

Planet of Slums. By Mike Davis. London and New York: Verso, 2006. 228 pages. £15.99 (Hardback)

It is now generally accepted that we have entered a new geological epoch – the Anthropocene – in which human beings have become a geological force of climate change (Chakrabarty forthcoming 2009). This superb book by Mike Davis tells the story of a major part of this “epochal transition” – urbanisation concentrated in slums (1). Consistent with monumental challenges in the Anthropocene, the sustainability of these “gigantic concentrations of poverty” is extremely doubtful (5). Thus, as readers of *Planet of Slums* might guess from the cover, this book is a horrifying yet wholly engrossing read. Davis states in the epilogue that “the future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism” (202). In other words, the urban poor, an increasing percentage of the global human population, are on a path that will place them at the forefront of decisions about how human life will evolve. Without human solidarity and faced instead with a Mad Max scenario of continual warfare, the challenges of the Anthropocene seem unlikely to be met. This poses dire consequences: in Val Plumwood’s (2007: 1) words, “We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all”. I have jumped to the end of the *Planet of Slums* in this review because, as a scholar interested in imagining possibilities for a different world, it is with the question of human solidarity that I would have liked the book to start. For Davis, however, this is a different project (201).

From the first to the last page, *Planet of Slums* is packed full of fascinating statistics and stories. As I read the book (at home), I felt the need to constantly interrupt my partner with yet another amazing statistic, such as the comment at the beginning of the book that “London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1800, but Dhaka, Kinshasa, and Lagos today are each approximately *forty* times larger than they were in 1950” (2, original emphasis). Such overwhelming information makes Davis’s portrayal of slums very convincing. *Planet of Slums* is expansive in scope, taking the reader on a global journey and across many different aspects of slums. The book begins with a discussion of urbanisation and the nature of slum dwelling (chapters 1 and 2). Approaching “housing as a verb”, Davis considers the diversity of housing across different lives as people negotiate the need to be close to work, for security and other

necessities. Davis also discusses a number of different tenure/ property arrangements in slums, including informal rents.

Chapter 3, *The Treason of the State*, provides a short history of slum dwelling, from a slow growth period during which colonial and other imperial forces denied 'peasants' the right to the city, to the post-colonial fast growth period in which many different forces have driven people into cities, including civil war and modernisation projects (55-57). Davis notes that government promises to transform housing for the poor have disappeared as neoliberal policies, such as privatisation and marketisation, have been imposed around the globe, forced on poor countries by the World Bank and a network of non-government organisations (a topic extended into chapters 4 and 7). Geographers have played a key role in debates concerning neoliberalism (see Lerner 2003) and they will be familiar with the material covered by Davis. What I found particularly interesting for thinking about the economy as an ongoing achievement (rather than as determined by a given 'system' like neoliberalism) is the way in which slums have been used as "laboratories" for economic experiments (73). This idea of economic laboratories corresponds with a new body of scholarship exploring the way in which economies are performatively brought into being (see for example Mackenzie, Muniesa, and Siu 2007).

Another familiar theme to geographers that is explored in *Planet of Slums* is the way in which social inequalities are played out through space. In chapter 5, *Hausmann in the Tropics*, Davis discusses how urban populations are governed through urban spaces and the conflicts that arise, such as in the case of the demolition of slums. Davis notes in this chapter that the growth of slums and segregation of the wealthy in isolated communities is producing a fractured humanity. Unlike the gated wealthy communities in which security is assured, life in slums is precarious. Beginning "with bad geology", the concentration of people in slums leads to what one soil geologist cited by Davis describes as a "perfect storm" (122). The lack of adequate sewage systems discussed in the chapter, *Slum Ecology*, for example, makes it clear that slum ecology is not simply a health issue but an issue of human dignity. In order to have some privacy, women in slums in India go to the toilet in fields in the dark (141). The last chapter, *A Surplus of Humanity*, is the most gruesome. It contains stories of extreme exploitation, including a deeply saddening discussion of child labour and child outcasts.

There are glimmers of hope in *Planet of Slums*, such as squatting as a form of collective action against land ownership (38-39) and, as I discovered at the 2005 World Social Forum, squatting as a form of social provisioning for the homeless. But these glimmers of hope are overwhelmed by the overall picture of inequality and extreme exploitation portrayed in the book. Yet there is research available that can help us to see possibilities in some of the worse places imaginable. This research might help us to imagine different worlds. At several points in the book (such as on page 45), for example, Davis notes the lack of statistics on slum dwelling. Arjun Appadurai's (2002) research shows how this 'lack' has been turned into an opportunity for political agency by an alliance of slum dwellers in Mumbai. Appadurai draws attention to the Alliance's "pragmatic approach" to social transformation which includes census data collection as a mechanisms of citizenship (29, 35). There are many other examples of possibilities in slum life, from trash picking collectives (Medina 2000) to toilet festivals (Appadurai 2002). Forms of grassroots research like that undertaken by the Alliance demonstrate the potential role of research in working toward a human solidarity so desperately needed in the Anthropocene. Authors with a similar style to Davis (particularly in *Planet of Slums*), such as Naomi Klein, have embarked projects on projects to contribute to collective action. Avi Lewis and Namoi Klein's 2004 film *The Take* is a good example. The *Planet of Slums* cover suggests that the slums documented by Davis are "volcanoes waiting to erupt". *Planet of Slums* goes a long way toward countering representations that criminalise and demonise slums and their dwellers, representations associated with violence against slum dwellers which "disable any honest debate about the daily violence of economic exclusion" (202). As Davis suggests, perhaps the next step required is new thinking on human solidarity.

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