

*Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb.* By Mike Davis.  
London and New York: Verso, 2007. 192 pages. £12.99 (Hardback)

At the time of writing, the debate over the replacement of Trident, the British nuclear deterrent, shows no sign of abating. At the same time it has been demonstrated that even Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone is not immune to the suicide bombings which have plagued the rest of the city, and indeed many other cities in the Middle East and beyond. The car bomb has made slaughter a quotidian affair, and in so doing has blurred the boundaries between peace and war, civilian and combatant. In all cities, to varying degrees, the car bomb has reinscribed the urban experience, although up to now it has yet to have been considered as an object of academic attention. Davis' *Buda's Wagon* fills that gap. The text itself takes its name from Mike Boda, known also as 'Buda', to whom Davis attributes the dubious title of perpetrator of the first ever car bomb. In September 1920, outside the offices of JP Morgan and Company in New York City, a horse drawn wagon exploded killing 40 people, and causing the suspension of trading on the city's stock exchange for the first time in history (p. 1-3).

The text moves on chronologically from this point, taking the form of twenty-two short chapters, the close of each functioning as an indication of a spatial and temporal shift in the narrative. Each chapter opens with a brief summary of the cultural and political situation of the place to which it refers, with later chapters building on the accounts produced in earlier ones. The bulk of each chapter is, of course, made up of a detailed explanation of the reasons for, technical aspects of, and outcomes from the use of the car bomb itself. Although evidently confined by the genre, the insistence on a temporal linearity to the text results in a distinct 'clunkiness' to the flow, as very little in the way of coherent place-based narrative is produced for the reader. Moreover, such a structure severely inhibits Davis' ability to undertake any serious analysis of social and political specificities of each situation, resulting in chapters which becomes increasingly dreary and formulaic, propped up by banal factual evidence such as the make and model of the car used in the bombing. The overall effect is compounded by Davis' writing style. While informality worked in Davis' favour in landmark texts such as *City of Quartz* (1990) where the reader shared his outrage at the injustices of the situations he exposed, the disregard for academic convention in *Buda's Wagon* elicits significantly less sympathy.

However my central critique of the text is its apparent inability to take into account the broader picture, drawing out points and making connections of wider theoretical and political value. So, for example, what was the importance of the closure of New York's stock exchange, and why could only a car bomb have achieved such an outcome? In the same vein, given the heavy subject matter, I am surprised by the scant attention paid to the morality of the car bomb. Indeed, reading of Hezbollah's "ruthless and brilliant" (p. 4) car bombing techniques in Lebanon one wonders if Davis has forgotten the realities behind the body counts

he so judiciously lists, preferring instead to satisfy some fetishistic interest in the materialities of blowing things up.

The car bomb is only of interest based on its ubiquity and efficacy in the present engagements in the Middle East, and again I am concerned with the text's attempts to deal with such issues. Early on, in the evocatively titled chapter 'Poor Man's Air Force', explicit allusions are made to Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak*. Scott's text has been associated with progressive, class-based politics, yet I would assert that, even in the most oppressive and unjust military occupations such as those in Palestine or Iraq, drawing such an parallel is hugely problematic. Suggesting that a car bomb turns the tables on the usual functioning power relations is too easy, uncomplicatedly bifurcating between good and bad, oppressor and oppressed, in a way which has more in common with the present Bush administration's 'with us or against us' ideology than the production of complex and analytical critique. Such issues become increasingly germane when one considers, as Davis mentions, the Western funding of car bomb training camps for Afghani fighters opposing Soviet occupation in the mid-1980s (p. 90-96). This would have provided a good opportunity in which to discuss the way the practice of 'terrorism' is framed in conventional western discourse. It has always amazed me that 'shock and awe' could be considered a legitimate military technique to 'liberate' a country, whereas counter-occupatory 'insurgents' could be cast as 'terrorists' by the same strategists. While terrorism has been utilised discursively as a way of spatialising an 'us' versus 'them' ideology (see Coleman 2003), applying culpability for terrorist acts in countries inhabited by 'them' has proven more difficult, resulting in what Gregory (2006) has termed "the death of the civilian". General knowledge of the West's complicity in producing that which it now alleges to combat is widespread, however that the use of the car bomb was once a technique exported and trained to the same groups which have now become 'our' enemies is an important observation. Given we are supposedly engaged in a War on Terror, Western responsibility in the diffusion of a particular militaristic epistemology could have usefully acted as a sustained and informed critique to counter the media doublespeak with which we are bombarded every day.

In his concluding chapter, rather than drawing together the themes of the text into a coherent argument Davis prefers to focus on the Pentagon's ongoing research into counter-terrorism measures, in which it is revealed that the budget for this effort currently stands at US\$3.5 billion (p. 189). The chapter explores in comparative length the potential technological options which we may yet see in the world's rich cities, but offers only as a passing comment that the only effective way to reduce the devastation of the car bomb, through the "decommissioning of minds" (p. 195), is highly unlikely given the current climate. It concerns me that even the basic economic inefficiency in this spending of American tax dollars (and by extension Pounds, Euros, Yen and so forth - although one should note that this book, while discussing world affairs, is written from an unthinkingly American perspective) is not considered important enough to warrant a mention, let alone an exploration of why a government might prefer to keep pouring money into a technology which effectively facilitates the continuation of a war with no discernable endpoint.

By this stage it will be pretty evident to readers of my disappointment in this book. This is a double disappointment, a result of both my deep respect for and enjoyment of Davis' previous works and a reflection of all the potential this subject matter could have held. One could argue that this disappointment is misplaced as in fact this book does exactly what it purports to do: briefly present a history of the car bomb. But it does so in a way which is so under-analytical to make it of little utility to the academic, yet at the same time not engaging enough to keep the everyday reader interested. While the events referenced in the text are very current, indeed occurrences up to late 2006 are discussed, the work still feels under researched. A cursory examination of the reference list reveals a reliance upon journalistic accounts, the *New York Times* in particular, while the amount of first hand research undertaken appears to be minimal. Further, niggling errors such as the discussion of the CIA's "sirector" (or 'director' - p. 93) or London's "congestion pricing" scheme (or 'congestion charging' - p. 137) undermines confidence in the text as a whole. Terrorism has become a hot topic in contemporary academic circles given the current geopolitical situation, with some dealing with it better than others. Unfortunately, rather than offering innovative new angles through which to understand the world, Mike Davis' *Brief History* will disappear as just one more in an ever expanding genre.

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