
Reviewed by David Harvey

Ecology of Fear

Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster

by Mike Davis

New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998

IN *CITY OF QUARTZ*, Mike Davis turned the whole field of contemporary urban studies inside out. With a lively combination of investigative journalism and historical sociology, powered by an engaging prose style, Davis constructed a view of Los Angeles and its history that was as memorable as it was controversial. His view was somewhat “noir,” if not downright dyspeptic, and his targets—the L.A. boosters, the media kings, the real estate developers, the architects, all coupled with complicit politicians—were not amused. Those who live by the image did not care to have that image so magnificently and publicly punctured. They waged a media war to discredit their critic.

Ecology of Fear is a sequel to *City of Quartz*. And judging by the cries of outrage that have carried from Los Angeles to London and New York, Davis has once again hit his favored targets where it hurts. This makes *Ecology of Fear* hard to review. I deplore the campaign being orchestrated against Davis, manifest in the vicious attacks against the book in various media. But I do not want to take a partisan position in Davis’s favor either. *Ecology of Fear* is, by and large, a great read, a wonderfully evocative book. It is witty, amusing, sometimes wildly over the top, but always engaging. And it will certainly and rightly be the focus of debate. But it does not have the impact of *City of Quartz*. Indeed, in some ways it magnifies rather than resolves some key

difficulties to be found in that earlier work.

The fundamental thesis of *Ecology of Fear* is that what makes Los Angeles distinctive “is not simply its conjugation of earthquakes, wildfires and floods, but its uniquely explosive mixture of natural hazards and social contradictions.” These will, Davis holds, “inevitably erode many of the comparative advantages of the Southern California economy.” Los Angeles will not, of course, collapse. Rather, it will “stagger on with higher body counts and greater distress, through a chain of more frequent and destructive encounters with disasters of all sorts.” Thus will Southern California’s golden age forever be superseded.

The gloominess and the inevitability of this scenario are, of course, open to question. It is Davis’s job to convince us he is right.

The opening argument is strong. “The urbanization of the Los Angeles area has, it seems, taken place during one of the most unusual episodes of climatic and seismic benignity since the inception of the Holocene.” In Southern California, “small changes in driving variables or inputs—magnified by feedback—can produce disproportionate, or even discontinuous outcomes.” As a consequence, “the landscape incorporates a decisive quotient of surprise; it packs an eco-punch seldom easy to predict simply by extrapolating from existing trends.” Don’t be fooled by the benignity of recent years, Davis warns. Twentieth-century Los Angeles has “been capitalized on sheer gambler’s luck.”

Davis assembles materials from the seismic record, pulls together evidence for a two-hundred-year drought in late medieval times, excavates a record of tornado-like events, and, in perhaps the

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most brilliant of all of his environmental evocations, takes up the history of fire-ecology in the chaparral zones of Malibu, where “a monomaniacal obsession with managing ignition rather than chaparral accumulation simply makes doomsday-like firestorms and the great floods that follow them virtually inevitable.” His graphic historical reconstructions of past fires leave nothing to the imagination as to what that inevitability portends. The response to these environmental dangers, Davis argues, has been a mixture of media-induced denial and amnesia, all in the cause of that self-interested L.A. boosterism that insists upon depicting the city as an unproblematic land of sunshine and easy affluence. The irresponsibility of developers and boosters, in the face of known risks, converts those risks into humanly constructed disasters.

If and when the seismic “big one” occurs, for example, then the disaster will not be “natural” at all. Despite all sorts of warning signs, such as the obvious problems of shoddy construction exposed in the Northridge earthquake and “the grim reminder from Kobe, public discussion of seismic safety reform withered away in 1995, as lobbyists dug in their heels and politicians moved on to happier agendas.” Building his own compendium of potential horrors (many of which are now known to seismologists and engineers), Davis accuses the state’s Seismic Safety Commission of constructing a “compendium of cowardice” in its most recent report, and of burying (for reasons of profit) the issue of costly redesign and retrofitting of buildings to achieve better levels of protection. Special interests have, furthermore, converted “disaster amnesia” into a federally subsidized luxury. The Clinton administration played a game of “seismic Keynesianism” as it poured aid and disaster relief into Southern California in the wake of the Northridge quake to help revive a stalled economy and secure votes. Federal subsidies to deal with natural disasters are one thing. Federal subsidies to support developer stupidity and greed are another.

The same logic is exposed in Malibu,

where federal disaster relief from the Eisenhower years onward “established a precedent for the public subsidization of firebelt suburbs.” Worse still, politicians and the media “have allowed the essential land use issue—the rampant uncontrolled proliferation of firebelt suburbs—to be camouflaged in a neutral discourse about natural hazards and public safety.” Davis documents how influential property owners in Malibu fueled “official hysteria about suburban

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wildfire,” spread “all kinds of wild rumors” about arsonists and sinister plots against property (shown to be groundless with the exception of a hapless transient who lit a fire that got out of hand), and brutally and thoughtlessly pushed official policy toward a scientifically discredited and ecologically disastrous policy of fire containment. All of this is contrasted with the approach to fire ecology in low-income and largely immigrant downtown L.A., where periodic apartment and hotel fires have taken a deadly toll. Official laxity coupled with property-owners’ negligence and greed create a deadly climate of unbridled fire hazards. “Needless to say,” Davis writes, “there is no comparable investment in the fire, toxic, or earthquake safety of inner city communities. Instead, as in many things, we tolerate two systems of hazard prevention, separate and unequal.” The effect is “to recycle natural disaster as class struggle.”

But then, strangely, Davis shifts his ground to a more metaphorical plane. By the time we get to cougar attacks, plagues of snakes and mice, African killer bees, and the potentiality of bubonic plague spread by squirrels, we are far from the world of natural disasters being recycled as class struggle. His theme is in part how “nature” might unpredictably “bite back” (quite literally in

the case of cougars) and how we can never avoid the unintended ecological consequences of our own actions. The divisive reactions are there, of course, but this time they concern attitudes to nature. “The social construction of nature,” Davis writes, “is typically mirrored by the naturalization of purely social contradictions.” He tries to unpack this through consideration of the “strange choreography of the wild and the urban in Southern California.”

Here Davis’s penchant for stylistic overkill gets tedious. Metaphors get stretched beyond plausibility. Everything gets narrated at the same fever pitch, as if an occasional cougar mauling has the same significance as a major earthquake (in consciousness as well as in reality). Events that have the character of molehills (however quirky and interesting) are invested with mountainous significance. People are constantly *horrified, astonished, stunned, and amazed*.

This tone carries over, perhaps more appropriately, into the chapter on “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles.” Here Davis explores “the underlying tides and currents of Los Angeles disaster fiction” and the “dark rapture” with which the destruction of Los Angeles gets greeted in literature and film. An enjoyable essay in its own right, the chapter purports to see in such representations “the deepest anxieties of a postliberal era—above all the collapse of American belief in a utopian national destiny.” Los Angeles, “with its estimated 500 gated subdivisions, 2,000 street gangs, 4,000 mini-malls, 20,000 sweatshops, and 100,000 homeless residents” has become “a dystopian symbol of Dickensian inequalities and intractable racial contradictions.” Hollywood’s craving for disaster is depicted as a subconscious collective recognition of that fact.

But with what options and alternatives does this leave us? It is here that Davis loses his grip. The lopsidedness of the account threatens to capsize his argument.

There is something too one-sided about looking upon Los Angeles (as he does both in *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*) as primarily one vast real estate and speculator boondoggle. The city is, more inclusively, a world of production and work, of trade and commodity flows, and of complex social relations, including those of class, ethnic, racial, environmental, gender and sexual identity struggles. Some of the latter are available for inspection in *City of Quartz*, but in *Ecology of Fear* the world of union and community organizing, of popular mobilizations (with which Los Angeles is rife), quite simply disappears from view (even though Davis is well aware of their existence).

The world might have been a better place, he seems to say, if only the authorities would have lived up to their responsibilities or if people had (as in the chapter on how Eden lost its garden) listened to sensible planners instead of being ridden over roughshod by greedy developers. But Davis depicts those options as foreclosed. And while it is useful to pay attention to how “the contemporary American city simulates or hallucinates itself” (an odd formulation that I find somewhat troublesome) and how social fantasies have their roles to play in keeping “the machinery of unreality running smoothly,” there is a limit to how far such cultural/technological formulations and fantasies can take us in the search for or denial of material alternatives.

Furthermore, Los Angeles is nowhere near as unique as Davis suggests (how easy it would be to write an even more dramatic book on the social and environmental contradictions of Mexico City, Caracas, or even Florence). Davis nowhere attempts to tackle the thorny problem of how human occupancy can best be organized in the face of a rising tide of environmental risks and hazards. The author’s lack of alternative vision and his doom-laden sense of historical

inevitability (surprising for a socialist) hurts most in his last chapter, which reverts (though in a somewhat labored style) to themes elaborated on in *City of Quartz*. He makes no attempt to capitalize upon the stunning opening gambits of *Ecology of Fear*. Davis extrapolates from past trends (something he vigorously condemns in earlier chapters), and resurrects Parks’s famous diagram of urban ecology (suitably relabeled) to produce a “strangely anachronistic and unprecient” (I here use his own judgment on *Blade Runner* against him) depiction of L.A.’s future in which, I fear, the “ghost of past imaginations” predominates over creative politics.

Davis has, it seems, imprisoned the future of Los Angeles in his own detailed imaginings of disaster. And that future is rancid, not socialist. He loses sight of the simple fact that if cities are imagined and made, they can equally well be re-imagined and re-made. *Ecology of Fear* wittily and powerfully reminds us, nevertheless, of some of the key ecological and social issues that need to be excavated, understood, negotiated, and addressed, if we are to build any kind of urban alternative at all.

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