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Mike Davis. *Dead Cities and Other Tales.* New York: The New Press, 2002. viii + 432 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56584-844-3.

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Doom, Gloom, and the Marxist Apocalypse

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Mike Davis has had a brilliant and controversial career as Los Angeles's self-appointed scholar of doom, in the process earning worldwide praise for his politically correct view of a world where cities are a roiling foment of greed, race-riots, and bunker-mentality architecture, of bullet-proof doors and transportation designed to separate whites from the sight of black and Latino neighborhoods.

Davis certainly has the scholarly and political creed to back up his Marxist views. The son of a meat cutter who helped found his local union, Davis left high school to become a meat cutter himself when his father became ill. He then learned to drive big rigs–a big selling point with affluent leftist readers impressed by his blue-collar mystique. Davis's political evolution began with memberships in Students for a Democratic Society, the Teamsters, and the Communist Party. At age twenty-eight, he attended UCLA and studied economics and history. Now fifty-three, Davis teaches urban theory at the Southern California Institute of Architecture. His award-winning books combine pathos, humor, and erudition in unique studies linking ecological history with social and urban history. His previous book, *Ecology of Doom*, was a best seller, and Davis was lauded as prescient for predicting the LA riots of 1992 two years before they happened.

But the failure of the city to burn to the ground in 1992 and the rebuilding of large chunks of LA seems to have upset Davis's Marxist hope for a fiery proletarian revolution. Anyone familiar with the controversy over *Ecology of Doom* would not be surprised that he is still skewing the facts to fit his apocalyptic vision. *Dead Cities*, although published in 2003, contains articles focusing primarily on the 1990s. For Davis, the intervening ten years have not happened. Los Angeles is still smoking; downtown is still half built; Tom Bradley is still mayor; George Bush senior is still president; crime is still on the increase. Even in the articles dealing with more recent events, such as September 11, Davis has a hard time separating reality from his own need to present "doom" as having arrived on our doorstep.

Even worse, *Dead Cities* reads as both hasty and sloppy. Davis repeats himself, and many of the facts used in the book are only validated by reference to other works by himself. Then, there is Davis's throwaway use of hyperbole and poorly checked "facts" to create a sense of drama. A passing remark about "American fighter pilots [dropping] cluster bombs chalked with the names of dead Manhattan firefighters on the ruins of Kabul" (p. 18) is unreferenced, and for good reason. Davis is in fact referring to an isolated incident involving a single Tomahawk, not a cluster bomb, and not dropped on Kabul. No matter, this "factoid" was probably gleaned from the same sources Davis quotes as advocating mass torture of suspected terrorists–the op-ed pages of various daily newspapers. But op-ed is not the same as facts, as Davis well knows.

Another throwaway remark, that "Tokyo, according to a 1998 Earth Council report, requires for its sustenance a biologically productive land area more than three times the size of Japan" (p. 363), sounds disturbing, until you realize that it is merely a dramatization of the obvious. Cities need agricultural land, big cities need lots of land, and small countries with big cities need lots of imports.

There are specious juxtapositions. "In March 2002, while crews were still excavating the remains of dead firefighters and stockbrokers from the crater that was once the World Trade Center, the Larsen B ice shelf in Antarctica suddenly collapsed" (p. 414). Is Davis suggesting that terrorism affects the ice shelf? Or that we are destroying the world in so many myriad ways it is hard to keep track anymore? No, he is linking ecological damage with modern life–toxic agriculture, global warming, use of fossil fuels, and pollution. All of these things do have a huge and negative impact on the environment, but does stating the obvious in a strangled and manic tone,

as Davis does, really get us anywhere? Rather than looking for answers, Davis seems anxious for the end of the world to hurry up and get here and prove him right.

Just as in *Ecology of Fear*, Davis is not above twisting facts to fit his political agenda and *Dead Cities* repeats many of the same inaccuracies. Try reading Davis's description of downtown LA while actually standing in downtown LA and you will wonder if he is describing the same city, or some fantasy land where the easily accessible Bunker Hill has morphed into a "walled fortress"; where ped-ways which comfortably link buildings above street level have become means for cutting off access; where outdoor fountains and amphitheatres have turned into concrete wastelands; where black and Latino students do not fill the public library. Davis seems to see a different city than everyone else–a city viewed through the distorting lens of Marxism.

Similarly, I doubt New Yorkers would recognize their city in Davis's description. It is true that twenty, or even ten, years ago a blackout in New York meant looting, fear, anger, and collective angst. Yet last month's blackout (the first major blackout in many years, which occurred well after Davis's book was published) was accompanied by mass campouts and sing-alongs, barbeque picnics on the sidewalk, and a distinct lack of looting. It is hard to connect this image with the inferno which Davis describes.

In fact, Davis's political agenda seems to have overtaken his sense of vision entirely. He remains strangely unwilling to acknowledge that cities can rise from the ashes, can remake themselves in a new image, and that the process of urban decay is reversible. Reading *Dead Cities* is at times like listening to a raving lunatic on a street corner ranting that the End of the World is Nigh, or watching a 1950s-era movie about an asteroid colliding with the earth and destroying all life as we know it.

And this is a tragedy, because Davis is a brilliant scholar who has much to teach us about how we live and design our cities, and how this process can and does go wrong. And most of Davis's cautionary notes ring true–we are destroying our landscape with pollution and uncontrolled growth. Suburban edge cities are an uncontained sprawl that is devouring the landscape. Waste of all kinds is eating up our resources. Davis has a great deal to teach all of us, but it is clouded by his preoccupation with the apocalypse. Davis seems to thrive on doom.

Like all of Davis's work, *Dead Cities* contains much that is insightful and clever but there is little to tie together his sharp analysis of the ecological and political depredations of Las Vegas, the anniversary of a deadly Hawaiian tidal wave, and an essay on planetary geology, except that desire for the apocalypse. Everything he writes is filtered through the lens of social Marxism. Latinos, blacks, and the poor become martyrs to Davis's vision of the ecological destruction of the city. Yet Davis never considers that people may not be willing to be martyrs to a race war or Marxist revolution or that some of us still have ideas about making the world a better place.

Indeed, reading *Dead Cities* is an eerie experience, but not for the reasons Davis hopes. For the rest of us do not inhabit the same eerie dead landscape in which Davis lives. The rest of us inhabit a sick landscape which we strive to improve. No, *Dead Cities* is eerie because it marks the descent of a brilliant and prescient mind into a morass of doom, gloom, and hope for a Marxist revolution that will never come. Try as Davis might, he will not convince that the apocalypse is here.

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