***Planet of Slums***, Mike Davis (London: Verso, 2006), 256 pp., $24 cloth, $16.95 paper.

*Planet of Slums* is relentless. Mike Davis, the prolific author and social critic, piles on evidence in the service of a passionate, despairing, and at times furious analysis of the economic, social, and environmental state of cities in the global South. Davis might have just as readily titled his book *The World Is a Ghetto*, after the 1972 hit by the band War. But a key goal of the book is to show how much things have changed since that time, almost all for the worse. If the book tends to oversimplify enormously complex and diverse urban worlds, it has an undeniable virtue at its core. Whereas the War tune's chorus was "don't you know / that it's true / that for me and for you / the world is a ghetto," Davis never stops asking who the "me and you" are. The growth and transformation of slums from Cairo to Manila, from Lagos to Lima, are both a symbol and a cause of a growing gap in life chances (socioeconomic and existential) between rich and poor—local, national, and global in scale.

The core of Davis's book is that the contemporary Third World urban poor are doubly cursed in ways that echo the two major upheavals of the nineteenth

century: industrialization and imperialism. On the one hand, twenty-first-century urbanization resembles the most painful moments in nineteenth-century industrialization in terms of living conditions, but without any transition to formal labor and the elements of a social contract that establish relatively stable working-class lives. On the other, in one of the many insightful historical comparisons made throughout this book, Davis sees the impact of today's "neoliberal globalization" on Third World cities as analogous to the ways in which nineteenth-century imperialism reshaped rural life through "the forcible incorporation into the world market of the great subsistence peasantries of Asia and Africa [that] entailed the famine deaths of millions and the uprooting of tens of millions more from traditional tenures" (p. 174). *Planet of Slums* often (but not always) succeeds in pulling off a difficult trick—showing the similarities between past and present realities (implying that things are not so different today) while emphasizing the unprecedented nature of contemporary global forces (implying that things are very different today).

The principal means by which present-day global capitalism has remade (or, better, *un*made) urban futures are free-market ideologies and their embodiment in the policy framework of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Thus, Third World cities swell in population without a concomitant availability of jobs, leading to competition over crumbs in the urban informal sector. Privatization, a key component of SAPs, reduces part of the middle class (especially former civil servants) to poverty, commoditizes social services such as health care and sanitation, and leads to gated communities for the middle and upper classes (ghettos for the wealthy?). On this last point, Davis articulates a seemingly unbridgeable distance, and the dissolution of any remaining measure of reciprocity, between the haves and the have-nots. "[W]e are dealing with . . . a fundamental reorganization of metropolitan space, involving a drastic diminution of the intersections between the lives of the rich and the poor" (p. 119).

*Planet of Slums* has its origins in an essay of the same name that Davis published in the *New Left Review* in 2004. The essay's sections, organized around themes, serve as a structural template for the book. This may not have been the best narrative strategy to pursue. Most of the chapters—whether focused on housing, urban ecological dangers, microcredit, the informal sector, or SAPs—add numerous examples to those provided in the original essay, drawing from the range of case studies that make up the empirical spine of the book. We get, for example, one or two paragraphs on Mumbai in almost every chapter. This method serves to illustrate the specific issue at hand, but we rarely get a sense of Mumbai as a living, breathing city.

To be fair, this kind of portrait is not the goal of *Planet of Slums*, whose sweeping bird's-eye view is explicitly intended to demonstrate a common and largely negative direction of urban futures in the developing world. But it somehow makes for fairly leaden reading for a work with such a sharp political edge. While chapters on particular cities may not have made sense for his purposes, some of the detail and sense of lived space of Davis's *City of Quartz* (the book on Los Angeles that made his reputation) would have been a welcome balance to the marshaling of statistics and the frequent quotations from those studies that bolster his points.

Not that *Planet of Slums* lacks entirely for rhetorical flair. "Seismic hazard is the fine print in the devil's bargain of informal housing" (p. 126) is how Davis sums up the disproportionate vulnerability of poor neighborhoods to pulverization in earthquake-prone cities. And his characterization of the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals as "the last gasp of developmental idealism" is right on the mark. The assault on romantic claims that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or the informal sector are alternatives to public policy and state action is deftly thrown as a challenge to theorists and practitioners who see small as beautiful and local "agency" as sufficient to radically improve the lives of the urban poor. Contemporary global capitalism is powerful and rapacious enough, argues Davis, that local-level entrepreneurship and organization are rarely much more than survival strategies. In this and other ways, Davis's critique is more old Left than new, and it is somewhat refreshing in its hardheadedness and realism. Indeed, there are times when Davis, musing on the long-term global effects of a system that produces what he calls "surplus humanity," reads like a Marxian version of Robert Kaplan's provocative work in which global economic structures replace demography and premodern culture as the engine of coming catastrophes.

One other strength of *Planet of Slums* is Davis's extensive revisiting of a generation or two of debates in development studies and connecting them to twenty-first-century urban problems. Yet there is a tension in the text between clearly sophisticated readings in the political economy of development and what is now a somewhat predictable recourse to SAPs and more broadly "neoliberal globalization" as the necessary and sufficient explanation of Third World woes. Where the reader comes down on this is likely tied to whether one sees the weight of the many correlations Davis cites (for example, SAPs adopted, then urban conditions worsen for the poor) as constituting an obvious cause. Simply stating as fact, to cite one example on the health care system in Zimbabwe, that "the introduction of user fees in the early 1990s led to a doubling of infant mortality" (p. 149) will not satisfy those interested in how "cost-sharing" affected health outcomes in relation to other factors.

No doubt, as Davis argues, SAPs were explicitly designed to remove the "urban bias" identified in the 1970s in which postcolonial urban-based elites, civil servants, and a "labor aristocracy" were subsidized by rural farmers. But by now we must surely go beyond homogenizing the effects of SAPs across very diverse contexts and assuming that their policy prescriptions were implemented in any straightforward or uniform way. Equally important, as Davis himself admits, pre-SAP conditions in most cities were pretty fragile in the ways that states were able to support and improve the lives of the (much smaller number of) urban poor: "[T]he social state in the Third World was already withering away even before SAPs sounded the death knell for welfarism" (p. 63).

This perspective leaves *Planet of Slums* fundamentally ambivalent about the role of states, and oddly silent about social movements as forces for addressing and ultimately narrowing the chasm between rich and poor, or even for simply alleviating the most pernicious aspects of urban existence, whether lack of access to water, exposure to toxic environments, or subsubsistence incomes. With Third World states captured by wealthy elites and

foreign interests, and NGOs as often well-meaning stooges in neoliberal efforts to hollow out the public sector, one is left with a sense of hopelessness at the end of this book. Davis makes occasional mention of urban riots and protests against the growing inequality and reduction of social services in various cities around the globe, but does not address the conditions under which these demonstrations happen or, more broadly, how those who have benefited from the social bifurcation of cities have apparently gotten away with it so easily. In his conclusion, Davis promises that a forthcoming book will focus on the "historical agency" of the urban poor and their modes of response and resistance in "a world of cities without jobs" (p. 201). One looks forward to this, not only because Davis is always worth reading, but also as a counterweight to the bleak and almost apocalyptic images that *Planet of Slums* sadly, but often convincingly, conjures.

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