

Slumming it

Mike Davis's grand narrative of urban revolution

David Cunningham

Writing in 1970, the French philosopher and social theorist Henri Lefebvre proposed a 'theoretical hypothesis': by 'urban revolution I refer to the transformations that affect contemporary society, ranging from the period when questions of growth and industrialization predominate ... to the period when the urban problematic becomes predominant, when the search for solutions and modalities unique to urban society are foremost.' Today this hypothesis is perhaps becoming the 'global reality' that Lefebvre foresaw. Yet while the contemporary 'urban fabric grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life', the social and spatial forms of 'tremendous concentration' that it produces appear very different from what he and many of his contemporaries no doubt imagined.¹

In Nairobi's vast Kibera slum, UN-HABITAT's Rasna Warah studied the daily life of a vegetable hawker named Mberita Katela, who walks a quarter mile every morning to buy water. She uses a communal pit latrine just outside her door. It is shared with 100 of her neighbours and her house reeks of the sewage overflow. She constantly frets about contamination of her cooking or washing water – Kibera has been devastated in recent years by cholera and other excrement-associated diseases ... Mexico City's residents [meanwhile] inhale shit: fecal dust blowing off Lake Texcoco during the hot, dry season causes typhoid and hepatitis. In the 'New Fields' around Rangoon, where the military regime has brutally moved hundreds of thousands of inner-city residents, Monique Skidmore describes families living in the sanitary equivalent of the mud hell of World War I trench warfare: they cook and defecate in the mud directly in front of the tiny plastic sheets under which they sleep ... In Baghdad's giant slum of Sadr City, hepatitis and typhoid epidemics rage out of control. American bombing wrecked already overloaded water and sewerage infrastructures, and as a result raw sewage seeps into the household water supply.

The awful power of passages such as this explains why few recent books have prompted such an immediate and intense reaction as Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*.^{*} Published in March 2006, though based upon an earlier essay in *New Left Review*,² it had already inspired at least one journal special issue by the end of the year,³ generated a veritable frenzy of web activity, and seen its collected data and speculations on contemporary urbanization seamlessly incorporated into accounts of an emergent global capitalist empire developed by Retort, Slavoj Žižek and others. Although Davis has been an important and distinctive voice on the intellectual Left for some time, as well as in urban studies, *Planet of Slums* is unique among his books in having been so quickly hailed as a 'landmark', 'seminal' text.

The precise conditions and dynamics of the processes that he describes are complex, to say the least. Certainly, if there has been what some regard as a distinctive 'spatial turn' within political and social theory over the last few decades, *Planet of Slums* suggests the need for a more specific and radical re-interrogation of the very concept of the urban today, and of its relations to dominant forms of capital accumulation, in understanding the contemporary configuration of political topologies. Noting the emergence of two new words from the Latin root *urbanus* in English at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Iain Boal remarks that the 'historical identification of "urban" with "urbane" may not survive contact with the developments portrayed [in Davis's book]... If urbanity seems outdated, even residual, it turns out that the career of "urban" is only just beginning.⁴ And, indeed, for Davis if Lefebvre's urban society has a 'brilliant future', right now it looks like much of it will take the form of Kibera, Sadr City, or 'New Fields'. Recent projections by the UN Urban Observa-

^{*} Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London and New York, 2006. 240 pp., £15.99 hb., 1 8446 7022 8. The quotation is from pp. 143–4. Further references appear within the main text.

tory project suggest that by 2020 ‘urban poverty in the world could reach 45 to 50 per cent of the total population living in the cities’ (151). At the same time, poverty *in general* is, with the widespread expulsion of labour from agriculture, and the concomitant destruction of older forms of village life, becoming increasingly urbanized across the globe, a genuinely world-historical transformation.

The consequences of this are considerable. For if this constitutes an emergent global society in which ‘the urban problematic becomes predominant’, such a condition entails not only transformations in the relations between urban and rural, but also, with increasing importance, within and between different urban forms and processes of urbanization, and the heterogenous forces that generate them. As such, they open up, as I have argued previously, a historically new set of relations between universal and particular, concentration and dispersal, internal to the urban itself, that clearly demand new kinds of conceptual mediation.⁵ For urban theory, and the forms of political thought associated with it, it is in the striking challenge *Planet of Slums* sets to such a project that its ultimate significance lies.

A brilliant future

While Davis’s opening observation that we have now reached the point of an epochal transition in which ‘the urban population will outnumber the rural’ is something of a commonplace in recent writings on the city, there is still something utterly startling in figures showing that places like ‘Dhaka, Kinshasa, and Lagos today are each approximately *forty* times larger than they were in 1950’, or that China has ‘added more city-dwellers in the 1980s than did all of Europe (including Russia) in the entire nineteenth century’. Within the next fifteen years it seems certain that the total rural population globally will begin to fall. The result will be that all future population growth will effectively be an urban phenomenon. Of this new global urban population, more than one billion already live in slums, mostly in the metropolises of the South, many in conditions of almost unimaginable hardship. In sub-Saharan Africa, slum-dwellers today constitute nearly 75 per cent of the total urban population. In Ethiopia and Chad, UN figures show that an incredible 99.4 per cent of urban inhabitants may be classified as such – a truly jaw-dropping figure (23).

Materially, in Africa especially, this is an urban world built of scrap metal and wood, reclaimed plastic, concrete, straw and mud – one that is sometimes literally constructed, so Davis tells us, on top of shit and

death. Around 85 per cent of urban inhabitants occupy their property ‘illegally’. Without basic sanitation, little running water, and minimal access to medical or other welfare services, chronic diarrhoeal diseases threaten the lives of millions, particularly children. People squat in the ‘empty’ spaces around chemical refineries and toxic dumps, on the sides of highways and railways, as well as in various ‘hazardous and otherwise unbuildable terrains – over-steep hill slopes, river banks and floodplains’. Famously, in Cairo’s City of the Dead, ‘one million poor people use Mameluke tombs as prefabricated housing components’ in an act of *détournement* that restructures the vast graveyard as a gigantic ‘walled urban island surrounded by congested motorways’. Davis quotes Jeffrey Nedoroscik, a researcher at the American University in Cairo: ‘Cenotaphs and grave markers are used as desks, headboards, tables, and shelves. String is hung between gravestones to set laundry to dry.’⁶ Elsewhere in Cairo, around one and a half million people live on rooftops; the formation of an effective ‘second city’ in the air (33, 36).

If, then, there is enormous suffering here, there is enormous ingenuity and innovation also – which have recently come to fascinate many contemporary architectural and urban theorists, most famously in Rem Koolhaas’s 2001 study of Lagos. This is a text to which Davis, somewhat surprisingly, never refers, but to which *Planet of Slums* might nonetheless be taken as a kind of extended critical response. Like some overexcited post-colonial Jane Jacobs, what Koolhaas notoriously celebrated in the Nigerian metropolis was the unplanned ‘organized complexity’ of its social-spatial form. In its quasi-organic, self-regulating development (one of the oldest urbanist tropes in the book), such form had become, he claimed, a kind of ‘collective research, conducted by a team of eight-to-twenty-five million’, an investigation into the possible future of urban society globally. The ‘Lagos condition might simply be twenty, fifty or a hundred years ahead of other cities with more apparently familiar structure and lifestyle’. Lagos, as Koolhaas characteristically put it, ‘may well be the most radical urbanism extant today’.⁷

For some, these rather ‘upbeat’ speculations were a welcome affirmation of the creativity or constituent power of those more often regarded as mere victims of abstract forces beyond their control. Yet, as the geographer Matthew Gandy pointed out, much of the creativity celebrated by Koolhaas was, in the end, only another celebration of the market itself. The ‘proof and evidence’ that the radical urbanism of Lagos is ‘one

that works' was, after all, the traders doing business underneath the dilapidated Oshodi flyover (part of a highway system built by the German engineering firm Julius Berger during the 1970s), and, by extension, the larger informal economy of poverty through which life in the African metropolis is (often barely) sustained.⁸ Despite evidently different political intentions, such meditations concerning Lagos's brilliant future come rather too uncomfortably close to the more manifestly ideological claims of neoliberal thinkers like the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto. Perhaps the nearest thing to an individual 'villain' in the story that Davis has to tell (intellectually at least), de Soto's hallucinatory vision of the informal economy as a 'frenzied beehive' of slum-dwelling 'micro-entrepreneurs', hitherto hampered by the Third World equivalent of the nanny state, is well known. So, too, is what it conveniently ignores or covers over – the horrific forms of exploitation and abuse (of woman and children in particular) that the informal economy hides; the acceleration of 'flexibilization' in which an extension of the working day is combined with an increasing irregularity of available work itself; the 'generation' of 'new' work not as the creation of new jobs but via the subdivision of existing jobs and incomes; and the simple fact that much of the work available in the informal economy is not entrepreneurial self-employment at all but, instead, good old-fashioned labour for someone else's profit.⁹

None of this stopped de Soto's theories from becoming the neoliberal 'answer' to the 'challenge of the slums' in Washington and at the World Bank. Its ultimate effect, as Davis says, was that '[p]raising the praxis of the poor became a smokescreen for renegeing upon historic state commitments to relieve poverty and homelessness' (72). Such a retreat of the state, above all, lies at the root of the transformations taking place in an expanding urban society today. At the same time, the flipside of de Soto's paeans to the 'praxis of the poor' has been their easy reversibility into an account of poverty which holds those who suffer it effectively responsible for their own immiseration. The World Bank's supposed war on poverty in the cities becomes a fundamental attack upon the poor themselves.¹⁰ At the heart of this is evidently the most basic aim of the neoliberal project: to ensure that the conditions for profitable capital accumulation hold throughout the potentially planetary space of a global economy. As David Harvey has baldly put it: 'In the event of a conflict between the integrity of the financial system and the well-being of a population, the neo-liberal state will choose the former.'¹¹

While Davis finds the beginnings of a new urbanism as far back as the 1950s, its real lift-off comes in the late 1970s with the 'sink or swim' restructuring of urban economies via the IMF–World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), and the waves of 'so-called primitive accumulation' that followed from it. For much of urban society in the so-called developing world, the social state – apart from its most repressive apparatuses – has, as a result, simply withered away. Under the regime of General Babangida, during the late 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria, for example, pursued a series of policies that led to it being hailed as a model for other African economies by the IMF and the World Bank. These included, most crucially, a thoroughgoing programme of privatization and deregulation, along with the progressive stripping away of agricultural subsidies and what existing public health and education services there were. The result is described by Gandy: "'extreme poverty" figures for the country rose from 28 per cent in 1980 to 66 per cent in 1996. The small-farming sector, still Nigeria's biggest employer, was decimated. The population of Lagos doubled ... as migrants from the countryside flocked to the city.'¹² As is also true elsewhere, many of these migrants are no doubt actually better off in the more established and central parts of such 'mega-slums' than in their previous rural settlements, with at least some basic access to amenities and housing (however poor or minimal). For others, however, particularly in the now vast 'peri-urban' belts at the edge of cities where urban form dissolves indeterminately into countryside (in a manner that gives a rather different meaning to contemporary notions of urban sprawl), it is far from clear how this can be the case.

Grand narratives

The analytical ambition of *Planet of Slums* is to produce what Davis calls 'a periodization of the principal trends and watersheds in the urbanization of world poverty' since 1945. As such, his documenting of this new urban society is an intentionally panoramic one, ultimately motivated by the global question of what its new forms may mean politically and socially in the years to come. And while the critical reception of his latest work has been overwhelmingly positive, indeed effusive, it should be said that there have also been some voices of dissent. South African writer Richard Pithouse in particular – a contributor to the last issue of *Radical Philosophy* ('Shack Dwellers of the Move', *RP* 141) – has waged something of a one-man war on claims that, in the words of Arundhati Roy, *Planet of Slums* represents a genuinely 'profound enquiry'

into this 'urgent subject'. Writing from the classical perspective of a grassroots politics, mediated by Fanon and Badiou, Pithouse has taken Davis to task for an over-totalizing and over-apocalyptic account of slum politics and culture, as well as for effectively being more interested in the narratives of the oppressors – the World Bank, UN, NGOs, and US military – than of the urban oppressed themselves. 'The thinking of people who live in the shacks is entirely absent.' This is a planet seen ultimately, he writes, through 'imperial eyes'.¹³

It is not the first time that Davis has been accused of at least some of these things. In a 1991 review of his classic account of L.A. *noir* and defeated utopianism, *City of Quartz*, Marshall Berman also suggested that Davis's narration of 'the efforts of the comfortable to lock out the poor is more vivid than his descriptions of the poor themselves': 'The grandest narratives in the book are histories of money.' In thrall to Spenglerian visions of social and environmental catastrophe, when Davis tries to write of the 'good folks in the barrios and ghettos', rather than of the 'big guys moving the big bucks around', noted Berman, the prose inevitably 'sags'.¹⁴ While 2000's *Magical Urbanism*, on the Latino city, could be read as Davis's answer to such criticism, *Planet of Slums* – following hot on the heels of a book about the global threat of avian flu – is back on familiar (albeit considerably geographically broader) apocalyptic terrain.

As a writer, Berman argued, Davis has always seemed torn between the democratic expansiveness of a Whitman and the remorseless nihilism of Céline. In his latest work, the privileged literary allusion is Dante's *Inferno*. Yet, for all its typical stylistic elegance, *Planet of Slums* is a long way from the sometimes poetic (and sometimes ghoulishly picaresque) accounts of urban disaster, chaos and simple everyday weirdness to be found in Davis's earlier books on the American metropolis. This book's forebears are less the poets of a vertiginous and energizing metropolitan experience famously celebrated by Berman himself, than documenters and compilers of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century urban poverty and deprivation like Mayhew, Riis and, of course, Engels. Indeed what *Planet of Slums* presents us with is more akin to a global contemporary version of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* than a Marxian theory of the urban indebted to the likes of Lefebvre or Benjamin. Davis has always loved his charts and tables, the marshalling of statistics and facts culled from a huge variety of sources. But *Planet of Slums* is his most syncretic enterprise yet, skilfully organ-

ized around its collaging together of others' research and fieldwork so as to construct its grand narrative of a new urban world. The footnotes alone serve to take a largely uncharted world of research on new urban forms and social-spatial relations out of their various disciplinary-specialist backwaters and place them squarely at the centre of contemporary political and theoretical concerns.

Given the breadth of material covered by *Planet of Slums*, as well as the critical thread that weaves it together, Pithouse's complaint that Davis 'relies so heavily on the work of the [World] Bank and other institutions of contemporary imperialism' seems misguided, for it misrecognizes the level of analysis at which a text such as this operates. The book's arguments stand or fall in relation to the specifically global perspective signalled by its title. To this degree, it is hard to see how it could not but be indebted to 'imperial' sources like the UN-Habitat's *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements* – a 'global audit', published in 2003, that provided much of the original impetus for Davis's work. While Davis's approach may thus entail certain undeniable risks – a flattening out of differences in both history and social-spatial form – it is, in fact, precisely the inherently totalizing and comparative project pursued in *Planet of Slums* that gives it its distinctive power. For in the social world of an emergent global capitalist modernity, the 'grandest narratives' just always are 'histories of money' in some fundamental sense. Which is to say: the contemporary proliferation of slum settlements, and their potentially catastrophic human (as well as wider environmental) consequences, simply cannot be understood except, in some way, via an account of global capitalist development at its highest levels of generality and, indeed, abstraction. Just as importantly, this means trying to grasp what is most emphatically 'modern' about the development of the slum in the geographically diverse but interconnected forms it takes today.

Synocicism of the slums

As first used in Aristotle's *Politics*, the term 'synocicism' (*synoikismos*) described the processes underlying the formation of the *polis* or city-state. For contemporary urban theorists, it has come to designate, more broadly, the changing range of economic, social, political and technological processes that generate new spatial forms of urban agglomeration and 'tremendous concentration'. Cities are, as Manuel Castells has written, 'socially determined in their forms and in their processes. Some of their determinants are structural,

linked to deep trends of social evolution that transcend geographic or social singularity. Others are historically and culturally specific.¹⁵ Part of what is at stake in the global, comparative perspective that Davis adopts is an attempt to elaborate what might be called a synoecism of the contemporary slum, to ask why globally, over the last few decades, the stimuli of urban agglomeration productive of the slum, in particular, should have evolved at such an unprecedented rate.

It is obvious here to look back to a nineteenth-century precedent, to the Victorian metropolises of Manchester, Liverpool or, indeed, London. Not for nothing have the Chinese called in the services of a historian like Gareth Stedman-Jones to advise them on what to learn from Britain's own transition to a 'modern urban nation'.¹⁶ And, indeed, as Boal notes in his review, something of the 'conceptual centre' of *Planet of Slums* is to be located in the 'theoretical connection' it establishes, on a number of different levels, between the twenty-first-century metropolis and the social-spatial character of its nineteenth-century forbear. Several of the chapter titles and subtitles alone may indicate this: 'Back to Dickens', 'Illusions of Self-Help', 'Hausmann in the Tropics'. Yet, as Davis also says, the contemporary 'dynamics of Third World urbanization both recapitulate and *confound* the precedents of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe and North America' (11; emphasis added).

One of the most controversial aspects of Lefebvre's argument in his 1970 book *The Urban Revolution* was his (undertheorized) claim that, socially, eco-

nomically and culturally, some new specifically urban problematic was coming to displace and subsume, at a planetary scale, an older problematic of the industrial. For Castells, writing shortly after, this claim amounted to little more than an abandonment of a properly Marxian confrontation with the economic realities of class struggle in favour of spurious, and ultimately utopian, speculation.¹⁷ Yet contemporary tendencies suggest that, for a number of reasons, these questions concerning the developing relations between the urban and industrial may indeed have to be reprised again, with considerably more complexity, today (albeit, it would seem, without the utopian hopes they once embodied for Lefebvre himself). For, while the extraordinary urbanization taking place in China may well have as its 'Archimedean lever' – as Victorian Manchester or Glasgow did – the 'greatest industrial revolution in history', elsewhere this can hardly be said to be the case. If Dongguan, Shenzhen, Fushan City or Chengchow are, as Davis puts it, the contemporary equivalents of Sheffield or Pittsburgh, for much of the new urbanization it is, he suggests, Victorian Dublin (or contemporaneous Naples) that appears a more plausible model. In the explosive 'mega-Dublins' of the South, Davis argues, 'urbanization has been ... radically decoupled from industrialization, even from development *per se*' (13).

If this is so it is undoubtedly because, as Davis puts it,

[the] global forces 'pushing' people from the countryside ... seem to sustain urbanization even



when the ‘pull’ of the city is drastically weakened by debt and economic depression. As a result, rapid urban growth in the context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation, and state retrenchment has been an inevitable recipe for the mass production of slums. (16–17)

In the midst of shrinking economies and collapsing industry, Africa today continues to maintain an annual rate of urbanization considerably higher than the average growth of European metropolises during the peak years of nineteenth-century urban (and industrial) revolution (15). What prevented the formation of earlier mega-slums was either the fairly rapid generation of new regular employment *or* (as was the case in Ireland and Southern Italy) the possibility of emigration to settler societies in ‘underpopulated’ parts of the world. But the endless waves of people descending on the metropolises of the South today, increasingly unable to survive in the rural societies they are leaving, are far in excess of any new demand for labour that might support them, and there is nowhere else for them to go. The conception of the ‘wage puzzle’, referred to by some contemporary economists, names the obscene fact that ‘wages have fallen so low in African cities that researchers can’t figure out how the poor manage to survive’ (156). What is thus produced, as the ultimate outcome of the various IMF–World Bank immiseration programmes, is a reserve army of surplus labour of a size and density that simply has no precedent in human history, one which is, among other things, transforming the nature of urban form itself.

In the nineteenth century it was ‘the insertion into cityspace of large-scale manufacturing industry’ that was, according to Ed Soja, the ‘primary trigger’ of a ‘third Urban Revolution’ constitutive of the specifically modern *capitalist* metropolis:

From this moment on, there developed a fully symbiotic and expansive relation between the urbanization and industrialization processes on a scale and scope never before achieved.... It was a relation so formidable that it would define industrial capitalism as a fundamentally *urban* mode of production (and also imbue much of oppositional socialist thought with an associated, if at times somewhat quixotic, anti-urban bias).¹⁸

If this symbiosis has often been thought to be in the process of breaking down today it has generally been because the possibility of some *new* Urban Revolution is seen as the inevitable outcome of technological and social forms associated with the postwar development of a capitalist ‘information’ or ‘network’ society. Yet, as *Planet of Slums* shows, it is equally the case

– whether we look to Africa, South America, the Middle East, or indeed much of South Asia – that ‘urbanization without industrialization’ appears (most immediately at least) to be the result of somewhat different processes in much of the world, ‘the legacy of a global political conjuncture’ that followed on from ‘the worldwide debt crisis of the late 1970s’ (14). In fact, the two are inseparable.

Geopolitically, the slum is something like a dialectical antipode to the global or informational city (as influentially described by Saskia Sassen or Castells during the 1990s), just as its dominant social class would appear to be the opposed term to a transnational capitalist class smoothly inhabiting some new global space of flows. From this perspective, it functions not only as the most concrete manifestation of ‘uneven development’, but also, apparently, as a dramatic confirmation of claims made by Alain Badiou and others that, today, the great majority of humanity ‘counts for nothing’, are ‘named’ solely as the ‘excluded’. Yet it would be wrong to thereby view the contemporary slum as a merely delinked residue of a once-presumed-to-be-vanished spatial form, some simple ‘space of place’ ‘left behind’ by capitalist ‘modernity’. For, to cite Gandy on Lagos again: both its ‘creative’ informal economy and its extraordinary population growth are, albeit ‘inversely’, precisely linked to regimes of capital accumulation which have their ‘centres’ elsewhere, in New York, London or Tokyo. And they are *produced* through specific policies pursued by successive military dictatorships at the behest of global institutions like the IMF and World Bank.¹⁹ The network doesn’t disappear here – far from it – but it certainly manifests itself in forms very different to those that have been primarily plotted by Castells, Sassen et al. to date.

Indeed if the ‘new’ urban spatial form of the metropolis of the twenty-first century is being developed in the Northern centres of the global economy, one of the clearest implications of Davis’s book is that it is being developed just as much in the seemingly disconnected spaces of the Southern slum. To put this another way, conceptually, the re-formation of the metropolis today means that it is subject to an irreversible global generalization. Its ‘natural terrain’ can no longer be restricted, if it ever could, to the classical ‘sites’ of London, Berlin, Paris or New York: ‘Europe was once the birthplace of the Metropolis’, it may be that much of its future is in fact ‘being defined in the developing world’.²⁰ Failing to conform to most conventional notions of metropolitan culture (or of ‘urbanity’), as developed in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ‘West’, it may be said of course that

the very concept of metropolis is no longer adequate here. Yet, in one sense at least, Lagos, Kibera or Kinshasa can – like the earlier slums definitive of the urban ‘West’ itself – still be regarded as contemporary forms of the metropolis in what might be its most basic ‘conceptual’ sense: as a name for the *generalized* spatial formation of a ‘certain reality of pure forms’ defined by its historical negation of the urban form of the *city* as *polis* or as *urbis*; the spatial correlate, primarily, of the general mediation and production of the social by the value form.²¹ In the slum, too, it is, in crucial ways, still *money*, ‘with all its colourlessness and indifference, [which] becomes the common denominator of all values ... hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability’.²²

Whatever one may make of his conclusions, Koolhaas was right about this: we should ‘resist the notion’ that a metropolis like Lagos is (or is not) ‘en route to becoming modern ... [even somehow] modern in a valid, “African” way’. Rather, as Koolhaas argues, it is, in key respects, ‘a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity’, albeit one that may be doing away ‘with the inherited notion of “city” once and for all’.²³ In urbanist terms, the ‘multiplicity of modernities’ that may be said to define a global urban problematic has, as Peter Osborne argues, a ‘conceptual shape, to which the idea of “alternative” modernities is inadequate’. For the latter tends merely to ‘reinscribe the historically received geo-political particularisms of the modernity/tradition binary of colonial difference, within its generalisation (through simple quantitative multiplication) of the first term’. The multiplication of modernities that constitutes unevenness within a global *urban* modernity has, by contrast, a considerably ‘more complex, *distributional* logic’.²⁴ And if there is one thing that Davis and Koolhaas can agree on it is that the ‘engrained vocabulary and values’ of contemporary urbanist discourse remain ‘painfully inadequate to describe the current production of urban substance’ itself in such a situation.²⁵ Moreover, it is in this sense, also, that the ‘theoretical’ question of what exactly ‘uneven development’ means today, in the context of a global *urban* society, most urgently arises. For if poverty is becoming urbanized across the world then clearly whatever defines ‘unevenness’ globally can no longer be construed either through any simple urban–rural opposition, or through the kind of (sociological or anthropological) opposition of the ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ that is far too often, and too easily, taken to follow from it. If the concept itself is

to remain at all adequate to what it would endeavour to describe, the social and spatial instantiation of ‘uneven development’ will increasingly have to be reconceived in terms of contrasts between different urban forms and life-worlds variably connected within the spread of a global capitalist modernity. Part of what this entails is that, as Harvey puts it, such unevenness must itself ‘be understood as something actively produced and sustained by processes of capital accumulation, no matter how important the signs may be of residuals of past configurations set up in the cultural landscape and the social world’.²⁶ Whether we think of Lagos or Mumbai or Gaza, nothing more emphatically confirms this than the new social and spatial world defined by Davis’s planet of slums.²⁷

Urban revolutions

Such theoretical issues are not ones on which Davis himself spends a good deal of time. What he does seek to do is to confront, in rather more detail, what might be the genuinely political ramifications of the developments he describes. Lefebvre’s own 1970 conception of an ‘urban revolution’ contained two inter-related ideas. First, at an analytical level, it argued for a long, ultimately global, historical shift from a predominantly industrial to an urban world. Second, and more specifically, it identified as part of this the emergence of a new kind of political praxis with a distinctively urban condition and dynamic: ‘Entire continents are making the transition from earlier forms of revolutionary action to urban guerrilla warfare, to political objectives that affect urban life and organization.... The period of urban revolutions has begun.’²⁸ Hence, for Lefebvre, the events of 1968, in particular, testified to a form of revolt made in the metropolis rather than the factory, a crisis of the social relations and forms of concentration produced by urban society rather than by industrial capitalism as such. The Paris Commune appears as prefigurative here – notoriously misrecognized by Marx and Engels as an industrial rather than urban revolt, even in the face of what Lefebvre calls the ‘obvious fact[s]’.

Much of Lefebvre’s argument might be read as a response to the Left’s association with what Soja describes as an ‘at times somewhat quixotic, anti-urban bias’ throughout much of the last century. Politically, Davis notes, the twentieth century was, for the most part, ‘an age not of urban revolutions ... but of epochal rural uprisings and peasant-based wars of national liberation’ (174). As the urban theorist Andy Merrifield writes, there are thus, unsurprisingly, more than ‘a few antiurban skeletons in the closet of Marxist insurrec-

tions ... [in which] variously, the city is portrayed as the site of corruption, of hell, of Mammon, and Sodom and Gomorrah'. For much of Maoism, and other Third World movements, the 'pull' of the metropolis 'contaminated real Marxism, unduly affected the "halo" of militant Marxist practice'.²⁹

Yet there is little doubt that – for all that the urban is severely under-thematized throughout his *oeuvre* – Marx himself, writing in the 1840s, saw the 'enormous cities' of Europe (and indeed their 'slums' in particular) as one key space of relationality and concentration in which the new proletariat's strength would grow and it could feel 'that strength more'.³⁰ Not the least of the ways in which some 'return to Marx' might be visible today is in the necessity for a reconsideration of such an idea within the context of the new global urban reality that *Planet of Slums* describes. Certainly as Davis notes of Latin America: 'In 1970, Guevarist *foco* theories of rural insurgency still conformed to a continental reality where the poverty of the countryside (75 million poor) overshadowed that of the cities (44 million poor). By the end of the 1980s, however, the vast majority of the poor (115



million) were living in urban *colonias*, *barriadas*, and *villas miserias* rather than on farms or in rural villages (80 million)' (156).

Globally dispersed and culturally differentiated as they are, slum-dwellers constitute 'the fastest growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth' (178).

Yet how exactly to describe or to define the changing processes of 'class composition' at work in this remains a moot point. Huge parts of the population of the global South may be subject to what Deborah Bryceson calls 'de-peasantization', but it could hardly be said that, outside of China at any rate, they are thereby coming to establish a new industrial proletariat, in any usual sense. If they undoubtedly *are* a proletariat it is in the more basic sense of which Marx writes in the first volume of *Capital*:

In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions act as levers for the capitalist class in the course of its formation; but this is true above all for those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled into the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians.³¹

What is distinct today about this tearing of 'great masses' from 'their means of subsistence' is expressed in a term coined by the Brazilian sociologists Thomas Mitschein, Henrique Miranda and Mariceli Paraense – *passive proletarianization*: the 'dissolving of traditional forms of (re) production, which for the great majority of direct producers does not [however] translate into a salaried position in the *formal* labour market' (175, emphasis added).

The political question that follows from this is, 'To what extent does an *informal* proletariat possess that most potent of Marxist talismans: "historical agency"?' Are 'the great slums – as Disraeli worried in 1871 or Kennedy in 1961 – just volcanoes waiting to erupt?' (201). Certainly, for Davis, the 'future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism'. But he continues: 'This refusal may take atavistic as well as avant-garde forms' (202). The point is expressed more bluntly in the original 2004 *New Left Review* article: 'for the moment at least, Marx has yielded the historical stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost'.

It was such an analysis that was taken up, and extended, in Retort's *Afflicted Powers*:

Already in the ten most populous Muslim states, half the population is urban. By 2015 that will be true of more than two-thirds. ...This is the stage for the new politics of the Qu'ran Belt – in particular, for the crisis in the mega-cities of West Asia and Africa. In contemporary Cairo, Amman, Kano, and Kuala Lumpur, a new public sphere is emerging in and around the Islamists' response to this developing urban reality.³²

They continue, while

Islamism in its present forms, still mutating and metastasizing in the slum conurbations of the World Bank world, is very far from being a vanguard movement alone ... never, alas, has the world presented such a classic breeding ground for the vanguard ideal as the billion new city-dwellers of Asia and North Africa. Classic, but also unprecedented.³³

Clearly, if the retreat of the state would seem to be a common root for slum development globally, in the 'Muslim World' the retreat of the 'secular state' has left a vacuum that has been filled in very specific ways. As recent events made manifest, Hizbollah's political power and support in the southern slums of Beirut is, for example, in large part due to the fact that it is they alone who are now providing welfare provision and a social 'safety net' there. Such a pattern is repeated throughout the 'new public sphere' of a 'developing urban reality' that Retort endeavours to describe.

But it is precisely here that Davis's simple opposition between the 'atavistic' and the 'avant-garde' is most inadequate. Retort rightly emphasizes what is specifically modern in the forms that a contemporary political Islam of the slums now takes, where elements of atavism and avant-gardism are most evidently (and complexly) intertwined. Davis is not always quite so careful, particularly where it is the 'end times' Pentecostalism of the Holy Ghost rather than Mohammed that is apparently elbowing Marxism off the stage.³⁴ No doubt the riskiest literary reference in the entire book is to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. You rather expect that it's coming, but Davis resists the temptation until a few pages from the end of the final chapter, where, reaching a certain frenzy of apocalyptic rhetoric, he ends with a vision of 'an existential ground zero beyond which there are only death camps, famine, and Kurtzian horror' (195). The accumulated historical force of this allusion threatens to tip Davis's account into a profoundly unintended discourse of 'primitivism' and Third World 'savagery'. At the very least, in the midst of an extended account of the 'witch children of Kinshasa', and of a 'return' to 'village magic' and 'prophetic cults', it flirts uncomfortably with Conrad's own inherited, iconic images of African 'darkness' and 'horror'.

Early on in the book, Davis traces a nineteenth-century genealogy of the word 'slum', taking us through the works of commentators like the Reverend Chaplin, who, in 1854, saw '[s]avages not in gloomy forests, but under the strength of gas-light' (22). The image is familiar in its distinctive mixing of the 'contemporary' and 'primitive', and finds its *locus classicus* in Charles Booth's borrowing of the vocabulary of darkest Africa

from Stanley's famous journalistic accounts, so as to convey the 'horror' of London's Victorian slums; metaphorically transporting the darkness of the actual jungle to the new 'urban jungle' then taking shape. The current danger, perhaps, is in a transporting of such imagery back to the new conurbations of Africa. Not for nothing does the journalist Robert Neuwirth, in his recent *Shadow Cities*, object to the very use of the word 'slum' to describe these settlements, as a 'loaded term', 'laden with emotional values'.³⁵ Yet if the term retains a productive force today, in the context of a globalizing capitalism, it is precisely – through a recollection of its roots in the nineteenth-century metropolis – in the degree to which it recalls the distinctive modernity of the social-spatial forms it now so riskily names.

The good old days, or the bad new ones

If *Planet of Slums* has appeared to be the intellectual event it undoubtedly is, this is no doubt in part because of a more widespread sense that, as one Negrian commentator puts it, the urban must be the locus today for any 'thinking of the antagonistic, or, at the very least, agonistic production of space'.³⁶ Certainly the Pentagon would seem to agree. In the final pages of the book, Davis cites the development of new discourses around what it now terms MOUT: 'Military Operations on Urban Terrain'. For the likes of Major Ralph Peters, 'The future of warfare lies in the streets, sewers, highrise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world' (203). As documented elsewhere by the likes of Eyal Weizman and Stephen Graham, around the Israel–Palestine conflict in particular – but the point is more general – for the military at least, it's clear that the urbanization of world poverty is also leading to 'the urbanization of insurgency'. The 'mega-slum', army theorists imply, writes Davis, 'has become the weakest link in the new world order'. The invocation of a certain Leninist topology is striking, and suggests a number of questions for the contemporary Left as well.

In a 2004 piece in the *London Review of Books*, citing Davis's then recently published article in *New Left Review*, Slavoj Žižek posited an 'area of "opportunity"' marked by the 'explosive growth of slums' that refers us back, once again, to the rather different nineteenth-century precedent of Marx himself:

We are witnessing the growth of a population outside the control of the state, mostly outside the law, in terrible need of minimal forms of self-organisation. Although these populations are composed of marginalized labourers, former civil

servants and ex-peasants, they are not simply a redundant surplus: they are incorporated into the global economy in numerous ways.... One should resist the easy temptation to elevate and idealise slum-dwellers into a new revolutionary class. It is nonetheless surprising how far they conform to the old Marxist definition of the proletarian revolutionary subject: they are 'free' in the double meaning of the word, even more than the classical proletariat ('free' from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, outside the regulation of the state); they are a large collective, forcibly thrown into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of support for their traditional ways of life.... The new forms of social awareness that emerge from slum collectives will be the germs of the future.³⁷

Given this final proclamation, it's not entirely clear that the 'easy temptation' has exactly been resisted. As David Harvey argues in his recent *Spaces of Global Capitalism*:

Accumulation by dispossession [or 'so-called primitive accumulation'] entails a very different set of practices from accumulation through the expansion of wage labour in industry and agriculture. The latter, which dominated processes of capital accumulation in the 1950s and 1960s, gave rise to an oppositional culture (such as that embedded in trade unions and working class political parties) that produced the social democratic compromise. Dispossession, on the other hand, is fragmented and particular.³⁸

It is, as such, writes Harvey, 'fomenting quite different lines of social and political struggle' today.

It's fairly clear that Harvey, the 'orthodox' Marxist, is not entirely convinced by the political form these 'different lines' are taking. In some respects, much the same could probably be said of Davis. It is evident that for both the unique difficulty facing such struggles concerns their capacity to extract themselves 'from the local and the particular to understand the macro-politics of what neo-liberal accumulation by dispossession was and is all about'. 'The variety of such struggles was and is simply stunning', Harvey continues. 'It is hard to even imagine connections between them.'³⁹ There is something slightly odd about the idea of an *understanding* of 'macro-politics' as some revolutionary prerequisite here. But the point is fairly obvious. As the *World Charter of the Rights to the City*, drawn up at the Social Forum of the Americas in 2004, also recognized, the social divisions of the contemporary metropolis may favour 'the emergence of urban conflict', but its present formations mean that this is 'usually fragmented and incapable of producing

significant change in the current development models' themselves.⁴⁰ For Davis, this newly expanding urban population, 'massively concentrated in a shanty-town world', is, above all, defined by the degree to which it lacks anything like the 'strategic economic power of socialized labour'. As a result, struggles in the slums tend towards the 'episodic and discontinuous', part of a reconfiguration we call the 'local' itself.

Set against this are some fairly classical 'grass-roots' objections to what may be regarded as such peculiarly Marxian concerns. For Pithouse, 'The point is not that the squatters must subordinate themselves to some external authority or provide the "base" for some apparently grander national or global struggle. Squatters should be asking the questions that matter to them and waging the fight on their terms.'⁴¹ Yet one can agree with all this and still observe that Pithouse's own ultimately fetishized localism can only take one so far. As Gandy rightly says in the context of Lagos, though 'informal networks and settlements may meet immediate needs for some, and determined forms of community organizing may produce measurable achievements, grassroots responses alone cannot coordinate the structural dimensions of urban development'.⁴²

Clearly, there is no one urban revolution coming into being, stretching from Gaza to the former Second World to Lagos and beyond.⁴³ If the global 'slum collective' is part of some new multitude, such a notion tells us little about the directions of such a new politics, and even less about that notoriously empty concept of the multitude itself. Any idea of a slum politics as – in however dispersed and localized a way – somehow *immediately* free of capitalism, because of its very 'exclusion', is mere fantasy. This is the lure of Žižek's 'classical' conformity 'to the old Marxist definition of the proletarian revolutionary subject ... dwelling in a free space, outside the regulation of the state'. But it fails to absorb the lessons of *Capital* if its consequence is simply to ignore the degree to which, in the slum too, it is capital that continues to overdetermine social and spatial relations, including those of politics itself. This is not to deny that hope for political imagination might reside in a new, quintessentially modern, urban situation where – 'deprived of support for their traditional ways of life' – people are compelled 'to invent some mode of being-together'. But, then, if whatever new forms of sociality and modes of cooperation 'emerge from slum collectives will be the germs of the future', for much of the world at least, it is unlikely that they will obey the good 'old definitions' anyway.

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2003, pp. 2–5, 14. Nonetheless, Lefebvre observes that ‘so-called underdeveloped countries are now characterized by the fact that they undergo the rural, the industrial and the urban simultaneously. They accumulate problems without accumulating wealth’ (p. 32).
2. Mike Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, *New Left Review* 26, March/April 2004, pp. 5–34.
3. *Mute*, vol. 2, no. 3, Special Issue: *Naked Cities: Struggle in the Global Slums*, 2006.
4. Iain Boal, ‘21st Century Noir’, *Naked Cities*, p. 12.
5. David Cunningham, ‘The Concept of Metropolis: Philosophy and Urban Form’, *Radical Philosophy* 133, September/October 2005, pp. 13–25.
6. In my previous article in *Radical Philosophy* 133, I suggested that the forms of spatial relationality characteristic of the modern capitalist metropolis, determined as they are by ‘pure’ exchangeability, mean that ‘units’ of urban form are always subject (in however minor a way) to a kind of potential *détournement*: ‘A church can, in the formal structure of universal equivalence, become a café, an art gallery, a recording studio, a set of apartments, a recording studio, or whatever’ (p. 22). The squatting culture of the slum perhaps suggests a very different manifestation of what would nonetheless be the same kind of formal structure. In such a structure, by contrast to the earlier forms of what Lefebvre terms ‘absolute’ and ‘historical’ space – in which, as in the *polis*, the ‘incomparability’ of the intrinsic qualities of certain sites remains essential – ‘specific values’ (to use Simmel’s phrase) are no longer, in themselves, definitive of the urban as such, but are constitutively mediated by a pure form of exchangeability.
7. Rem Koolhaas/Harvard Project on the City, ‘Lagos’, in Francine Fort and Michel Jacques, eds, *Mutations*, ACTAR, Barcelona, 2001, pp. 718–19. See also Koolhaas, ‘Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos’, in Okwui Enwezor et al., eds, *Documenta 11_Platform 4. Under Siege: Four African Cities*, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003.
8. Matthew Gandy, ‘Learning from Lagos’, *New Left Review* 33, May/June 2005, p. 38.
9. As Davis notes, the occupants of shanty-town shacks are neither necessarily squatters, nor de facto ‘owners’ of their property. In many instances, housing is itself a generator of capital for ‘slumlords’ legally or illegally coercing economic ‘tribute’ from the poor.
10. See Paul Cammack, ‘Attacking the Poor’, *New Left Review* 13, January/February 2002, pp. 125–34.
11. David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Development*, Verso, London and New York, 2006, p. 27.
12. Gandy, ‘Learning from Lagos’, p. 46.
13. Richard Pithouse, Review of *Planet of Slums*, *Sunday Independent*, 2006, www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28,10,2578; ‘Coffin for the Councillor (or, The Left in the Slums)’, *Interactivist Info Exchange*, <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/10/07/148251>; ‘Thinking Resistance in the Shanty Town’, *Naked Cities*, pp. 16–31.
14. Marshall Berman, ‘L.A. Raw’, *The Nation*, 1 April 1991, pp. 417–21.
15. Manuel Castells, ‘European Cities, the Informational Society, and the Global Economy’, *New Left Review* I/204, March/April 1994, p. 18.
16. See Tristram Hunt, ‘Lessons from Beijing Emerge from the Dickensian Smog’, *Guardian*, 28 July 2006.
17. Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, Edward Arnold, London, 1977.
18. Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 76.
19. Gandy, ‘Learning From Lagos’, p. 38, 42.
20. Nanna de Ru, ‘Hollocore’, in OMA/Rem Koolhaas, ed., *Content*, Taschen, Cologne, 2004, p. 336. See also Cunningham, ‘Concept of Metropolis’, p. 22.
21. Cunningham, ‘Concept of Metropolis’, p. 20.
22. Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, trans. Hans Gerth, in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks CA and Delhi, 1997, pp. 176, 178.
23. Koolhaas, ‘Lagos’, p. 653.
24. Peter Osborne, ‘Non-Places and the Spaces of Art’, *Journal of Architecture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2001, p. 185.
25. Koolhaas, ‘Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos’, p. 175.
26. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, pp. 65–6.
27. Gaza, as Davis points out, could in certain respects plausibly be regarded as the world’s single biggest slum – ‘essentially an urbanized agglomeration of refugee camps (750,000 refugees) with two thirds of the population existing on less than \$2 per day’ (48).
28. Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*, p. 43.
29. Andy Merrifield, *Metromarxism: A Marxist Tale of the City*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, pp. 2–3.
30. Famously, Marx writes: ‘The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.’ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1967, pp. 84, 89.
31. Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 876.
32. Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, Verso, London and New York, 2005, p. 163.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 172–3.
34. In fact Pentecostalism shares some things with much twentieth-century Third World Marxism to the degree that it, too, has as ‘its ultimate premise ... that the urban world is corrupt, unjust and unreformable’. See Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, *NLR*, p. 33.
35. Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters in a New Urban World*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 16.
36. Alberto Toscano, ‘Factory, Territory, Metropolis, Empire’, *Angelaki*, vol. 9, no. 2, August 2004, p. 198.
37. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Knee Deep’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 17, 2004.
38. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, p. 52.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
40. *World Charter of the Rights to the City*, www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/2243.html.
41. Pithouse, ‘Thinking Resistance’, p. 26.
42. Gandy, ‘Learning from Lagos’, p. 52.
43. One of Davis’s most startling observations is that the ‘fastest-growing slums’ are now in the former Second World. It is perhaps in places like Baku, Yerevan and Ulanbaatar that ‘urban dereliction’ has accompanied ‘civic disinvestment’ at the most ‘stomach-churning velocity’ (24–5).