Reviews

When I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin a few years ago, there was one book especially that almost all my academic friends and I, a motley crew of people from Architecture, English, Art History, Anthropology: History and American Studies, had read and admired. It came up regularly in discussions of many of the things that we thought were important: urban geography, ecology, thought control, writing, community development, film, and late twentieth-century apocalyptic fantasies. The book was Milte Davis's *City of Quartz* (1990) about the militarization of public space in Los Angeles, a wonderfully crafted mixture of urban history, cultural reportage, and radical agitprop, which reeked with Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, but was written in accessible prose. Especially for the progressives among us who aspired to write books with political consequences for people outside our field, this was one of our rare common texts, and as the boolt spoke to us, we spolte through it across disciplinary boundaries.

Mike Davis's new book *Ecology of Fear* picks up where *City of Quartz* ended. The major theme is what he calls the 'imagination of disaster' in Los Angeles today. Davis writes about droughts, fires, floods, tornadoes, mountain lions, and a blind thrust fault that lurks beneath the city, but the emphasis is on social consequences and anxieties. He argues that Los Angeles's self-image as a victim of natural disasters obscures the way unchecked development has jeopardized the city's safety:

> For generations, market-driven urbanization has transgressed environmental common sense. Historic wildfire corridors have been turned into view-lot suburbs, wetland liquefaction zones into marinas, and floodplains into industrial districts and housing tracts. Monolithic public works have been substituted for regional planning and a responsible land ethic. As a result, Southern California has reaped flood, fire, and earthquake tragedies that were as avoidable; as unnatural, as the beating of Rodney King and the ensuing explosion in the streets (9).

This already amounts to a truism among some people, but Davis argues it more powerfully than anyone else. He also reminds us that unchecked development in spite of the region's uninhabitable nature is not just the result of amnesia, but of profit-oriented decisions by city boosters and capitalist speculators.

The book consists of seven chapters. The signal chapter is 'The Case for Letting Malibu Burn' about the firestorm in Malibu in 1993. Davis believes that Malibu, which consists of a lethal mixture of houses, dead brush, and Santa Ana winds, should never have been opened to development. He also argues that the wealthy Malibu homeowners were defended by 'the largest army of firefighters in American history' and benefited 'from an extraordinary range of insurance, land-use, and disaster relief subsidies' (99). This argument may seem unnecessarily insensitive to the victims of the firestorm (and perhaps is), but Davis wants to show that Malibu homeowners against conventional wisdom have

been in a position of privilege. He does so by juxtaposing their situation with the experiences of recent immigrants from Central America and Mexico in the run-down tenements and cheap hotels in Westlake and downtown Los Angeles. While Malibu homeowners after the firestorm were awarded federal subsidies and low-interest loans, which they used to boost development, construction remains shoddy and emergency capacities inadequate in the tenements and cheap hotels. Smoke detectors and fire doors are broken, the rooms are overcrowded, and the local fire department is underfunded. Fires in Westlalte and downtown LA, accordingly, are more frequent and claim more fatalities than in Malibu. This to Davis means that the poor in inner-city communities are doubly punished and pay the price for the costly development and fire prevention in Malibu.

Another important and representative chapter is 'Maneaters of the Sierra Madre,' where Davis discusses the colonies of mountain lions; cougars, and other wild life which during the past decade have killed several people around Los Angeles. This leads him to discuss the complex relationship between the wilderness and the urban in Southern California (he cites Gary Snyder's wonderful definition of the wilderness as the possibility of being eaten by a mountain lion). More importantly, it leads him to examine the hysteria surrounding public debates about, for instance, mountain lions and ltiller bees. Here he begins to introduce race into the analysis when he observes the way anxieties about wild life have been exploited to promote fears of immigration and obstruct inter-ethnic contact.

Other chapters are less exciting. In the chapter 'Our Secret Kansas,' about the little-known tornado problem in Los Angeles, Davis shows that the media (and here he refers primarily to the *Los Angeles Times,* an arch villain in his landscape of the city) have hidden the tornadoes behind understatements and euphemisms. But the chapter mostly amounts to a catalog of twentieth-century tornadoes. Another disappointing chapter is the final chapter 'Beyond 'Blade Runner,'' where Davis sounds more like *City of Quartz* than anywhere else in the book. He writes about continued technological surveillance, social control; and elimination of public space, but adds little to the analysis from *City of Quartz.*

Ecology of Fear is in many ways a rich and extraordinary book. It has some of the same qualities as *City of Quartz,* but also some of the same problems. First, the writing is wonderfully quirky and sometimes terrific. Davis especially has a way with metaphors, as when he calls Southern California 'Walden Pond on LSD' (16), 'Blade Runner' 'Los Angeles's dystopic alter ego' (359), and the Eighteenth Street gang 'the General Motors of Los Angeles street culture' (378). But this often becomes trite, and the writing sometimes turns into empty hyperbole. Second, Davis demonstrates an astonishing knowledge of Los Angeles, but his preoccupation with the city borders on parochialism. Only someone as immersed in Los Angeles as Davis could argue for instance that the city is underwritten. Third, Davis has a wonderful eye for detail and makes impressive leaps from everyday observation to complex social analysis. But too many ideas are undeveloped. At one point he begins to hint at the relationship between the local and the national and suggests that disaster fiction from Los Angeles correlates with 'the nervous breakdown of American exceptionalism' (354). This argument, like many others in the book; is never developed.

There may be more important issues at stake, however. *Ecology of Fear* is a socially grounded analysis with a clear ideological message, and most readers' opinion of the book will depend on the degree of agreement with Davis's political position. This is perhaps

inevitable. Unfriendly readers will tend to find the book too conspiratorial and sinister, and they will be disturbed by how Davis almost revels in the apocalyptic fantasies he describes. When he writes about Southern California's relative seismic stability during the past two centuries, it almost seems as if he wants the region to begin to pay its 'seismic regional debt' (25). And when in a chapter about 'The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles' he lists and catalogs disaster novels and films about the city (by his count, it has been destroyed 138 times in fiction and film since 1909, in nine major categories), one wonders where *Ecology of Fear* belongs. Does he secretly wish for the destruction of Los Angeles to fulfill his apocalyptic fantasies? Perhaps most importantly, many unfriendly readers (including some of the reviewers who have already written about the book) will feel that Davis does not provide practical solutions to the city's problems and will read this as an invalidation of his political position, based on the common logic that if there is no solution, there is no problem. More friendly readers will disagree. His apologists may feel that Davis, as an observer, not an urban planner or politician, does not have a public responsibility to invent schemes to undo the patterns that he describes. But maybe a more optimistic reading of *Ecology of Fear* is also possible. If the problems Davis describes are the consequences of social circumstances, it follows that they can also be solved socially. This means that in this ecology of fear there is also an element of hope. By exposing the imagination of disaster in Los Angeles as the product of man-made circumstances, Davis has provided the possibility of a solution. Therein lies the book's significance to debates about contemporary urban life in the United States.

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