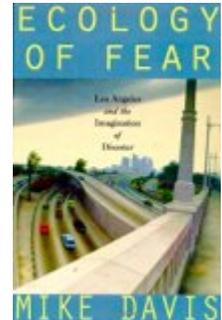


Mike Davis. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998. 484 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8050-5106-3.



Reviewed by Jared Orsi

Published on H-Urban (September, 1998)

The jeremiad is a favorite form of American public discourse. Imitating the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who bemoaned Israel's sins even as he prophesied the coming of God's Kingdom, American rhetoricians from Jonathan Edwards to Martin Luther King, Jr. have attacked society's flaws while still retaining hope for the possibility of reform. With a gracefully written new book, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, Mike Davis adds another work to this classic American genre. In the first six chapters of the book, Davis grippingly describes the various types of disasters that plague southern California today and traces the historical sins and blindnesses that have created the present hazards. In the final chapter, he outlines his vision of Los Angeles' future. On the whole, this latest work from the author of the widely-read *City of Quartz*, is an eye-opening jeremiad in need of somewhat more nuanced historical analysis.[1]

Davis' central claim is that the citizens of Los Angeles have imagined disasters through a lens of fear and misunderstanding and that the result is a profoundly inegalitarian society that is apocalyp-

tically out of balance with its environment. He begins with a chapter tracing the historically cataclysmic character of the Los Angeles environment and arguing that the city we know today emerged during a fluke period of environmental quiescence. During this span, the region suffered none of the mammoth earthquakes or two-hundred-year droughts that mark the geologic record. Consequently, Angelenos severely underestimate their environment's potential for violence. But catastrophe in Los Angeles, Davis argues, is ordinary and inevitable. He forecasts "higher body counts and greater distress" (p. 55) in southern California's future.

In Chapter Two, "How Eden Lost Its Garden," Davis explains how Los Angeles got into this predicament. "Selfish, profit-driven presentism" (p. 65), he maintains, has historically deafened southern Californians to the admonitions of prophets who have warned of impending environmental crises and suggested ways to avert them. Chapter Three links the environmental crises to social injustice. Davis juxtaposes wildfires in upscale Malibu, which receive a full mea-

sure of media attention, high-tech fire-fighting, and public financial relief, with urban tenement holocausts that go largely unnoticed and unabated. In Chapter Four, "Our Secret Kansas," Davis documents Los Angeles' tornado history, a problem that image-conscious boosters have managed to keep under wraps, despite an incidence of tornadoes twice as high as Oklahoma City's. Davis explores in Chapter Five the growing paranoia over attacks by mountain lions and other beasts. Here he suggests that the recent spate of clashes with the wild kingdom, which have elicited comparisons to drive-by shootings and mass murders, are logical outgrowths of urban encroachment into wild areas. Davis completes his critique in Chapter Six, "The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles." In this chapter, he lists, categorizes, and summarizes dozens of books and films that involve disaster in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles disaster genre, with its invading Asian hordes and anthropomorphized extra-terrestrials, he concludes, reflects regional racial anxieties.

In the final chapter, "Beyond Blade Runner," Davis adopts the role of visionary. Instead of predicting cataclysmic doom or a world of technology gone berserk, Davis constructs his vision by extrapolating the present. He begins by tweaking Ernest Burgess' famous Chicago school of sociology model that diagrams urban concentric land use zones. According to Davis' version of the model, southern California's future geography will consist of an urban core of homeless people, a violent inner-city, blue-collar crime-watch suburbs, affluent gated communities, and a gulag rim of prisons on the outskirts. He bases this scenario on current anti-democratic tendencies rooted in fear. Among those he cites are comprehensive surveillance of downtown space, private vigilante security forces, prison-like schools, public preference for replacing social spending with prison budgets, white flight from older suburbs into edge cities, and social control districts for abating everything from prostitution to graffiti. Such disturbing trends indicate to Davis the willingness of wealthy white

southern Californians to curb civil liberties in order to allay their social fears, a tendency he projects into terrifying future. Unlike other practitioners of the American jeremiad, Davis sees no hope for repentance on the horizon.

In addition to revealing horrifying injustice and potential cataclysm that threaten the city's social and physical environments, this book makes two additional contributions. One is to illustrate the connections between social affairs and environmental change. In recent years, social scientists have documented the ways in which the arrangement of society determines who is most likely to be hit by a disaster and how badly.[2] Not surprisingly, damage from catastrophes is often distributed along race, gender, class, and age lines. In *Ecology of Fear*, Davis illustrates for a general audience how this works. Enormous public resources, for example, have been spent to preserve Malibu homes from fire while comparatively little goes to protecting urban tenements. Also, after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, Congress began funding disaster relief by making comparable cuts in social spending. As Davis demonstrates, social arrangements may not cause fuel to combust or ground to shake, but they do distribute the costs of those events.

A second contribution of the book is to recast the way we think about the Los Angeles environment. Again, Davis' success along these lines lies in making accessible a body of technical scholarship. Citing a variety of scientific literature, he illustrates the many instabilities of the Los Angeles environment. In contrast to the humid eastern United States, where nature at least appears orderly and predictable, southern California's Mediterranean environment is subject to sudden and often violent nonlinear events that stem from complex environmental interactions. Swirling hemispheric weather systems interact with Pacific Ocean temperatures to deliver years of extreme rainfall or searing drought. Scientists now believe earthquake faults in southern California may be

"wired" so that slips on one could trigger a chain-reaction turning the entire Los Angeles basin in a giant epicenter. A recent spate of mountain lion attacks (nine of this century's ten have occurred since 1986, including five in 1994) may be attributable to habitat changes that induce radical shifts in the lions' behavioral patterns. Together, such phenomena illustrate how small and remote causes can multiply through feedback loops with calamitous results. Scientists call such phenomena "chaos," or "nonlinearity." Davis calls it "Walden Pond on LSD" (p. 14).

This book is also likely to raise controversy. Davis' intemperate language will turn off some readers, as will his overtly left-leaning politics. Some of his audience will delight in the color and candor of phrases like "architectural Stalinism" (p. 12) and "blood-thirsty Orange County Republicans" (p. 131) and in his borrowed Russian dolls metaphor linking California Governor Pete Wilson to talk show host Rush Limbaugh to terrorist Timothy McVeigh (p. 410). Other readers, however, will question Davis' objectivity and protest that much in the book is overstated. Davis himself would likely deny that objectivity is what he is after. No one ever accused Edwards or King of being objective. Objectivity, after all, is not the stuff of which great jeremiads are made.

A deeper criticism that many historians are likely to raise concerns Davis' use of history. To be fair, his purposes is not to illuminate history itself, but rather to use it as a window of insight into the present. Even on those terms, however, the book feels oddly ahistorical. In Chapter Two, for example, Davis blames selfish development-oriented elites, specifically the owners of the *Los Angeles Times* and the Southern Pacific Railroad, for "killing" (p. 68) the visions of the city planner Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who sought to preserve human and natural habitat by building public urban greenways. Instead, the villains placed the environment in a "concrete straightjacket" (p. 69). Davis is factually correct, but there is a richer

story here than a mere struggle between saints and sinners.

Although elites were perhaps guilty of the greed and shortsightedness that Davis charges them with, their rapaciousness is not the most historically interesting thing about them. A more nuanced treatment of history, I would suggest, would consider the economic, political, social, and environmental conditions that made the elites' visions make sense at the time. The *Times*, for example, opposed "concrete straightjacket"-style flood control in 1917, supported it in 1924, opposed it again in 1934, and supported it thereafter. The owners' greed and shortsightedness presumably remained the same throughout the period, so we need something more to explain such behavior. In fact, the newspaper's flood-control stance flip-flopped in response to drought, economic conditions, and corruption at the Flood Control District. Elites, then, like Davis' "'nonlinear' mountain lions" (p. 179), apparently respond to environmental changes with sudden and extreme behavioral shifts. Society just might work as chaotically as nature. The contingency and non-linearity that Davis so deftly explains with regard to the natural environment, however, do not figure as much in his discussions of human activities.

These criticisms aside, Davis offers a compelling counterpoint to the widespread assumption that humanity's environmental challenges are separate from its social problems. Despite much evidence to the contrary, we insist on believing that natural disasters arise from extraordinary behavior of nature and that humans have little complicity in the damage. Just last month a *Chicago Tribune* editorial lamented the "dread and destructive fury" of hurricanes. We "can do little," editors said, "but watch in awe the 'great mischief' of Mother Nature." [3] Davis warns us not to blame Mother Nature. His work, in contrast, compels us to see hurricanes as ordinary parts of the environment, to ask why people live

in the paths of hurricanes, and to question society's mechanisms for distributing the costs of the "dread and destructive fury." The *Tribune* editorial exemplifies the sort of thinking against which Davis has directed this jeremiad. He is attacking a paradigm whose fall is long overdue.

Notes

[1]. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990; New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

[2]. For examples, see Kenneth Hewitt, "The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age," in *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, ed. Kenneth Hewitt (Boston: Allen & Unwin Inc., 1983); Kenneth Hewitt, *Regions of Risk: A Geographical Introduction to Disasters* (Essex, England: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997); and J. M. Albala-Bertrand, *Political Economy of Large Natural Disasters, with Special Reference to Developing Countries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[3]. "Mother Nature's 'Great Mischief'", *Chicago Tribune*, 27 August 1998, sect. I, p. 22.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Jared Orsi. Review of Davis, Mike. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2282>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.