enlightenment.

Alessandra and the Moctezuma-Davis family created a beautiful Day of the Dead altar for their beloved Mike. It is adorned with a picture of Mike standing under a “Utopia Rd” sign he and Alessandra encountered in an out-of-the-way spot in New Zealand; a wonderful photograph of Mike raising his fist alongside some New York graffiti reading “Revolt”; and an image of the geologically attuned Mike perched in front of an escarpment in Newfoundland. An IWW patch and a bust of Engels, as well as foods and liquors, are in the *ofrenda* too. Wishing Mike well, the family imagined him driving in his Ford truck “on a road with thousand-foot drops,” searching for that illusive “eclogite metamorphic rock, and listening to Coltrane as you round the bend.” His daughter Róisín remembered how “very brave” Mike was in his last dying days.<sup>97</sup>

## To the Poor Always

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO UNDERSTAND how my mind works, Mike told an interviewer, though admittedly baffled by the notion himself, “it’s more obvious in the projects I never finished than the ones I’ve written.” One of those books destined to remain unwritten was “a world history of revolutionary terrorism.” As I was pulling Mike’s books off my shelves to write this piece, a prospectus for the project fell out of one of them. *The “Heroes of Hell”: An Anthology of Revolutionary Outlaws and Anarchist Saints* was to be a nine-chapter salute to those whom Jules Vallès, the editor of a 19th-century Parisian socialist journal, *Le Cri du Peuple*, hailed as steadfast in their allegiance to “the poor *always*, despite their errors, despite their faults, despite their crimes.” Mike plotted an

95. Mike Davis, “Unarius at the Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles,” email to Adam Shatz and 21 others, 1 September 2021. Mike often took interviewers and friends who visited him in San Diego to visit the Unarians. For one of the best accounts, see Raven, “Mike Davis.”

96. Dean, “Still a Damn Good Storyteller”; Ulin, “Master of Urban Dialectic.”

97. Morlan, “What Mike Davis’ Family Put into His Ofrenda”; Wiener, “Mike Davis.”



Mike Davis' *ofrenda*, San Diego, 2022.

Courtesy of Alessandra Moctezuma.

ambitious excursion through the “eternal conspiracy” propounded by Auguste Blanqui; accounts of labour avengers Alexander Berkman, Wesley Everest, and others; examinations of Bolshevik bank robbers and the Bonnot Gang; studies of mutinous mariners like Brazil’s João Cândido Felisberto, leader of the 1910 Lash Uprising; and portraits of 1970s agents of revolutionary suicide, such as the Situationist terrorists, the Angry Brigade, and Puerto Rico’s independence crusaders, *los macheteros*.

Mike himself was no proponent of individual terrorism, as his encounter with the dodgy fanatics during the Gray Line strike, or his rejection of the Weather Underground, made clear. Yet he understood what drove actual revolutionaries in the direction of exemplary acts of vengeance, hating as he did the crimes against humanity perpetrated by capital. He quoted Trotsky: “Whatever moral eunuchs and Pharisees may say, the feeling of revenge has its right. The working class has greater moral probity because it does not look with dull indifference at what is happening in this, the best of all possible worlds.”<sup>98</sup>

98. The prospectus in my possession is undated, but Davis discussed a more focused version of the book, restricted to the years between 1878 and 1932, in “Artisans of Terror: Mike Davis interviewed by Jon Wiener,” in *In Praise of Barbarians*, 263–277, where he quotes Trotsky, “Why Marxists Oppose Individual Terrorism,” *Der Kampf*, November 1911.

Mike chose an epigraph for this book that was never to be. It was drawn from lines of verse by his favourite anarchist poet, Lola Ridge. They first appeared in Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* (1909) and serve well as a final goodbye to Mike himself:

Here's a toast that has never been given:  
Listen, thralls of the Book and the Bell:  
To the souls of the martyrs unshriven,  
The bondsmen who dared to rebel –

To the Breakers, the Bold, the Despoilers,  
Who dreamed of a world overthrown;  
They who died for the millions of toilers,  
Few fronting the nations alone;

To the Outlawed of men and the Branded,  
Whether hated or hating they fell.  
I pledge the devoted, red-handed,  
Unflinching heroes of hell!<sup>99</sup>

It seems somehow inappropriate to offer the usual valediction, RIP, whether it be the conventional Rest in Peace or the more radical variant, Rest in Power. I doubt that Mike, who was never restful in life, would want to be so in death. Not having much in the way of peace over his 76 years, save for the serenity he secured in his loving circle of family and friends, he certainly appreciated that meaningful power lay well beyond his individual grasp. Mike knew it was right to rebel, and he revelled in the fight. His ride through life was a joyously bumpy one nonetheless.

Always an outlaw, Mike Davis was one of our heroes from capitalist hells, which he railed against with such resolution, unrivalled imagination, and a historical range that was daring and daunting. He never flinched in his refusal to let the profit system's destructive essence present itself as natural and inevitable. Militants and mavericks, radicals, rebels, and revolutionaries will be reading Mike Davis for decades to come. Honour him with acts of defiant dissent, determined demonstrations for social justice, resolute stands of class struggle and international solidarity, carrying high the standard of a fighting socialist movement.

99. Lola Ridge, "The Martyrs of Hell," *Mother Earth*, 4 (April 1909), later published as "The Toast," in a longer and far less resolutely inflammatory version, in Ridge, *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918), 62–63.





**With Alessandra, San Diego, 2022.**

Courtesy of Jason Sexton/Alessandra Moctezuma.

*Many thanks to those who read this essay in preliminary versions, offering thoughts for revision, clarifications, and encouragements. Especially useful were the readings of Steve Brier, Susan Watkins, Chad Pearson, Alan Wald, Kirk Niergarth, Mike Goldfield, Dianne Feeley, Russell Jacoby, Nelcya Delanöe, Joan Sangster, and Greg Kealey.*



This tribute is a co-publication of *Labour/Le Travail* and *New Left Review*. It will appear in both journals with minor editorial variation.