



Toward a Better World: Interview with Mike Davis

by Ben Terrall / March 10th, 2008

Mike Davis is a veteran writer and activist who cut his progressive teeth in the 1960s civil rights and anti-war movements. He has worked as a meat cutter, long distance trucker, and, most recently, college professor (he currently teaches history at UC Irvine).

His first book, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, is a trenchant, thoroughly researched history of the U.S. labor movement; he is most famous for 1990's *City of Quartz*, a modern history of Los Angeles that drew a wide audience. His cautionary book *The Monster at Our Door: the Global Threat of Avian Flu* has been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Arabic and Swedish.

Davis's lively prose style, combined with an intellectual curiosity and ease with science, the humanities, radical history and much else, makes for engaging writing chock full of eccentric, surprising information. Davis's fellow Lannan Foundation award winner Susan Straight recently said, "he writes everything [and] he knows everything about everything."

Mike Davis was good enough to give me a phone interview in early February. In the background, Mike's twin toddlers scurried around his San Diego home as he graciously let me pick his brain for an hour.

Ben Terrall: In your 2006 book *Planet of Slums*, you write, "Cities in the abstract are the solution to the global environmental crisis: urban density can translate into great efficiencies in land, energy, and resource use, while democratic public spaces and cultural institutions likewise provide qualitatively higher standards of enjoyment than individualized consumption and commodified leisure." Could you say something about how the current trends in urban American can be pushed to move in that direction, as opposed to the way things are going now?

Mike Davis: First of all we need to recognize that we're probably witnessing the de-housing of millions of Americans through a combination of the subprime crisis and increasing unemployment. I think that we've been handed on a plate an extraordinary opportunity to, if not solve the housing crisis in America, greatly reduce it.

[An earlier opportunity] was during the savings and loan meltdown during the beginning of the 1990s, when the federal government came into possession of more than a million units of housing through defaulting or bankrupt savings and loans. And all the government did was simply sell those off at a discount on the market. And you might think what could have been done with the stock of housing.

Secondly, base closure across the country has provided extraordinary opportunities for cities. And to be honest with you the only example I can think of a positive outcome is the Presidio in San Francisco. Here in San Diego the Naval Training Center was given away at a dollar an acre to a private developer who developed market-rate upscale condominiums, leaving not only civilian San Diego families, but Navy families, still facing an acute housing shortage.

So first of all, we need to address the problem of a national housing crisis that's going to get suddenly worse. Secondly, the trends of course in the last stock market cycle in housing, is we've seen a new spurt of gentrification that's touched even what were considered formerly ungentrifiable neighborhoods, right into inner-city neighborhoods in places like Houston and Newark, downtown Los Angeles, almost always heavily subsidized one way or another by the public sector. Yet at the same time exurbs continue to grow, and sprawl into countryside more environmentally and socially expensive than ever. The size of new homes has increased by 50% in 30 years, the environmental cost of exurban development is higher than ever. So the fundamental pattern of market-driven urbanization, becoming more and more inefficient, making more people's housing situation precarious, forcing working class people into longer commutes, all this remains in place. The big difference is that over the last 30 years the center of gravity of the urban crisis has tended to migrate from the inner cities per se to the older suburbs, the fifties inner ring suburbs, where working class people, people of color move in the expectation they'll find better schools and jobs. But like a mirage in the desert, the better schools and jobs have already moved on further out.

BT: You wrote in your book *Magical Urbanism* that "only powerful extra-electoral mobilizations, with the ability to shape agendas and discipline candidates, can ensure the representation of grassroots socioeconomic as well as ethnic-symbolic interests."

In a similar vein, JoAnn Wypijewski recently wrote on the *Counterpunch* website, "The problem now isn't whether Obama can be president or what kind he'd be, where he's false and where he's true. The problem now is, Who has got it together to hold his or anyone's feet to the fire? And what's likely to spur engagement, sturdy advocacy and resistance?"

Given the need for government action to achieve what you were talking about, and so many other things, I wonder what you see in terms of grassroots ability to hold politicians' feet to the fire — especially since you recently wrote a great piece in *New Left Review* about the financial sectors behind the current Democratic Party.

MD: Although I may be wrong in some ways to the extent that a lot of those sectors seem to have gravitated more to Obama this election cycle than Clinton.

But yes, I think the shame of the whole primary process has been that the unions, by and large, with the exception of the SEIU, ran away from Edwards. And Edwards had the platform, whatever you think of Edwards personally, that most conformed to what unions claim to want. It was definitely one of the most progressive platforms since the Rainbow Coalition. And I think ultimately it's self-defeating because if Edwards [had been] able to stay in the campaign and take more delegates to the Democratic convention, then perhaps you could argue that those [pro-labor] positions would have greater clout and would ensure that they were integral parts of the final election. You can't be sure of that at all, certainly, as Clinton and Obama will praise Edwards and talk about poverty now for a few weeks. But as we've seen with the last Democratic candidate, that will soon fade and the great danger is that we'll have a Presidential election exclusively devoted to the war on terror, security and pumping the economy for the middle classes, and the question of the working poor and poverty in general will again disappear.

The unions that left the AFL-CIO of course did on the basis of criticism that the AFL-CIO was just promiscuously spending all of its money on Democrats who often didn't fight for the interests of labor, rather than organizing. But the unions left still seem to embrace that politics.

Years ago I was very impressed by the example in Los Angeles of the Industrial Areas Foundation-related organizations, United Neighborhood Organization, and so on. These were organizations that largely mobilized church bases, beginning with the Catholic Church.

Father Luis Olivares of La Placita in downtown Los Angeles was the leader of this movement. And their traditional policy was not to trust any politician, but to hold everyone's feet in the fire. And during his period, the issues were socioeconomic ones like discrimination in car insurance, supermarket prices. It had a whole economic populist

content, and it also interacted with and supported the more dynamic unions, particularly those organizing amongst immigrants. But then Olivares was displaced and these organizations mainly began to express the moral, pro-life politics of the Cardinal, rather than the economic needs of working class families.

So I must confess that I don't really believe that we live in a new age where everything has to be done on the moveon.com model, and the internet — and that organizing is passe. And I think we have powerful organizing models that have been developed in the last 10-20 years, but I don't see them consistently applied to the purpose of a platform.

In the case of Los Angeles, it's been clear for almost a generation, that really what this city needs is a coalition of organizations built around an essential human needs platform, that puts children first, that addresses the crisis of the working poor, health coverage, etc, that is not mortgaged to either the career of any charismatic Democratic politician or to the inscrutable rivalries with which the Democratic Party is rife. And also a coalition that is not simply part of a Democratic Party alliance. Obviously if you read my books you realize that I'm not a supporter of the Democratic Party, but I do believe that social reform in this period requires relentless pressure on Democrats by people who still believe that the party is the principle agent of reform.

BT: In various places in your books you talk about the need for the government to invest in jobs, to rebuild infrastructure, to address human needs. There's a project that the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights has called the Green Collar Jobs Campaign. Do you know about this or similar initiatives, and can you speak to them. Also, can you talk about the problem of the environmental movement still being largely a white phenomenon, and how this green jobs campaign or any other project might broaden that base.

MD: I think that every environmental demand should be linked to a social justice demand. And in particular in California, I think most environmental demands should have to do with youth employment and extending the opportunities for the enjoyment of nature and participation in green politics to people in the inner cities. And you have things like the California job corps which have proven track records, almost to the point of Head Start, but are kept on the back burner, little boutique-like programs that are part of the shards of another age when there was serious talk about addressing core issues. But I think much of the environmental movement has walled itself off from enormous pro-environmental constituencies represented by the immigrant population which is the section of the population that most intensively uses public space and green spaces. And of course, it has become entrapped in special causes, I think to the detriment of a larger regional or state-level view.

In one of my books I [asked if] saving Santa Monica basin is entirely worthy; it kind of ended up being a major and sole investment of Westside environmentalists, to the detriment of serious environmental or open space needs in interior parts of Los Angeles.

There obviously are a lot of people in the environmental movement who understand this, but I'm not talking about just embracing this in principle or in your manifesto of social justice and environment, but linking every environmental demand to a specific proposal that improves quality of life in working class areas — that employs people, that creates more parkspace, that addresses what I think is the most single profound crisis in California, which is that in a rich state our children are poor.

Any forward progress for the Green Party or progressives in California depends on getting labor more involved in issues of land use planning, of water, of environment, of climate change, of housing. It's been the absence, in a way, of the labor movement as the single largest progressive constituency from these issues that allowed developers to run the state, sometimes to the narrow benefit, temporary benefit, of a few construction unions.

But increasingly unions have to face the fact that their members can't find housing within an hour and a half from work, that the environment's deteriorating, that Southern California, at least, is becoming gridlocked to an extent that it will cause a massive loss of jobs from the region. The labor movement has to get interested in questions

about urban, about regional planning, conservation, global warming.

BT: How do you think the problem of corporate greenwashing in terms of the way not only advertising but media coverage seems to be skewed towards this very wishy-washy pro-business way of looking at the impending environmental disasters that we're facing?

MD: I think there are two components here. One, the companies who are just throwing up an enormous smokescreen and want to be able to buy carbon credits and essentially deceive people. But then I think there is also an aggressive sector of venture capital that really is thinking that it can make profits through alternative energies and so on. And sometimes the interests of the two aren't the same. I'm sure there are big debates in some of the energy companies. But it is, at the end of the day, simply flim-flam, particularly when you give away the ability to make specific locational decisions. In other words, to tax and regulate specific sources of emission, and instead can plant trees in the Amazon or something.

And of course, in Southern California, all this is anchored by a kind of vivid testimonialism by people who otherwise have enormous environmental footprints. I just read something by Julia Roberts, who seems to be actually a very, very nice person, but massively into recycling while owning I don't know how many homes. But it's part of the larger, I think, deception that philanthropy, with socially responsible business, can solve the world's problems.

BT: There's so much you could say about these environmental questions, I didn't want to cut away from them, but I wanted to get in a question about the UN in Haiti. In *Planet of Slums* you talk about the Pentagon's global approach to counter-insurgency being more focused on a kind of urban warfare. And having gone to Haiti and seeing what the UN is doing there, I wonder if you see that as partly a new role for UN peacekeepers, as a kind of counterinsurgency proxy, in areas where, politically, after Mogadishu, it's too risky for U.S. forces to be there.

MD: Well to be honest with you, I'm very disturbed that groups like the Friends [American Friends Service Committee] and CARE and Save the Children and other NGOs have supported the establishment of this State Department Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization and support the Haitian Stabilization Initiative. This whole idea of having a smart foreign policy because what this stuff really is about, you probably recall, I think it was in the Spring of 2006, the State Department issued this report which was quite extraordinary because it found almost everything possibly wrong with the U.S. occupation of Iraq and then argued for a new policy, that avoided expensive reconstruction, huge upfront investment, for a combination of imposing law and order and then small-scale economic progress.

And it's very clear that's what's still going on Iraq with the surge and so on is the past, but Haiti is the future. And what the U.S. is looking for, or at least the State Department and probably most certainly an Obama or Clinton Administration, is a form of intervention that can establish a minimum threshold of control and stability in the areas recognized as most potentially volatile or dangerous from the standpoint of U.S. interests. And it's done so in Haiti, not only using the UN, including the first Chinese contingent, but it's part of this extraordinary, and I think much overlooked alliance between the Bush Administration and the Workers Party in power in Brazil, which includes consensus about peacekeeping in the Caribbean, but also the joint development of biofuels internationally.

What is also extraordinary about Haiti is that the object of intervention isn't just Haiti or Port-au-Prince, but it's specifically Port-au-Prince's largest slum, and probably the poorest in all the Americas, Cite Soleil, with a combination of building police stations and paving roads, and setting up a few popular projects — it's explicitly a strategy to take back control in Cite Soleil from the so-called Chimere gangs to the new government of Haiti in a context where the democratic-elected President of Haiti is in exile, and has been deposed by a combination of French, American and Brazilian intervention. It's quite extraordinary, and I think the program, though relatively small scale, is more the template for the future than the occupation of Iraq, in the sense that it addresses the question, in a world where economic globalization-linked space, where a lot of governments have been reduced to a

bare minimum after structural adjustment, where a lot of areas, huge areas of the cities have been essentially abandoned by the state, how do you re-establish state control, how do you prevent groups of any kind from achieving dual power and sovereignty in the slums. And the experiment in Cite Soleil is supposed to provide a model for that, and a model for future U.S. interventions. It kind of meets Max Boot's demand in a column last year, that the U.S. should basically have a Department of Colonial Affairs, well that's the Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization.

BT: I think one of the things that's clear to me from following what's going on in Haiti since the 2004 coup which forced out Aristide and his democratically-elected government is the role that NGOs can play in these seizures of power and taking back democracy from the people. This has been the case in Haiti since before the 2004 coup, but I've heard just recently that, from a grassroots group that does work with the poor in Cite Soleil that they're ready to give over the group to these right-wing funded characters that were behind the coup, just to keep people alive.

MD: I think you're absolutely right, and I think the State Department has now made explicit, and indeed even the Bush Administration, by transferring the primary responsibility, at least theoretically, for stabilization from the Pentagon to the State Department, makes it explicit that throughout the world the U.S. is going to work with these NGOs, and these NGOs are kind of soft power American intervention. But what I find very disturbing is that groups that have for so long advocated for peace and nonintervention, like the Friends, would endorse a policy where basically the small-scale job schemes, and free clinics, are part and parcel of strengthening the police and dramatically repressive strategies. And for them to buy into this line, I wonder if this is not what a Clinton or Obama administration would give us on an even larger scale. Of course, McCain, or a McCain/Guliani ticket, is more apt to keep using a big stick.

I think people are so focused on the horror of what the American intervention in Iraq has brought, that they're not paying attention — and, of course, nobody's being forced to debate — what's happening in Haiti, what's happening in the horn of Africa, U.S. interventions in West Africa, it's just all off the radar screen.

BT: A friend who is a politically engaged geography professor wanted me to ask how activists might effectively counter the nationalist logic that governs discussion on matters of immigration (emphasizing "illegality" and the supposed "right" of countries to control their boundaries and who comes in and out).

MD: My position on this is virtually the same as many people in the Catholic Church, including others I would disagree with vehemently on other issues, which is human rights come first, borders are essentially systems of violence imposed on landscapes and human lives. And it's very important that there's something like an abolitionist minority that reject borders per se as a way to ration rights in the world or to manage conflicts. Although there's differences between borders. The U.S.-Mexican border is fighting against an inexorable fact, which is that Mexicans and North America are totally entangled. Europe, which already has its own internal Mexicos, like Poland, would try to go so like an absolute border, and to have an almost Orwellian type of border patrol. This is what a lot of the nativists in the country want to do, to move toward something more like the Schengen system in Europe, total exclusion, total control. But the violence of borders, and the number of wall borders, of course, has increased exponentially. A lot more people die now at the borders of Europe than they did in the age of the Iron Curtain.

BT: Could you talk a little further about biofuels?

MD: We now have a whole series of reports on the future of agriculture in the light of climate change. One of the most disturbing of these comes out of the Peterson Institute, which is one of the most prestigious, most Wall Street-oriented Washington think tanks, and their expert William Cline has run a very complicated simulation of climate and crop models — comes up with data which other reports come to — which is we're going to see declining productivity across the world by the end of the century. India in particular is going to be particularly hard hit we know, Mexico's going to be hard hit. The natural factors of production are changing, and they're changing in a bad

way for everybody, except maybe Canadians and Northern Europeans. And secondly of course you have this livestock revolution and urbanized populations demanding more meat protein which is increasing the pressure on grain production, and diverting it to animals. Then you have the fact that agriculture is so dependent on fossil fuel, and the price of fossil fuel rising. And now all of a sudden here we have biofuels, which is essentially using anything, not just corn but anything, grown on arable land as opposed to plants grown on non-arable and desert terrain. Which I think poses exactly the kind of process that so many people have warned us about, including President Castro of Cuba. All this is a scenario for famine, food security is weakening on every front and basic food group security in terms of essential grains for human needs simply remains close to the most important issue in the world.

What's novel and troubling here is this alliance between Brazil and the United States on biofuel. And it's part of the Brazilian plan to leverage Brazil into a kind of semi-superpower. It's an alliance between big farmers in Brazil and agribusiness in the United States, and it does nothing to address the needs of the movement of the landless in Brazil. In fact the whole direction that biofuels is going just accelerates the displacement of small grain producers everywhere.

BT: Have you seen anything recently about any pressure to regulate air travel, since so many specialists say that one of the key ways to control the adverse effects of global warming is to cut down on air travel?

MD: To some extent in Europe, partially because there air travel has been more expensive. France in particular now offers fast rail as a substitute to regional flying. But no, with immigration, [there is] more flying to preserve the fabric of family life, package tours tend to grow; some of the things that are alternatives to it are even worse. I've become very interested in the second home phenomenon, which is a social and environmental disaster across the world, where basically local people lose affordable housing so that people can keep millions of seasonal homes on the Costa del Sol and Hawaii and so on.

But all these things that we've talked about today require degrees of planning, democratic planning, and the ability to link investment decisions to environmental and social consequences that are really totally outside of any political discussion going on anywhere. It's just taken as a matter of course that maybe the market needs to be mollified now, maybe we need a more humane version of neoliberalism. But it's still a world of Darwinian super-corporations and on the other side philanthropists and large NGOs.

BT: There seems to be a lot of cognitive dissonance going on right now about these questions.

MD: There is, but what disturbs me is you get great bursts of energy to bring about change and build an alternative, but they have enormous difficulty finding traction. Look at what happens at the world social forum. I'm not saying it still doesn't generate a lot of energy, but I think a lot of the foundations of it have been eroded in the last decade. Which is why there are a few eccentrics like myself who still believe in more traditional forms of left organization — the need to build explicitly socialist groups. And I have a lot of young friends who disagree with that, and I respect their differences, it's just a debate we have.

BT: Do you see one of the problems with the World Social Forum being the dominance of NGOs and the way NGOs get used?

MD: Well, there are NGOs and NGOs. I mean, there are many wonderful NGOs, but really what has happened across the world, and this is partly the result of deliberate policies of the World Bank, which very much likes working with NGOs, is the sponsorship of what you might call mega-NGOs, a certain minority of NGOs who control the dispersal, the allocation, of World Bank, or philanthropic or state funds. And it is a little reminiscent of the politics of the war on poverty in the United States in the 1960s, in the ability of these organizations to substitute themselves for struggle, to take rank and file organizers and turn them into bureaucrats. Parties of the left can do the same thing. I think there's a reasonable question to be asked whether parties of the left in power on a

municipal, regional, and national basis don't just tend to organize their own base, because they transform people into full-time functionaries. These are quite ancient questions about the sociology and the institutions of social movements.

Very clearly there are NGOs and there are NGOs, there are wonderful fighting indigenous rank and file groups, but they tend to live off scraps from the table. And you have far more bureaucratic NGOs that tend to be the ones dispersing the funds and are allowed to make the key decisions.

The interview closed with a discussion about the great leftist science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, whose future histories of Orange County Davis called "very shrewd stuff."

Mike told me, "I'd love to teach a class on this stuff, use his [Robinson's] books, use a couple of Octavia Butler's, [and] William Gibson's *Virtual Light*. I think there's much more meat in this kind of stuff than most of what passes for social theory these days."

Ben Terrall is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, In These Times, Counterpunch, Lip Magazine, and other publications. He can be reached at: btterrall@igc.org. [Read other articles by Ben](#), or [visit Ben's website](#).

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