

Planet of Slums

Mike Davis, Verso: New York, 2006

Reviewed by Tom Meyer

The reality is one billion human beings living in shacks. That there are books about this now, UN studies and US military planning scenarios, may give the planet's other five billion inhabitants some pause. With the numbers of shack dwellers looking to double worldwide within a generation though, that pause may not delay many of the forces involved in the historical moment our next generation is entering. Indeed, the writing down of this problem by a relatively popular American public intellectual may have been inevitable, but the presence of Mike Davis' Planet of Slums reveals more than it intends. It is, and admits to be, half a book, a work of accessible scholarship into the genesis of modern megaslums in the postcolonial period following the second world war. Megaslums, as Davis recounts, come as no accident, and their emergence creates a range of economic opportunities sufficiently broad to make them no simple contingency either. The neoliberal investment in intensive urban poverty, though recent, proves to be sophisticated and deeply bound together with prevailing global economic structures. Davis names the culprits, drawing together from the study and scholarship of the past thirty years into the development of this crisis, and offers to his readers an upsetting course on the workings of neoliberal politics and policy. After two hundred pages though, once the writing stops and the book set down, it is the second unwritten half that begins to raise its questions. Apocalyptic, Dantesque, and Orwellian allusions aside, where are the shack dwellers? Do one billion people suffer, or are they also suffered? Is there recourse beyond the distant motions of Western guilt? The silence of the text speaks to its intellectual climate, and what the silences indicate may call for a further round of reflection. Surely the book succeeds in bringing neoliberalism capably and coolly to attention, yet it is what Davis does not do that also gives pause.

A main concern of this book is to argue neoliberalism to be the continuation of colonialism, furnished over the last half century with a range of modern appointments. The outlines of this argument will be familiar to many readers, including the roles of Western banks, international development agencies, the UN, and an opportunistic bourgeoisie. In this modern incarnation, however, no longer predominantly rural but rather urban and peri-urban populations have descended into a transitional state of deprivation, and do so in increasing numbers, generating an explosion of slum existence on an unprecedented scale. "Most of the cities of the South, however, more closely resemble Victorian Dublin," driving the inhabitants to a residency among "self-built shanties, informal rentals, pirate subdivisions, or the sidewalks" (Davis 16-17), and yet lack the formal employment to support new arrivals from an increasingly uninhabitable countryside economy. The result: megaslums, collecting in unplumbed, commonly unelectrified, frequently unheated, and structurally unsound shacks hundreds of thousands of individuals at a time. Over a million persons are compressed into each of fourteen or fifteen megaslums worldwide, the largest of which, in the Neza/Chalco/Izta section of Mexico City runs at four million inhabitants as of 2005, with more megaslums following suit in the descending hundreds of thousands. An urban influx, compressed

into high density living arrangements, and working to make life sustainable, becomes for Davis the inheritor of worldwide economic neocolonial processes presenting under the guise of development, aid, and adjustment. It is the wolf, at the door, in human clothes.

A successful author of numerous books and articles, Davis has found a formula that works, presenting the facts of his topic, and pulling off from their analysis past a certain stage of the account. In the case of the neoliberal recolonization of the global south, this makes for an ascription of villainy to the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that descend upon their victims, and an explanation of motivations as following from greed. In exchange for large scale lending to governments of the old “Third World”, an infiltration of policy rearrangements that commences in the decade of the seventies and continues to this day in effect drives rural residents into cities whose public sector has not been prepared for their arrival. “SAPs devastated rural smallholders by eliminating subsidies and pushing them sink or swim into global commodity markets dominated by heavily subsidized First World agribusiness” (Davis 153), creating an urban population fending for itself within the informal economies of the cities of the south. Cut off from public services, and separated from certain features of the political process, a “super-abundance of labour” (Davis 175) emerges to contribute to the process of development and servicing of the debt. In one of the book’s provocative conclusions, Davis suggests that these phenomena of a twenty first century crisis go largely unmentioned in western public discourse, except among military planners. Maintaining an urban space deprived of most public services, and inhabited by a “surplus humanity”? Call in the army: “The future of warfare,’ the journal of the Army War College declared, ‘lies in the streets, sewers, highrise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world. ... Our recent military history is punctuated with city names – Tuzla, Mogadishu, Los Angeles [!] (*sic*), Beirut, Panama City, Hue, Saigon, Santo Domingo – but these encounters have been but a prologue, with the real drama still to come” (Davis 203). The agents of this planetary crisis of megaslums reside in the west, just out of view, and their motives may be inferred as those of a latter day “equivalent of a colonial civil service” (Davis 154). Perhaps, though the details may have more to whisper than Davis’ research records.

Where, indeed, are the shackdwellers; and at the same time, where, really, is the bourgeoisie, in this narrative of worldwide immiseration? Davis sticks to the facts, such as may be found without an extended engagement with the lives they involve, and does summon a portrait of slum existence as a contemporary Dickensian nightmare. Women’s lives in the slum environment are afflicted by the lack of sanitation and basic services. “In the slums of Bangalore – the high-tech poster city of ‘India Shining’ – poor women, unable to afford the local pay latrines, must wait until evening to wash or relieve themselves” (Davis 141). Wealthy suburbanites hurtle past on an increasingly insulated “fortified network” (Davis 118) of interconnected hubs as the new urban poor squeeze into constricted living arrangements often distant from means of subsistence. “If municipal statistics can be believed, Dharavi compacts an incredible 18,000 people per acre into 10-by-15-foot rooms stacked on top of one another” (Davis 93). Surprising, then, not to hear from voices of shackdweller resistance, nor from the theory to have preceded Davis in treating these realities from the perspective of figures like Fanon. A

second book is on the way, and perhaps here the work of Elias Bongmba, Lewis Gordon, Paget Henry, and Nkiru Nzegwu, among others will leave more of an impression. For the time being, Davis' account leaves lingering questions, circulating around the issue of the efficacy of colonialistic metaphors in addressing a global reality of one billion human beings living in slums. Perhaps better theory is available, and Davis' analysis looks positioned to contribute for this challenge.

The reviews of Planet of Slums so far have largely heralded this work for the urgency and quality of maverick intellectualism it bespeaks. But it is a book about one billion people, and many of these people have also spoken, organized, and struggled, in ways that challenge the victimization trope of Davis' presentation thus far. As a moment in an analysis, Davis captures the shapes of a neoliberal neocolonial agenda coursing across the world stage; but the more complex humanity involving itself in these events can be otherwise engaged. Indeed, the extent to which all of the parties in this tragedy can be rightfully figured as organized, sovereign, and self-determining has yet to be carefully established. It is a tale, with enough significance, to be told rightly.