

Urban and Environmental Histories: The Legacy of Mike Davis
An Online Panel Discussion organised by the Calcutta Research Group (on Zoom)

20 January 2023

Speakers:

Ravi A. Palat (Binghamton University, New York)
Sohini Sengupta (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai)

Moderator:

Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (Rabindra Bharati University & CRG)

Report

The Panel discussion was organised as a tribute to Mike Davis, the American born historian. The discussion was chaired by Sabyasachi Ray Chaudhary, the Honorary Director of CRG, who began by giving a detailed account of the life and works of Mike Davis as well as a brief overview of the major arguments that Mike Davis put forward in his books. Mike Davis was a pioneering radical historian of the US working class and a fierce critic of the economic, political, and military apparatuses of the US State machinery and of Empires in general. He was both a writer and activist and his work expand through economics, politics, sociology and literature. His work primarily deals with the separation and dislocation of people from land brought about by the exigencies of capitalism. Davis was a fierce critic of imperialism and colonialism and his celebrated work, *The Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (2000) ushers in a new dimension to Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies.

Davis, in this book, argued that the famines which followed the late Victorian mega droughts became a powerful opportunity for Capitalism to consolidate itself as a system and ushered in mass scale economic exploitation of the Global South by the more modernised west. The effects of El Niño and La Nina triggered floods that further led to mass migrations across the world. He noted that while the Dickensian slum remained as a long stay in the academic imagination across the world, the same was not the case about the droughts that battered India during the nineteenth century. He argued that modern historians, while writing about the droughts and famines around the world from a metropolitan vantage point, have largely ignored the plight of displaced people in countries like India, China, Sudan, Tanganyika, etc., in the colonial late nineteenth century.

The panel discussion had two eminent scholars, Ravi A. Palat, Professor, Department of Sociology, Binghamton University, The State University of New York, and Sohini Sengupta, Assistant Professor, Centre for Community Organisation and Development Practice, School of Social Work, TISS, Mumbai. Ravi Palat talked about three of Davis's books namely, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (1986), *City of Quartz* (1990), *The Late Victorian Holocausts*. He discussed the three books from the American national perspective, local and global perspectives respectively. Palat argued that Davis' world view and historical understanding of the worlds as is reflected in all of his works was shaped by the kind of life and upbringing he had as belonging to the working-class community. Davis eventually became a political activist and won a prestigious fellowship to a private college but could not stay there for long. He worked as a communist party member for a long time but was eventually fired from the party for being hostile about Russia and its policies. He was largely self-taught and had an intimate knowledge of the geography of the American North. He eventually took up a job as a tourist guide and this became one of the turning points of his life—he decided to go back to college and finally graduated and went to Ireland on a fellowship—a move that shaped his career as a thinker and as a historian. Davis began thinking about labour history and the way labour societies exist in Europe and the US and it was during this time he wrote his first book, *Prisoners of the American Dream*. He realised that the labour societies in the two

continents are marked by differences rather than similarities because of the differences in the ways the societies evolved in these two places. The primary difference between European and American politics lies in the fact that in Europe, the struggle for socialism, right to vote, unionism, etc., are all tied to its feudal past whereas in the US, feudalism never existed and hence there was a general lack of awareness of rights among the working classes. The racial and class differences, an extraordinarily large middleclass population and the lack of a socialist labour party in the US further led to fragmentation. While the rights of workers in Europe were derived from the welfare states, in the US, the companies and corporations regulated such rights as housing and health and the companies.

After coming back to the US, Davis registered for a PhD at the UCLA and to support him, he took up trucking, a profession that we engaged in previously as well. It was during this second stint as a trucker on the road, that Davis realised how the profession has changed as a result of government policies. It was during this time he wrote *City of Quartz*, a history of Los Angeles seen through the struggle between the city's haves and have nots engulfed within the structures of capitalist and ethno-religious controls. He largely critiqued the architecture and the social set up—two intertwined aspects of the city. He was critical of the gang wars of the city but later on went to mentor gang leaders and established peace among them and even went on to call them social-democrats.

While writing his third book, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998), he came across how the phenomena of El Niño weather patterns and began to study the relationship among climate change, imperialism and famines in India, China, Brazil, etc. This led him to write *The Late Victorian Holocausts* in which he illustrated how imperialism, in the form of free trade capitalists, colonial officers and local sub traps took advantage of El Nino to usher in unprecedented suffering in the Deccan region of India. By systemic destruction of local and age old agricultural and storage practices, the British colonisers pushed the inhabitants of the Deccan region to the brink of suffering a drought. The introduction of monoculture forestry in order to expedite the expansion of railway and telegraph lines ensured that the ecological balance is thrown off in several regions of the sub-continent.

Palat concluded by summing up the extra ordinary life and choices of Mike Davis. Davis had a multi-pronged approach towards life. He was an activist, he spent his life among truckers, gangsters, never assumed any formal teaching role at any university. Davis rather stressed on need to have more community colleges and built his own academic universe by drawing from his practical experiences and observations of the world around him. In that way, he is an organic intellectual.

Sohini Sengupta focussed her discussion on *The Late Victorian Holocausts*. She began by how Davis integrated the disciplines of Political Science, Economics, Climate Science, Anthropology, and History to talk about human suffering. She highlighted Davis's continued focus on 'people' who face the risks that arise as a result of policy decisions and the irresponsible governance. She discussed in detail how pre-colonial agrarian practices ensured a certain security of food and supplies for the community—a practice that was destroyed as a result of imperial and colonial designs in the Global South. Citing examples of the Bengal Famine, Sengupta consolidated Davis's contentions all the more. Following Davis, she noted how contemporary academics must be wary about the way they use climate data and information to substantiate and draw connections between catastrophic events and climate change. She also talked about Davis's cardinal focus subsistence crisis and noted how Davis brought to light the human angle of climate change at a time when the event of climate change itself was perceived as a scientific phenomenon the understanding of which was largely based on scientific data.

The talks were followed by a discussion. Ranabir Samaddar initiated the discussion by highlighting how the question of pricing of food items has been largely missing from the accounts of droughts and how important it is in creating relief codes and price controls. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhary made the concluding remarks and pointed out how Davis taught us the importance of emphasising traditional

historiographies in order to understand how human beings face subsistence crisis which, at the same time, also lead to the transformation of urban spaces. He added that the deep relationships that exist among natural processes, capitalist economies, agrarian and societal practices as a result of which human settlements and societies get altered establishes the need to delve deeper into the study of Environmental Humanities all the more.