Victor Cohen

The Left Coast:
An Interview with Mike Davis

When he was a guest in 2009 on the PBS program Bill Moyers Journal, Mike Davis was introduced by Moyers as “a real, live socialist” from “the People’s Republic of Southern California.” Though a joke, Moyers was correct. Davis shows a way of being a Marxist intellectual in an inhospitable time. He also has never gone far from his roots in working-class southern California. With his second book, City of Quartz (Verso, 1990; Vintage, 1992), Davis established himself as the region’s most prominent critic, and its success propelled him into both the academic and public limelight.

Born in 1946, Davis grew up in El Cajon, where his father was a butcher. Davis spent a good part of his early adulthood working for SDS and various radical groups, as he talks about here, and also worked several years in London for New Left Review. Beginning in the mid-1980s, he returned to the US and entered academe, though he has never settled in one academic post for long. In 1998 he was named a MacArthur Fellow, and currently he is a Distinguished Professor in creative writing at UC-Riverside.

Davis’ first book, Prisoners of the American Dream (Verso, 1986), explores why this country never developed a popular working-class political party. City of Quartz analyzes the contradictions between the utopian longing and rapine corporate greed that have shaped Los Angeles. Davis’ three subsequent books, Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster (Metropolitan, 1999), Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City (Verso, 2000), and Planet of Slums: Urban Involuntary and the Informal Working Class (Verso, 2006), focus on transformations in the post-WWII cityscape in the US and abroad. Davis’ most ambitious project to date, Late Victorian Holocausits: El Niño Families and the Making of the Third World (Verso, 2001), charts the destruction through famine, both man-made and natural, of large portions of the peasant colonial classes around the world at the turn of the nineteenth century. Most recently he has published two timely cultural analyses, The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu (New Press, 2005) and Buda’s Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb (Verso, 2007). He also co-edited Verso’s Haymarket Series, with Michael Sprinker. In addition, he is coauthor of Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See (New Press, 2003) and co-editor of The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas (U of California P, 2002).
This interview took place on 18 September 2008 at Mike Davis’ home south of downtown San Diego. It was conducted by Victor Cohen, one-time managing editor of *minnesota review*, and transcribed by Salita N. Seibert, editorial assistant to the review while a doctoral candidate in the Literary and Cultural Studies Program at Carnegie Mellon University.

Cohen In spite of having written almost twenty books, as many articles and even a few works of fiction, it might be hard for many people to believe that you didn’t plan on becoming a writer, let alone an academic. What was the trajectory you were on, initially?

Davis I’m a child of the 1950s who was set free by the uprisings of the 1960s. I’ve had a very wobbly trajectory.

I grew up near El Cajon, a blue-collar town east of San Diego, settled by dust bowl migrants and WWII veterans with a distinctive country-western pride and a well-deserved racist reputation. We were a Catholic, trade-union family (two of my father’s workmates and closest friends were rank-and-file Communists) in what culturally could be described as Tulsa on the Pacific. Although I had a Tom-Sawyerish childhood exploring the back country with a wonderful gang of kids, the idiocy of exurban life took its toll in early adolescence.

My entire juvenile belief system—space-exploration science, the US Marine Corps, and JFK—crumbled in a single year of intense reading (Dostoievski, Kerouac, Rimbaud, and Gandhi) coupled with escalating misbehavior in school. After reading John Hersey’s terrifying account of Hiroshima, for example, I refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance or sing the national anthem. I was suspended.

The civil rights movement crystallized my inchoate beliefs. When I was sixteen [1962] my father had a severe heart attack and the medical bills quickly wiped out our savings, so I had to go to work full time for a semester. It was liberating to leave high school, but I also started drinking and acting semi-suicidally. Concerned, my cousin and her husband (a well-known activist in the Black community) invited me to a protest against job discrimination at San Diego Gas and Electric Company.

It was my burning bush. I ended up joining the small but militant local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). We picketed every Friday afternoon, then went to the Jewish Community Center to hear first-hand reports over the phone from Southern freedom-fighters in places like Holly Springs and Bogalusa. It gave my insubordination a coherent focus and compelling direction.
Cohen From what it sounds like, college wasn’t a logical destination at that point.

Davis Actually I was desperate to be the first in the family to go to college. Someone in CORE raved about a campus in the Pacific Northwest called Reed. I’d never heard of it, but went to the downtown library and did some research. It sounded like Beatnik paradise. I applied and, thanks to my overstated hard-luck story, I was given a full scholarship.

Reed in 1964 was truly a feast of nonconformist ideas with wonderful professors and sophisticated students. But I survived barely six weeks. Although I was officially expelled with a girlfriend for the now extinct and very quaint offense of “intervisitation,” I had actually crashed and burned in the second week.

Many of the lectures were over my head and I froze up trying to write my assignment on Homer. Reed famously has a lot of tolerance for distracted and even insane students, and it took hard work to get kicked out. But I had no self-confidence; to be honest, I felt dumber than dog shit. And my scarlet letter was the utter inability to write according to assignment.

The future looked grim (my draft board immediately reclassified me I-A), but Jeremy Brecher, a friendly senior who was active in the Portland civil rights movement, counseled me that I could now become a full-time activist. Jeremy (now a celebrated labor historian and writer in Boston) was the Reed contact for a group called Students for a Democratic Society, whose overworked national headquarters in New York was looking for college dropouts to recycle as office coolies. He gave me a copy of the Port Huron Statement and put me in contact with the national office. They said, “Come.”

Due to my latest ignominy I was persona non grata in my parents’ house, so, after a few despondent days at a cheap motel in El Cajon, I bought a Greyhound ticket to New York City. I arrived in November during an early snowfall, wearing a pair of Tijuana huaraches and an old Pendleton shirt. I was absolutely wide-eyed.

SDS national staff were paid $25 a week and expected to work 16 hours a day. My immediate boss was the assistant national secretary, Helen Garvey, a Radcliffe graduate whose family were eminent Menshevik exiles. Calm and ironic, as well as incredibly competent, she was my first revolutionary role model.

There was a lot of work to do. Berkeley had already exploded, the civil rights showdown at Selma was looming, Malcolm X was launching a new revolutionary group, and the Pentagon was pressing for a huge expansion of the intervention in Vietnam.
What was SDS’ response?

It attempted to take on impossible, simultaneous responsibilities: building a national antiwar movement, providing a multi-issue organizational framework for the emergent student movement, and seeding inner-city community-organizing projects (conceived as a “second front” for SNCC in the South). In a sense, a few hundred students had declared war on the Johnson Administration.

I was a private first class, adept at the basic skills of revolution, collation and stapling. Years later, my oldest daughter would ask me if I had attended “orgies” in the sixties. I told her that the only thing I made love to was a mimeograph machine. “What’s that?” she asked. “I’ll take you to the Smithsonian,” I replied.

I was a full-time SDS organizer until late 1967. After New York, I was briefly in Oakland (where I burnt my draft card in the first protest of that kind), then in Los Angeles (where I was regional organizer), and finally in Austin, where the non-Marxist, “Prairie Populist” wing of SDS had regrouped.

It took me longer than most to recognize that the moment of populism had long passed, and that New Deal liberalism had become the mask of genocide in Southeast Asia. Toward the end of my Austin period, however, I started studying the history of revolution.

At the Berkeley teach-in in 1965 I had been mesmerized, like everyone else, by the speech of the Polish Marxist Isaac Deutscher, so I began my Marxist education with his famous trilogy on the life of Trotsky. I was quickly entranced by its grandeur and tragedy.

I was even more entranced by Judy Pardun (now Perez), an Austin SDS leader who was a veteran of Mississippi Freedom Summer. We ran away to California and got married. For a year, we worked in a butcher shop with my father in San Diego, then moved to LA, where Judy’s parents lived. We joined the Communist Party.

I know that it seems like a bizarre decision: Soviet tanks, after all, were in process of crushing Prague Spring and ending any hope of a Communist Reformation, at least in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

But dissident Southern California Communists, under the leadership of Dorothy Healey, supported the Czechs and opposed the invasion. So we joined as an act of solidarity with Dubcek, not Brezhnev. We were captivated by Dorothy’s charisma and notoriety and impressed by the other new recruits. Angela Davis, who was
finishing her dissertation under Herbert Marcuse, joined in the same period.

The Party was the only serious multi-racial left organization in Southern California, with a cadre who played leading roles in both the antiwar movement and the Black Panther Party. And, of course, it was multi-generational, providing opportunities to learn about strategy and tactics from veterans of the Flint sit-down strike and the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

Some of the stereotypes were of course true. The internal culture of the district, when not lapsed into Popular Front nostalgia, revolved around issues of mass leadership and organizing skill. We argued about alliances and slogans, and almost never discussed theory or read Marx.

Cohen  What was your role in the Communist Party?

Davis  Fighting the Russians.

While Judy worked on her teaching credential at USC, I was given a minor sinecure at the CP bookstore near downtown. But my bureaucratic career was almost as short-lived as my enrollment at Reed. One day a middle-aged guy in an overcoat came into the Progressive Bookstore, scowling and taking notes on our unorthodox selections of Mao and Trotsky. He became increasingly obnoxious, so, with the help of my best friend (a Navy vet named Ron Schneck), I booted him out of the store. Oops. He turned out to be a Soviet cultural attaché.

Dorothy promptly got a call from her nemesis, CPUSA Chairman Gus Hall, raving about a “thuggish assault by ultra-leftists” on an esteemed Russian comrade. In turn, she called me. “Well, bubby, you claim you want to be a hero of the working class, here’s your chance. You’re fired. Go get a real proletarian job.”

Dorothy, I should note parenthetically, regarded my Trotskyist proclivities as something like an STD. Years later in the late 1970s, when she was a leader of the New American Movement, she booted me out of the Los Angeles Socialist Community School where I had taught for several years. But being purged by Dorothy was hardly the same thing as being taken down to the basement by the NKVD. Afterwards, she would invariably invite me over for a TV dinner—her routine nutrition—followed by a long argument about infantile leftism. We fought always but, like everyone who spend time in her company (including at least one love-sick FBI agent), I adored her. She had a mind of almost lethal acuity alloyed with dazzling charm and steely courage.
Cohen I recently read her autobiography, *California Red* (that she co-wrote with Maurice Isserman), and that description captures the force of her personality. Did you become a “real proletarian”?

Davis Yeah. With Dorothy’s help, I got a job working the graveyard shift at an electronics factory in Culver City. I fed fifty-gallon drums of nitric acid into a large and rather frightening acid-etching machine. After a few months, my hands and arms acquired a greenish hue that soap and water could not remove. I was beginning to look like a leprechaun. Alarmed, I complained to the night supervisor. He told me not to worry, “the previous guy on the job had also turned green.”

So I quit. My friend Ron, meanwhile, had heard about a terrific program, administered by the teamsters and funded by the War on Poverty, that paid unemployed guys to learn how to drive heavy-duty trucks (with no risk of turning green).

As it turned out, the Teamster Opportunity Program (TOP) was a eighteen-wheel boot camp run by veteran truckers who had been selected for their legendary driving skills. Screaming blood-curdling curses when we missed a gear or jackknifed a trailer, they taught us to maneuver giant Peterbilts in the dry, concrete bed of the LA River.

“You can die, but you can’t fail” was the motto. In fact for many of the guys, ex-cons or unskilled rural immigrants with ten kids, the program was a last chance. Some were functionally illiterate, but the instructors would spend extra hours to ensure that they could pass the written test and fill in an over-the-road logbook. Aside from later adventures with my children, it was the best three months of my life.

For the next four and a half years [1969-73], I worked on the Eastside and became active in Teamster United Rank and File, a predecessor of today’s Teamsters for a Democratic Union. A volcanic wildcat strike rocked the LA freight locals in 1970, and for a while the thirties seemed to have returned. There were Teamster riots against the LA sheriffs at Whittier Narrows and gun battles with scabs and Wackenhuts along the Grapevine (I-5 north of LA). Two people died, I think.

But it was easy to over-romanticize economic militancy. Our bubble burst when some of our grassroots heroes got jobs as thugs in Frank Fitzsimmons’ despicable conspiracy to break Cesar Chavez’s organizing campaign in the Coachella Valley. In response, we formed a small Teamster support committee for the UFW and went down to the Eighth Street produce docks after midnight to talk to the Chicano warehousemen. Some bravely refused to load scab
lettuce and were punctually attacked by a goon squad of Teamster business agents, sinisterly dressed in black from head to toe. Several were then fired at the instigation of the union.

Cohen I know you eventually found your way into UCLA and Bob Brenner’s orbit. Were you thinking about school at this time, or doing much reading and writing?

Davis In those days I had a regular run that started in Montebello, northeast of downtown, and finished at March Air Force Base near Riverside. I earned a fortune in overtime (I still have a paycheck stub for a ninety-hour week) and was usually too bushed to be able to study after work or even on weekends.

So I adopted a routine of skipping coffee break and lunch in order to have a full hour, often more, at supper to read the classics. Lenin was no problem, but I struggled hopelessly with Marx and Hegel. It was more difficult than number theory and Homer at Reed.

In the meantime, our little Teamster group had fallen apart and my life was drifting into incoherence. I was long expelled from the CP, my marriage had broken up (my fault), most of my close friends had become zonked-out Maoists, and there was a threatening shadow of repression over the LA Left.

I decided to move to San Francisco. I drove north, faked a local address, and took the Muni exam for bus and streetcar drivers. I became something like number 4,344 on the waiting list. It was preposterous. Every hippie and radical in the country wanted a decent blue-collar or public-sector job in the Bay Area, and despite numerous attempts over many years, I never found a foothold, although I still have dreams about finding a letter from Muni in my mailbox.

The next idea was finding a non-disgraceful job as a union organizer or researcher. I sought the advice of John T. Williams, a black Teamsters’ official who was unique for his progressive politics and honesty. He was pessimistic about my chances, especially in light of my CP and oppositional past, and advised that I apply to UCLA instead.

He also told me that Grayline Tours (“And here, folks, is Lucille Ball’s house...”) was hiring bus drivers. If I started full time, he thought I could probably accrue enough seniority in six months to ensure night and weekend work on the “extra board.” Thus I could stay in the union while going to school.

I took John T.'s advice, and was soon wearing a phony airline pilot uniform and gulling tourists with movie star gossip. But I also
took a serious interest in LA history for the first time. While my passengers gawked at the footprints outside Grauman’s Chinese, I would sneak a few pages from one of Carey McWilliams’ superb books.

The last thing in the world that I expected was that the class struggle would erupt during a tour of Hollywood. But it did. The drivers had accumulated years of grievances against the owners of the company, and about four months after I started, we were on strike.

It was a bitter little struggle, ultimately broken by professional scabs. There was some violence, conspiracy, and arson. One of our best guys was run over by a scab bus, and I was arrested for supposedly assaulting his assailant (who, in turn, claimed to have been a war hero and prisoner of the Viet Cong).

The craven secretary-treasurer of our local caved into the company, surrendering drivers’ seniority and blacklisting those of us who had been accused of fighting scabs. It was a very small event in my life, but a catastrophe for the older drivers. It taught me that any strike, no matter how small, is a life and death struggle that should be conducted with all the tenacity and seriousness of Stalingrad.

Cohen But it didn’t deflect you from UCLA?

Davis On the contrary, I was happy to be a geriatric freshman. It was a good tactical decision. Although learning to write would remain an agonizing struggle (reams of paper just to get the first sentence right), I gained tremendous intellectual confidence in Bob Brenner’s famous Capital seminar.

And, thanks to chapter one and the fetishism of commodities, I met Jan Breidenbach, my second wife, who took me hitchhiking in Europe in 1973. We met the International Socialists in London, had tea with the Viet Cong in Paris, and hung out with Lotta Continua in Turin. The “long sixties” seemed far from over.

I wanted to return to Europe as soon as possible, so I used a windfall scholarship from my dad’s union—the Amalgamated Meatcutters—to finance a year at the University of Edinburgh. I quickly ended up in the “docks faction” of the Edinburgh branch of the International Marxist Group [IMG] and also spent several months in Belfast on the fringes of Bernadette MacAliskey’s Peoples’ Democracy.

Through the IMG I first met some of the New Left Review (NLR) crowd. I had first picked up a copy of the magazine (issue 21) in Berkeley in 1965. I was dazzled by its supreme intellectual self-confidence as well as its franchise on untranslated treasures of
Western Marxism. Just before I left Britain in 1975, I spent an hour or two with the editor, Perry Anderson. As he marched at a brisk military pace across Regent’s Park, we talked about American labor history and the return of the remnants of SDS (e.g., the New American Movement) to social democracy.

When I came back to LA, I was stunned to discover a contract in the postbox from the NLR’s publishing venture, New Left Books. It proposed giving me a $2000 advance for a book on the politics of the American working class. I was only a senior at UCLA, so this was an extraordinary vote of confidence from Anderson and his London colleagues. I fretted for almost five years before I submitted the first two chapters of Prisoners of the American Dream to the NLR in 1980. Anderson invited me to London to work on the final edits, and I ended up staying until 1987. I never finished my PhD at UCLA.

**Cohen** Did you keep up with your political activism when you returned to LA in the late 1980s?

**Davis** You don’t want to know about all the obscure factional disputes and Talmudic debates that I was involved in during the 1980s. Over my lifetime, I am sure that I’ve belonged to a hundred defense committees or coalitions and gone to ten thousand meetings—or at least it seems that way. Their significance, of course, has entirely faded with time.

Except for my flush days as a Teamster, I lived a very bohemian lifestyle, including periods without a car or a cent in my pocket. Some of the London years were spent in miserable bed-sits and friends’ cellars. I pretended that it was a self-chosen path—true Bolsheviks led austere, anonymous lives. But by the mid-eighties it was increasingly difficult to believe that we were still “dead men on leave” or even the rear guard of the Cuban revolution. Having children made a huge difference. Like the thirties generation before us, many sixties radicals had great difficulty adjusting to life “after the Movement.”

For example, I had a friend in the Midwest in her early forties, and all she’d ever done since dropping out of college was work for the left. She was a superb organizer, but suddenly her group, the entire matrix of her life, dissolved, and she was left alone and bitterly poor. Such people, the Jimmy Higgins of socialist legend, seldom write memoirs or get acknowledged in celebrity-centric histories. Some might caricature them as the un-surrendered Japanese soldiers of the New Left, but they were also its true grit.

I had a softer landing, ultimately graduating to armchair
Marxism and book signings. But my old self made one last stand. In 1988, after returning from London, I went back on the road, hauling blanket-wrapped furniture to and from the Bay area for some pirates known as All-American Van Lines. It was wonderful to shake off the dust of too many NLR meetings and sterile intellectual discussions, but the work was back-breaking and the pay was ridiculous (13 cents per mile). Thanks to deregulation, over-the-road trucking had returned to the conditions of the 1930s.

Before I hauled down the red flag, I conducted an interesting experiment in the labor theory of value. For a few months, I was sharecropping I-5 six days a week and then teaching one night at the UCLA planning school (neither employer knew about the other). My finding? Sixty hours of tough, socially-necessary labor brought the same remuneration as a few hours of bullshit from a podium. You choose.

My membership in the working class ended one night at the truck scales in Hollister when an ill-tempered inspector, who thought I was insolent for arguing about shutting down my engine (Macks should idle first), slapped me with $500 in fines for “excessive grease on the undercarriage,” “loose steering linkage,” and the like. The All-American bosses said tough luck—drivers had to pay their own equipment fines since we were “subcontractors,” not workers.

Two friends, the architectural historians Diane Ghirardo and Margaret Crawford, got me a job at the Southern California Institute of Architecture. I taught there for eleven years.

Cohen What prompted them to offer you the job?

Davis Apparently a short critique I had published of Fred Jameson’s take on postmodernism. I argued that he elided the politics of racial backlash in the fortress design of downtown architecture, like the Portman hotels in Atlanta and downtown LA. It was a throwaway piece, but because it was about postmodernism at a time when it was the rage, and because I also knew where downtown LA was, I got the job.

I also taught part time at UCLA and USC, but Sci-Arc was incomparably more interesting, an avant-garde school with a director, Michael Rotundi, who encouraged us to take students on wild rides and hikes through Southern California. Michael was a homeboy, a chef’s son from Silverlake, and he wanted Sci-Arc to go native.

The UCLA urban-planning crowd were doing first-class theoretical and investigative work on LA, but we were less bridled and could turn our seminars into surrealist adventures. My students were especially brilliant at documentation, photography, and model-
building. It was huge fun, immensely instructive, and I would probably have stayed there forever, despite the less-than-living wage that required moonlighting elsewhere. But Sci-Arc was founded on a dynastic principle: each change of directors reallocated patronage and overturned old paradigms. My informal tenure ended when Michael returned to his studio and Margaret Crawford, the theory director, moved on to Harvard.

I had no other full-time job offers. Certainly there were flirtations—with geography at CSU-Northridge, humanities at Claremont Graduate School, and history at USC—but no one would actually walk down the aisle with me. I was being attacked on the front page of the *LA Times* and bitten at the heels by crazed realtors from Malibu. It was not a pleasant period.

But who can complain about being martyred when a check from the McArthur Foundation suddenly falls from the sky? A real revolutionary might have refused their plundered philanthropy, but I took the money and ran. My wife and I bought an old house on the Hamakua Coast of Hawaii where we had close friends and spent balmy days spelunking in lava tubes and exploring rain forest trails. Sitting on the utopian porch of our plantation house, my productivity soared. I wrote *Late Victorian Holocaus.ts* in less than six months.

But there were no jobs on the Big Island and thus little realistic hope for life after the MacArthur ran out. By some amazing machination, my chief partner in crime, Mike Sprinker, convinced SUNY-Stony Brook to offer me and my wife, respectively, full tenure and a well-paid TA-ship. We accepted, but just before we were supposed to leave for New York, Mike died. Against all odds, he had won an impossible seven-year-long fight against multiple myeloma, only to drop dead of a heart attack as he was clearing out his apartment for us to move into.

Cohen I want to ask about your collaboration with Mike Sprinker, but first, when did you begin working on *City of Quartz*? It seems a leap from *Prisoners of the American Dream*, where you’re providing a history of the American left, to *City of Quartz*, which is much more about the history of Los Angeles, though told from a left perspective.

Davis I’d been working for a while on two different projects, which I visualized as ultimately converging. One was *Prisoners*, and the other was an unorthodox Marxist analysis of Los Angeles. In both instances, I was trying to extend the ideas of Aglietta and the Regulation School—which I regarded as the cutting edge of a Neo-
Marxist economic history—to new terrains, to the political history of American labor, and to regional capitalism.

Before I left for London, I had written a hundred-page sketch of the key determinants of Southern California’s history, emphasizing structural controls, modes of regulation, and path-dependent outcomes. Disillusioned with UCLA (although manifestly not with Bob Brenner), I’d been talking to the historical sociologists at Binghamton about bringing the LA project there.

That manuscript is long lost. After a couple of years in London and Belfast (where my oldest daughter was born), my ideas began to shift. It’s funny how the perspective of exile can sharpen memory and reveal contours that were previously hidden in the details of landscape. I also acquired new theoretical templates for the LA project: Walter Benjamin but even more important was the work of the Welsh Marxist Gwyn Williams.

Gwyn was a tremendously original and powerful thinker, of the same generation, I think, as Eric Hobsbawm. I know it sounds daft, but the narrative structure of *City of Quartz* was first inspired by his wonderfully eccentric essay on “Welsh Indians.” His argument is like the plot of a good mystery and I won’t say more except that, like Benjamin, he was able to conjure whole modes of production out of the analysis of oblique histories, doomed prophecies, and unexpected landscapes.

He’s also the only Marxist to achieve a “totalized” history of a social formation: *When Was Wales?*—his Celtic Arcades Project—reconstructs the entirely of Welsh history from the Arthurian cycle to Thatcher’s defeat of the miners. It’s a pity his work isn’t better known over here.

**Cohen** Were there any more immediate models for your LA project?

**Davis** Sure. A lot of path-breaking work had already been done—by Bob Gottlieb, for instance, in his history of the *LA Times* and by Ed Soja in his essays on the restructuring of the LA economy in the late 1980s.

The ideas in *Prisoners of the American Dream*, for example, owe much to Perry Anderson and Bob Brenner, writing in entirely different contexts. If Gwyn Williams was an influence in *City of Quartz*, my second LA book, *Ecology of Fear*, was literally inflamed by Steven Pyne’s extraordinary social histories of fire. He inspired me to write environmental history.

Indeed, since the mid-nineties, I’ve been reading more science and geography than anything else. In probably the strangest article
that the NLR ever published (“Cosmic Dancers on History’s Stage”), I argued that the neo-catastrophist revolution in the earth sciences provided much more important paradigms for social theory and current philosophy than did contemporary French philosophy. (Mike Sprinker thought I was nuts talking about asteroids.) To give you an idea where my loyalties reside, I currently belong to three organizations: the International Socialist Organization, the American Geophysical Union, and the Geological Society of America.

Cohen Did your experience with the reception of *City of Quartz* play a role in how you went about putting together *Ecology of Fear*? There seems to be a certain relish in your account of the ways the actual history of LA profoundly contradicts how people usually think about it.

Davis Socialist scholars have debated for generations whether Marxism is “incomplete,” without a formal system of ethics. Lenin took a famous sabbatical in Capri to argue with Gorki over this problem. I have a different concern. I think what Marxism really needs is a sense of humor: a dark vein of self-conscious irony. But my own attempts to use wit and parody seem only to sow confusion, or provide pretexts for deliberate misconstrual.

For example, *Ecology of Fear* is often characterized as a celebration of the destruction of LA. In fact I was making precisely the opposite argument: that the entire genre of LA disaster fiction had acquired a sinister sub-text of racial apocalypse. Others claim that I compiled an exaggerated inventory of rare and improbable disasters: tornadoes, mountain lions, killer bees, and so on. One outraged critic called it a “pornography of disaster.” But I was mocking the boosterism that denies Southern California’s Mediterranean environment and extreme weather (including frequent small tornadoes), as well as a pervasive and symptomatic confusion about what’s wild, what’s natural, and what’s social. Suburbanites who compare coyotes and cougars to street criminals, it seems to me, have some very serious epistemological issues.

Cohen So did your approach to writing change much with a book like *Late Victorian Holocausts* or *Planet of Slums*, or even *Buda’s Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb*?

Davis *Late Victorian Holocausts* and *Planet of Slums* are conceived as a single project: an alternative history of globalization, focused on the decades of the greatest tectonic shifts in ordinary peoples’ lives, the 1870s and 1980s. *Holocausts* is deliberately dense and perhaps
over-scholarly. I wanted to write an exposé of colonial famines and holocausts to counter the renewed celebration of empire and white men’s burdens by Bush-era historians. But I also wanted to explore in detail the intersection between climate and economic history, integrating economics and meteorology in a single narrative. It probably demands too much of most readers. 

_Buda’s Wagon_, in contrast, is technological history as Graham Greene might have written it: a dark joke told by spooks in the CIA’s basement. _Monster at Our Door_, my book on the threat of pandemic flu, attempts to be a humanist polemic, squarely focused on the neglect of Third World public health.

_Cohen_ Let me ask you about working with Mike Sprinker. That’s a pretty substantial legacy you two produced, the Haymarket Series from Verso.

_Davis_ When Mike died, my first incredibly selfish thought was, I’ll never have a friend like this again. We had this very funny Mutt and Jeff relationship—he’s the younger guy, I’m the older guy, he’s a big guy and I’m the smaller guy, good cop/bad cop. Mike could be loud and physically overpowering, but there was not a more tender, generous human being on the face of the Earth. I really loved Mike, and he was infinitely helpful to me, always trying to rescue me from my marginal, crazy life situations.

I met Mike when he came to London in 1985 to read Verso’s copy of the second volume of Sartre’s _Critique of Dialectical Reason_. Gallimard had not yet published it, and we had the only reading copy outside Paris.

Mike was a brilliant philosopher who could outdraw the fastest guns on the Seine, but he was also a quintessential American guy, a German Catholic from Sinclair Lewis country who loved golf and all-night poker games. We relished each other’s company and institutionalized our friendship through Haymarket, the book series we co-edited for Verso.

Mike did most of the actual work. He spent fantastic amounts of time on other people’s work. I’m very selfish; it was hard for me to learn to write. I’ll edit other people’s stuff but it all feels like distraction from my own time. Mike had a billion things to write and yet every student dissertation was carefully perused sentence by sentence, and every Haymarket author received detailed feedback. He loved shaping ideas whether or not he got credit for it—a very rare quality these days.

He tried, without much luck, to expand my horizons to literary theory and poststructural philosophy. At his instigation, I
agreed to attend the annual meeting of the Marxist Literary Group in Corvallis. Constance Penley from UCSB was giving one of her famous lectures about the history of pornography. She was showing a silent film that involved a lascivious farmer, a hole in a fence, two naked girls, and a goat.

It was Saturday afternoon and we were meeting in a Methodist church hall across from campus. Its long craftsman windows exposed Penley’s entire presentation to passing pedestrians: women with their shopping bags, bug-eyed teenagers, little kids. Mike chuckled and whispered in my ear: “Can you imagine what the Baptists will say tomorrow morning about the Methodists?”
WORKS and DAYS

"Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will."
—Antonio Gramsci

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