

New Anti-Urban Theories of the Metropolitan Region: “Planet of Slums” and Apocalyptic Regionalism

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*A stranger could drive through Miguel Street and just say “Slum!”
because he could see no more. But we who lived there saw our
street as a world, where everybody was quite different from
everybody else.*

V.S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street*

“Planet of Slums” by Mike Davis (2004) describes an urbanizing world with more giant metropolitan regions, more poverty, rising right-wing evangelism, and little hope for a progressive alternative. While Davis has often helped expose the catastrophic effects of global capitalism on the urban environment, this latest missive is filled with moralistic anti-urban rhetoric reminiscent of the Victorian era, reflects a naïve USA-centric view of the world’s cities, and leads urban activists into the blind allies of despair or renewed emphasis on philanthropy as the remedy for urban ills.

Davis is quick to use metaphors comparing cities with uncontrollable natural processes, much like the Victorians who equated widespread epidemics with the growth of the urban working class. For Davis Mexico City is a “giant amoeba” and Lagos is growing like a “supernova.” We are witnessing “a major moral crisis in our history” as cities are consuming the earth. This “overurbanization” and “urbanization without industrialization” is producing “megacities” and “hypercities.” His rant includes sections taking us “Back to Dickens” and into “Urban Poverty’s ‘Big Bang.’ He sees “a shantytown world encircling the fortified enclaves of the urban rich” but devoid of socialized labor, which he considers the only hope for progressive urbanism. Alas, anyone who has taken a moment to explore the diversity of cities and urban movements outside the U.S. will look at these hyperboles as cheap rhetoric, not serious science.

The analysis by Davis follows and draws from one of the latest Habitat/UN reports on urbanization (United Nations, 2003). While Davis and Habitat provide a much-

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needed reminder that most of the world is far from the wired and well-heeled minority that lives in consumer abundance, this approach to metropolitan regions on a global scale revives the Victorian-era fear of cities and the people in them, overlooks progressive aspects of the metropolitan era, and substitutes apocalyptic rhetoric for progressive strategy. While this is clearly not the intention of Davis and the UN, that is where their work leads. Clearly Habitat/UN spends most of its time trying to shock donor countries into doing something for the urban poor, but it's hard to fathom Davis' interest in For a thinker that prides himself on his Marxist roots, Davis' approach is more akin to the moralizing that Friedrich Engels lambasted in his classics on *The Housing Question* and *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* (1969,1975). It resembles the anti-urban outlook of another great progressive thinker, Lewis Mumford (1961), whose doomsday expositions about the crises of giant cities were philosophical companions to elite policies of social austerity and philanthropy (Angotti, 1993, 7-9).

And for progressive urbanists, the term "slums" has long been reviled because it de-values communities and helps rationalize giant urban renewal plans that result in the displacement of poor people. Once the places where they live are tagged as dysfunctional, crime-ridden, generators of evil, they become targets for removal, often with violence. Noted activist Mel King remarks, "When I was at college, I learned that I lived in a 'slum'...somebody else defined my community in a way that allowed them to justify destruction of it." (King, 1991)

The search for a new progressive regionalism must go beyond facile dualistic models and sweeping moral condemnations, and should incorporate an understanding of the complex social and political dynamics in the world's diverse metropolitan regions. Apocalyptic analyses of metropolitan regions can easily lead to hopeless resignation before the engines of capitalist growth and urban expansion. The message to progressive scholars and activists is too often: There Is No Alternative -- TINA (Angotti, 1996). It is important to carefully examine the political content of the urban social movements throughout the world, and avoid the tendency to discount them as mere products of urban informality or parochialism (Latin American Perspectives, 1994). The World Social Forum's attempt to bring local movements together in the search for progressive global alternatives could not survive if the prospects were in fact as gloomy as Davis makes out.

The Rise of the Metropolis

The starting point for progressive regionalism is an understanding of how the metropolitan region differs qualitatively from previous urban settlements. This happened not through an "explosion" but as a result of a long and complex evolution spanning at least a century, but the difference is qualitative nonetheless. This understanding will help to fashion appropriate strategies for planning and political change that take into account the qualitative differences. Previous strategies, progressive and otherwise, address what were perceived as the problems of cities before the metropolitan era. As Peter Hall has observed, "twentieth century city planning, as an intellectual and political movement, essentially represents a reaction to the evils of the nineteenth-century city." (Hall, p. 7) City planning generally appears to be reactive instead of forward-looking, consistent with

the political establishments within which city planners work. The utopian and future-oriented ideologies that enter into planning discussions are mostly marginalized or used selectively to justify narrow, pragmatic objectives.

The metropolis is a qualitatively distinct form of human settlement that emerged in every major region of the world during the Twentieth Century. It is much larger, more complex in economic, political and cultural terms, and plays a more commanding central role in an increasingly globalized capitalist system (Angotti, 1993). It is no longer the factory town or industrial city but a complex of urban and suburban districts, incorporating elements of city and countryside. It may be internally fragmented and/or sprawled, depending on the economic regime under which it has evolved. If we use the criterion of size and look at cities over 750,000 population,¹ in 2000 there were roughly 340 metropolises in which almost a billion people lived, about one in every six people in the world. According to Davis, today there are 400 cities over a million population. But in a sleight of hand, Davis goes on to say that about half the world, 3.2 billion people, now live in cities. He doesn't say what definition of "urban" he is using to count those 3.2 billion people. Perhaps it is the definition commonly used in United Nations demographic analyses, which depends on each country's own definition of urban. This can vary wildly and in some countries even includes settlements as small as 2,000 people. The result of this sleight of hand is to reinforce apocalyptic urbanism. In fact, in 2000 no more than 16% of the world's population lived in metropolitan regions, and to be generous we might say that today the proportion is not much greater than 20%.

There is no doubt that the world is urbanizing rapidly, but the fastest growing cities are not the very largest metropolitan regions. It's the smaller and medium-sized cities where the greatest proportion of growth is occurring. Many of the world's smaller and medium-sized cities are inserted in economies that still rely heavily on agricultural production. According to the United Nations Development Program, 800 million people work in urban agriculture (Habitat, 2001, 214).

But the real point here is that even if Davis' assertion that half the world is now urbanized is true, why does he assume that's a problem? As poor as they may be, urban dwellers tend to have a higher standard of living than rural populations, and greater access to consumer goods, information, technology and cultural life.

The Global Metropolis

The 340-400 of the very largest cities in the world constitute for the most part the set of metropolitan regions that perform transnational and global economic functions, what Saskia Sassen has called "global cities" (Sassen, 1991). They are the command centers of global finance capital. Many of them are poles of attraction for immigrant labor, and also have significant internal peripheries and informal sectors that represent an "internal Third World."

But this is not a simple case of "hyperurbanism" or urban gigantism across the board. The truth of the matter is that at least three-fourths of the world's population lives

outside these 400 giant cities, within the pull of global capitalism but at its periphery. The world's 400 metropolitan regions are distributed relatively equally throughout the world, more or less in proportion to the world's population, with the possible exceptions of Africa (which has fewer large cities) and Oceania (which has more, mostly in Australia). The Americas tend to have slightly more and larger metropolises, Europe tends to have smaller ones. Sassen (1998, xxv) talks about "the new geography of centrality and marginality," not just centrality. In fact, the urbanization of the world's population is hardly a linear phenomenon and is riddled with enormous contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities. For progressives, understanding these contradictions and complexities is essential for developing political strategies, especially at the local level, while understanding similarities can help forge coalitions and strategies at the global level. As Andy Merrifield notes, the use of dialectics is critical to an understanding of "the ambiguity of contemporary urbanism and urbanization" (Merrifield 2002, p. 15).

The US Metropolis

Indeed, there are many different varieties of metropolitan regions around the world. The process of urbanization is mediated everywhere by geographical, cultural, economic and political factors. Perhaps the most influential model is the US metropolis, but on a global scale only a small percentage of the world's population lives within its boundaries.

The US metropolis is fragmented, sprawled and divided into private and public enclaves. Yet this urban emblem of free-market capitalism is the product of the most ambitious state-sponsored infrastructure plan in the world – the 50,000 mile interstate highway system and national mortgage finance system. Yet this homogenizing national urbanization process has also yielded significant differences. As David Rusk (1993) has shown, there are multiple varieties of metropolitan regions in the US, and he believes that "elastic" regions, in which political boundaries are flexible and expand along with the population, are potentially the most inclusive and capable of comprehensive planning. Understanding these differences is critical to developing progressive strategies.

It isn't the size of the US metropolis that has progressive urbanists upset. Nor is it the "slums." First and foremost it has always been racial inequality; throughout US history we have to recognize the unique and overriding role of race in urban policy (powell, 2000). Secondly, progressive urbanists are concerned about sprawl – but this is a concern of almost all urbanists, regardless of their political persuasion. Smart Growth, The New Urbanism, and transit-oriented development are the mainstream recipes for low-density sprawl, but progressives have also highlighted the need for approaches that directly address social and economic inequalities independently of their spatial characteristics. Progressives like jon powell highlight the racial roots of sprawl without diminishing the significance of its long-term environmental and public health consequences.

The Metropolitan Fallacy

And here we arrive at the central theoretical trap for urbanists that Davis falls into -- the classical urban fallacy. In the era of the metropolis we might call it the metropolitan fallacy, megacity fallacy, or megalopolis fallacy. Manuel Castells identified this in his classic critique of mainstream urbanism, *The Urban Question* (1977). The Chicago School of Urban Sociology created the fallacy that the overriding problem was the physical form of human settlement—i.e., the city. Louis Wirth (1964) claimed that cities were large, dense and socially heterogeneous, the premise for the Chicago School's theories that linked these characteristics with what they considered the problems of cities. These views countered attempts to focus on the role of economic inequality and the system of capitalist development that reproduced it.

The industrial city was not the problem and the "post-industrial" metropolis isn't the problem. But surely there are serious problems related to the size of the metropolis? Yes, there are diseconomies of scale, the serious environmental hazards associated with higher levels of energy and auto use, and the resulting public health problems. But while these are challenges to be confronted by urbanists, they are not solely related to city size and the potential for resolving them is much greater in large metropolitan regions than in smaller cities. Certainly, compact regions with higher levels of public transportation, where policy favors the use of renewable energy and sustainable design, are within the realm of possibility today. Compact settlements can provide excellent conditions for the development of collective and less wasteful forms of consumption that encourage the expansion of human interaction. By creating common physical and social infrastructures, the potential for reducing and eliminating social inequalities is great. To believe that this will occur automatically is of course as fallacious as believing that every social evil is determined by the form of human settlement. These are actually two sides of the same coin of physical determinism.

If we jettison entirely any determining role for the city, we also miss important opportunities for progressive change. The chance that the world's rural areas will develop economically *and* follow environmentally sound policies at the same time is slim. Indeed, the US regime of urbanization is based on such a model of low-density sprawl and it is among the most socially exclusive and environmentally damaging models in the world. The European model of compact cities is perhaps a better one, but if it becomes the dominant one we will still face a contradictory future in which the wealthy cities of the North will be relatively free of pollution while the most polluted cities in the world are in the South. So it's not the city or the metropolis that's the real problem, it's the economic models around which they develop, i.e., the particular regimes of capitalist development.

The Chicago School's theory breeds social scientists that repeat the myth that urban poverty is a necessary component of the big city, while they overlook one reality. Large cities, with all their serious problems, are as much a step forward in history as capitalism was when it replaced feudalism. The reason so many people continue to migrate to cities is that the quality of life in rural areas is so much worse. In rural areas access to work, better housing, and cultural life is more challenging, despite the advances in communications technology today (after all, most of the world doesn't own a

telephone, and most cell phones, internet hubs, and high-speed cables are located in large cities).

Marx understood how capitalist urbanization sharply exacerbated the urban-rural divide, but he also understood that it was an integral part of capitalist development which itself was an historical advance. He considered that a return to pre-capitalist rural life was not historically progressive. While Engels catalogued the miserable living conditions in England's industrial cities (1973) he also criticized utopian socialist schemes of the day that tried to recreate pre-capitalist settlements as if they were the solution to urban problems (1969). Engels criticized other progressives of his day for trying to remedy the social ills of capitalism, such as unhealthy and unsound urban housing, without seeking to transform capitalism itself (Engels, 1975). Engels assailed the moralistic arguments that blamed poor people (and their housing and neighborhoods) for poverty, and the reformers who advanced philanthropy and social austerity as solutions. Today's moralists, including many in the UN bureaucracies, are fixated on extracting more "aid" from developed countries – call it globalized philanthropy -- and educating poor people to be enterprising through the use of micro-credits and thrift – call it local austerity -- without addressing structural inequalities.

Communities Not Slums

What so many have called "slums" are in fact the communities in which the majority of the world's workers and their families live. Castells (1983, 177-178) catalogued "slums and squatter settlements" in developing countries, but he followed a research methodology that today would no longer be acceptable to progressives (if it ever was). "Slums" is such a broad term that it begs for precise definition.

The trend of urban research in the last three decades has been towards describing and analyzing a much greater articulation within "slums," outlining populations and areas that have widely varied income levels, levels of employment, and housing quality, etc. What might appear as a vast homogenous "slum" to an outsider is in fact a highly diverse community to an insider. Grass roots organizations in squatter neighborhoods must deal with an emerging and relatively stable middle class, new and old immigrants, an evolving property market, and the institutionalization of formal political relations. These phenomena are at the heart of recent research that goes beyond superficial dualistic analyses of "slums." A good example of an in-depth articulated study is Keith Pezzolli's study (1998) of an area in Mexico City.

Urbanization With Industrialization

Another shibboleth that Davis raises and which needs to be laid to rest again is the notion that "urbanization without industrialization" is the problem. In the era of flexible production and the global sweatshop it is hard to find a large metropolitan region that does not have some level of industrial production. But even before the onset of the latest wave of globalization, the same phenomenon existed. The differences between industrialization in less developed countries and the developed capitalist countries has

always been significant – less developed countries always had proportionately less industrial investment per capita, lower wages (including social wages), export-led growth, and less diverse economies, adding up to the reproduction of dependencies that go back to colonial times. As a result, cities grew without the improvements in the quality of life that characterize cities in developed countries. So industrial development was and is central to urbanization throughout the developing world.

A few export-oriented industries in a poor, rural nation can stimulate a huge wave of urban migration, but this is not much different than the effect that opening of factories in Birmingham, England had more than a century ago. Today there is an even greater problem, however. With expansion of global communication and transportation infrastructures, cities in less developed countries are increasingly latent labor reserves for the developed countries, where single immigrants work and send remittances to their countries of origin. In the less developed nations, the family unit is reproduced at a much lower cost, thus further suppressing wages in the developed countries. In addition, industries and agriculture in developing countries are being destroyed because of the price-cutting competition of foreign producers. Aggressive product advertising creates new markets for imported products, or locally-produced products of transnational corporations, and undermines traditional local industries. So the problem today is as much in the realm of consumption as it is with production. Reproduction is as important as production, for capital and for labor. If anything, then, we have urbanization without capital having to pay a just amount for the reproduction of the working class. To call it urbanization without industrialization is to grossly over-simplify the process.

Davis ends his analysis with an extensive lament about growing evangelism in the cities of poor countries that only leads us further into a corner of hopeless resignation to the engine of capitalist and urban growth. Davis overlooks the much greater influence of evangelism in rural areas (indeed, that's where it first took hold). He overlooks the substantial, though still minority, role of liberation theology. But most of all he overlooks the extensive urban movements in Latin America, Asia and Africa, ranging from conservative to radical but more on the progressive side than not. Indeed, Davis repeats the fiction that there is something innately radical about the organizations of the industrial proletariat and something innately conservative about urban, or "consumer" struggles, another manifestation of simplistic dualism (as promoted in Castells 1977 and Saunders 1986). This myth should have been dissolved in the rebellions of 1968, but keeps coming back even while movements of the urban poor in Brazil, India and Mexico maintain their resilience, and other "marginal" forces like the Zapatista Liberation Army, the Brazilian Landless Peasants, and South Africa's township movement take the lead in the global struggle against neo-liberal restructuring. A visit to one of the World Social Forum meetings should quickly disabuse academics of any workerist notions lingering from the era of industrial capitalism. Organized labor is clearly part of the movements against global capitalism, but labor itself remains sharply fragmented and politically divided. Part of organized labor has been a constant ally of global reaction. For example, the "new" AFL-CIO is still getting money from the US government to undermine militant unionism throughout the world (Bacon, 2005) and their participation in "anti-global" actions such as Seattle has been limited at best.

Davis' doomsday view of the world extends to the left and progressive movements, where he appears to consider traditional industrial working class organizations as the only legitimate ones. Davis points with some chagrin to the reemergence of populists such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez as a product of urban "informality" as if to say that, once again, the city has produced yet another disaster. In the first place, Chávez as a political phenomenon is much more complex (Ellner & Hellinger, 2003). In addition to support for him in the barrios of Venezuela's large cities, he also has a strong base of support among military elites, and rose to power in the wake of extensive working class protest against neo-liberal restructuring. He is opposed by Venezuela's "lumpen bourgeoisie" (to use the term coined by Andre Gunder Frank), a middle class dissatisfied with the rapid decline in oil revenues and real income, and a corrupt industrial trade union federation that played a central role in the US-backed plot to overthrow Chávez. While he is partly a new version of the old *caudillo*, a familiar element in Latin American politics, and his revolutionary ambitions have yet to be realized in practice, arguments that simplistically categorize leaders and their social bases ought to be off limits among progressives and sent to George W. Bush's White House where they appear to be greatly appreciated.

Whither the New Regionalism?

Is there an emerging progressive regionalism, an inclusionary approach to the metropolis that is geared to bringing about significant social change? Certainly there are threads of progressive regionalism, as suggested by Kipfer & Wirsig (2004). It may be an "emerging movement" as Sites (2004) suggests. But the signs are still not clear and it seems to me that we are witnessing something far short of a significant movement at local and global levels. As some of the above commentators have noted, much of the writing on progressive regionalism appears to be theoretical and normative, and there has yet to arise a powerful political or social movement, either from the bottom up or the top down, to advance the cause.

But there is one more cautionary note. Much of the writing about progressive regionalism is situated in the context of the US and European metropolis. The issues of sprawl and the fragmented metropolis are rooted in the problems related to the US regime. Smart Growth, The New Urbanism, and Transit-Oriented Development are among the major responses but while they have taken root among professional and managerial strata, they have yet to grip the masses, and are far from becoming a significant force in shaping the metropolis as a whole. Unlike the US, Europe has historically had several distinct regional planning trends, including multi-scalar planning in countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, *l'aménagement du territoire* in France, and British New Towns. However, the EU is inching towards the US model as it continues to plan for and sponsor highway construction, job and housing mobility, and the reduction of welfare state benefits. In recent years, therefore, European planners have begun to talk about planning for compact cities – a continental version of Smart Growth. Still, metropolitan-level consciousness in Europe continues to be more a phenomenon among professional circles than in the realm of political and social movements. A truly

progressive regionalism awaits the maturation of local and national political movements to the point where they can form viable metropolitan-level and international coalitions.

If there is going to be a movement for progressive regionalism it will have to happen from the bottom up because governing elites have every institutional reason to avoid it and professionals are simply useless without attaching themselves to dynamic political forces. The potential is there at the bottom, but it will take a while to mature. In New York City, for example, a neighborhood coalition in Brooklyn came together to protest the reconstruction of a 2.6-mile section of elevated highway, but could only win their battle by addressing the issue of the regional highway system, of which this section was a critical part. By doing so, they helped strengthen a growing region-wide coalition for sustainable transportation planning. Also in New York, neighborhood-based environmental justice organizations joined together to combat the proliferation of waste transfer stations in their neighborhoods and launched a successful campaign to change city-wide waste management policy because that was the only way they could win their struggle. This city of 8 million people is larger than most metropolises in the US, so while this struggle didn't encompass the whole region it came pretty close.

However, at the moment progressive urban movements do not have sufficient power to form stable metropolitan-wide coalitions that can successfully challenge the entrenched interests of developers, property owners, and beneficiaries of exclusionary fiscal and zoning practices. In the US, race remains the historic divider and until there is a serious national effort to confront the racial divide, from the bottom up and top down, there will be little progress towards progressive regionalism. But there is also another critical factor limiting the emergence of progressive forces. There is a constant pull of grass roots organizations to consolidate control over their local turf, which is constantly threatened by conservative interests, planning bureaucracies, and managers who are vested in early 20th century notions of comprehensive rational planning. Some of these local grass roots organizations are progressive and some are not; in fact, they are all over the political map.

The situation is contradictory and in flux everywhere in the world. For example, Rome (Italy), a metropolis of almost three million, has traditionally had a strong municipal government covering the entire urbanized region. With Italy's recent decentralization, separate municipalities were created within Rome, a new layer of regional government was established encompassing a larger hinterland, and the municipal government remained intact. Progressive grass roots organizations, including tenants, squatters, new immigrants, and those opposing displacement, see this new structure as offering opportunities for a democratic awakening. But so do conservative organizations of property owners and openly anti-immigrant political groups. The left-leaning municipal government is likely to be one element in a potentially emerging metropolitan-wide progressive coalition, but it can never manufacture by itself the solid political base for a progressive coalition. Everything it does is mediated through the myriad political parties that set the agendas in the halls of the local executive and legislative branches, not by means of democratic decision-making but through incessant back-room deal-making and negotiation. The legacy of a highly-centralized political and planning regime of

Napoleonic inspiration weighs heavily, and grass roots participation still has limited legitimacy and relatively undeveloped institutional roots.

Moving away from the US and Europe, to the “planet of communities” where the majority of the world’s metropolitan population lives, there are also signs of both hope and despair. China’s central planning apparatus has relinquished regional planning in favor of real estate development and Vietnam seems to be following in its footsteps. India’s legacy of British town planning hasn’t resulted in any significant regional planning, democratic or otherwise, and the planning bureaucracy continues to be an obstacle to the emergence of any democratic regionalism. Former colonies throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America continue to be plagued with a planning legacy sharply divided between formal planning for wealthy elite neighborhoods and informal planning by the majority without help from the state, or in opposition to the state. The highly centralized structures of regional governance and planning left over from pre-capitalist and colonial eras have been broken down in part as a result of neo-liberal restructuring, but there have yet to emerge strong metropolitan-level alternatives from the grass roots. There are promising signs in some countries. For example, in Brazil, The Workers Party came to power as a broad coalition among community and labor groups. They have started progressive municipal reforms like participatory budgeting and they are addressing living conditions in the *favelas* of the nation’s major metropolitan areas. However, divisions within the party reflect tension between the grass roots community groups struggling for greater equity and elite strata tied to capitalist expansion and neo-liberal reform. The tensions also reflect the growing social diversity within the *favelas*.

There are many more examples too numerous to mention here; my purpose is not to be exhaustive but to pose a question for further study to scholars, particularly those from the US and Europe. Let us examine the experiences of grass roots urban movements, local governance, and progressive NGOs throughout the world, looking for reforms that are geared toward addressing structural inequalities, and not just the World Bank’s vague goal of “poverty reduction.” Let’s leave to the United Nations the job of counting the number of people living in cities and “slums,” and focus instead on the metropolis, inequalities within and among metropolitan areas, and the political and social movements engaged in addressing them.

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¹ While somewhat arbitrary, this figure helps to separate out settlements that are large enough to afford major urban services that are normally not available in smaller cities and towns, such as an urban rail transit system, regional cultural centers, and financial centers.