

Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear*
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DOREEN MASSEY

ANGELENO ANOMALIES

Los Angeles is an exception among cities. Or, at least, we like to think of it as such. Its sprawling refusal to conform to Western notions of what a proper metropolis should be has generated continual debate amongst architects, planners and sociologists. Paradoxically, in one ethnocentric teleology, the urbanism that starts in Athens and Rome, and runs through Paris and New York, inevitably ends in Hollywood. (Quite where Beijing, Timbuktu or Tenochtitlan would fit into this scheme has never been very clear.) Los Angeles is a dream city of sunshine and mobility, and the infernal setting of every second disaster movie. It is also, of course, the home of an industry whose obsessive self-concern distorts its global image even more.

The Ecology of Fear—subtitled ‘Los Angeles and the imagination of disaster’—weaves together maps and words, dreams and matter, the physical city and (some of) its social divisions, and above all its human inhabitants and its natural environment, in startling and luminous ways. The heated reactions of academics, journalists and real-estate agents to this book can be taken as back-handed tributes to its unsettling power. Beautifully written, it constantly offers disconcerting insights and associations. Early on, recalling the arrival of Anglo-American conquistadors in this Mediterranean ecology, Davis observes that ‘in the most fundamental sense, language and cultural inheritance failed the newcomers. English terminology, specific to a humid climate, proved incapable of accurately capturing the dialectic of water and drought that shapes Mediterranean environments. By no stretch of the imagination, for example, is an *arroyo* merely a “glen”.’ The passage captures something of the strangeness of this land, as it must have appeared to each of those who entered it for the first time, but it also

points ahead to a larger claim: that the Los Angeles basin still remains opaque as a historico-natural phenomenon to Anglo paradigms of urbanism.

Thus in an already famous chapter entitled 'The Case for Letting Malibu Burn', Davis demonstrates the madness of building houses in a fragile, fire-prone zone of chaparral, and the further insanity of fire-fighting strategies calculated to intensify the inevitable conflagrations when they occur. The grim injustices of a city committed to boosting the property values of the super-affluent, regardless of fiscal cost, while tenements in inner-city barrios burn, come out in stark relief. But Davis does not offer a conventional picture of power and powerlessness. One of the most distinctive motifs in *The Ecology of Fear* is the way in which the elements, monstrosly disfigured by nature-defying patterns of habitation, wreak their revenge on even the enclaves of the privileged. The dialectical retaliation of nature can visit well-nigh biblical retribution on human indifference.

The 'fear' of the book's title refers, before all else, to the interactions between the two, particularly in the border regions between them. These are zones which give rise to phantasms that transpose social categories onto nature and natural categories onto society. The denizens of Malibu project the rolling flames that threaten their way of life into 'a new breed of terrorist', 'black gangs', vagrant hobos camping out in the canyons, and other anthropomorphic evils—even as, ironically, 'the burning hills [are] full of hundreds of present and former gang members: all risking their lives on state and county fire crews'. Mountain lions are denounced as 'serial killers', while gang members are cast as 'animals'.

But could such tales be told of other cities? Refreshingly, Davis does not seek to present Los Angeles as the *Bladerunner* future of urbanism in the twenty-first century. But at times he cannot resist a tendency to cast LA in exceptional or superlative terms. It is too often 'unique' or in various ways 'the most', with geographical categories finessed to sustain the claim. Thus the six-county Los Angeles region is 'unique in the Northern Hemisphere' for the intensity of interaction between humans, pets, and wild fauna; Los Angeles has the longest wild edge 'of any major non-tropical city'; while 'only Mexico City has more completely toxified its natural setting, and no other metropolis in the *industrialized* Northern Hemisphere continues to grow at such breakneck speed' (my italics).

Whatever the empirical validity of particular such claims, a more general phenomenon may be at work here—the US habit of calling a local sporting event 'The World Series'. For example, in 1971 the San Fernando earthquake killed 64 people, and in 1994 the Northridge earthquake 72; both were followed by hysterical dread of the terminal Big One, and 'literary and cinematic aftershocks'. But in September 1985, between these two, there was an earthquake in Mexico City with a death toll of about 10,000. Number of films made about it? None that I know of. While writing this review, BBC Radio News announced a number of times that there had been a small tremor outside Los Angeles; no-one had been killed. That same week, Mexican states from Veracruz through Hidalgo to

Guerrero were disappearing under floods and mudslides, with hundreds dead or injured, and thousands left homeless. No item on the news. Davis is of course aware of the power of the LA-based media to select and stage events. But while he meticulously excavates media-induced ecological amnesia, like the suppression of evidence of local tornadoes, his own tendency to overstate LA's exceptionalism as a site of disasters can succumb to a radical version of the same kind of metropolitan self-absorption.

In the last two chapters of the book ('The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles' and 'Beyond *Bladerunner*'), Davis explicitly addresses media representations of LA as Apocalyptic ground zero, and the different ways this has been overdone. Dismissing the predictive relevance of *Bladerunner* as a condensation of old preoccupations, Davis suggests that the LA of the future might be best understood using models from the Chicago sociology, but with fear of the social and natural unknown, overdetermined by media-generated phantasms, as the decisive variable of settlement. Here Davis places racial panic at the centre of his analysis. Rightly so. But the underpinnings of his account seem to rely too much on a generalized 'terror of the other'. What is lacking—although one can find it in his earlier work *City of Quartz*—is an explanation of the conditions that reproduce these racisms. Davis underscores the significance of the transformation which LA underwent during the mid-seventies, when it went from being 'the most WASP-ish of large American cities' to being one of the most ethnically diverse and fractured conurbations in the industrialized world. But he tends here to simplify the mosaic of the city into a polarization between the Anglo rich and the ethnic poor. Other factors of tension and division are side-lined—gender, for example, is not attended to at all. Similarly, although class is certainly not ignored, one is left wondering whether the city contains no poor whites, or prosperous ethnic minorities.

Immigration is, of course, one of the defining features of any 'world city', which no one would dispute Los Angeles to be. But if world cities really are global condensations of forces and relations of international scope, then writing about them should not remain local. Other analysts—Roger Keil in his pedestrian but informative volume *Los Angeles: globalization, urbanization and social struggles* (1998), for example—track the flows of incoming capital and labour to LA. One of the few times we go abroad with Mike Davis is to follow the routes of a plague—a strange wandering. This too is still the story of an arrival in Los Angeles. Global cities do gather many far-flung elements into themselves. But that is only one side of the story. They also throw out long tentacles beyond themselves. For extended relations of power run out from these centres. They are seats of control over considerable parts of the planet. Their pull on migrants can both devastate and save (through remittances) rural communities in other countries, hundreds and thousands of miles away. Their cultural exports can change those places too. Their environmental impacts may beggar the imagination.

At one point Davis criticizes Angeleno environmentalism of the seventies for its parochialism; yet his own call for a 'more subversive but necessary politics' typically stops short at local issues of urban design. The relationship of the city with the outside world remains to be explored. Yet this is a limitation that can be remedied elsewhere. Davis's tale of injustice and greed, natural and social disaster, tightly focussed within the city, urgently needed to be told. *The Ecology of Fear* has seized attention; provoked argument; brought new issues into the public sphere. A more moderate account might have passed without much notice. Who could ask more of a radical intervention?