

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Davis, Mike. *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory.* New York: Verso, 2018, pp. 294, \$35.99, 9781788732161.

Mike Davis has written a challenging and ambitious book that, for him, signals the renewal of his “driver’s license” in Marxism. In the course of the book, Davis accomplishes little less than a complete rethinking of the role of proletarian agency in the context of the contemporary global environmental and economic crises. While a good portion of the book’s chapters have previously been published in the *New Left Review*, pulling them together as a book makes sense to fully understand the significance and scale of his project.

In particular, three main themes stand out. The first theme is the importance of recognizing that social action should draw on the historical wellsprings of agency amongst proletarian groups during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, Davis shows that the contemporary critique regarding automation finds its roots in a similar set of debates in Marx’s works and many others’ regarding the role of proletarian agency in classical socialist thought and the workers’ movement. Historically, one of the drivers and outcomes of industrial automation has been the decline in revolutionary subjectivity and proletarian agency. Davis finds it regrettable that even Marxists today, including “post Marxists,” have relegated the proletariat to the proverbial dustbin of history. He writes, “to put it crudely,” we should not announce a funeral for the “old working class,” but rather recognize its legacy because the proletariat has been “demoted in agency, not fired from history” (6). He acknowledges that trade unions have been weakened and wages have stagnated, but in no way should the way of life of the working class be deemed insignificant in the efforts to dignify labour’s place in the world. “Machinists, nurses, truck drivers, and school teachers remain the organized social base defending the historical legacy of labor in Western Europe, North America, and Japan” (6). Building on his reading of the online *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, as well as other collected editions of Marx’s works, Davis reconstructs the possibility of revolutionary agency today.

The second major theme involves using historical sociology to help rethink and recentre the contemporary moment: “I mine our current understandings of nineteenth and early twentieth-century working-class

history—the fruit of hundreds if not thousands of studies since 1960—to highlight the conditions and forms of struggle through which class capacities were created and the socialist project organized itself” (21). By using the historical development of the socialist project as his basis, both the ambition and the clarity of Davis’ historical sociology shines through brilliantly as it has in so many previous works including *Planet of Slums* (2006), *City of Quartz* (1990) and *Prisoners of the American Dream* (1986).

The third theme that stood out in *Old Gods, New Enigmas* involves the spatialization of working class life, or more scientifically, “the hegemonic class.” By building “socio-cultural” worlds of their own in terms of social spaces for meeting, exercising, and the public renewal of neighbourhood and street-level life, Davis reminds readers that these spaces for learning and socializing, including for children and the elderly, were critical to the creation of a “proletarian public sphere” (99). In these spaces, a symbolic landscape was created. He is, of course, referring to parks, public architecture, temples, taverns, libraries, union halls, offices, and many other spaces that exist to this day in large and small cities alike across the world. He notes that these are precisely the places the fascists attacked in the effort to break up resistances to militarism; he writes: “it was opposition to conscription that spurred the emergence of autonomous socialist youth movements, especially in countries where the military had been regularly used to break strikes or quell public demonstrations” (104). For Davis, the spatial make-up of cities provides the conditions of possibility for socialist agency.

This book is truly a *tour de force*. It demonstrates that the key to understanding the present is to reflect upon where we’ve come from. But, beyond that simple truism, Davis also demonstrates that an economic analysis is critical to understanding how we can respond to the ecological crisis we find all around us. A model of this type of analysis can be found in the various strains of Marxist and socialist projects throughout the twentieth century and be used to counter a politics of fear with the socialist reservoirs of hope and agency. Given the overwhelming evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other scientific sources, Davis’ view is that we have already lost the first “epochal” battle against global warming; as such, time is running out for humanity to respond with collective resolve. With increased urgency to draw out the economic and political implications of living in a rapidly warming world, we must turn to “insurgent communities, pirate technologies, bootlegged media, rebel science, and forgotten utopias” (202) so that we can build “a new Ark” by directly confronting the great challenges before us as climate change exacerbates already-existing global

inequities. Proletarian agency can become a new source of hope for social movements.

Readers looking for a simple recipe or formula for how to respond to contemporary stark realities will be disappointed. But, those looking to reflect on what can be done about the calamities around us by moving well beyond what is “realistic” and “possible” in the current conjuncture, will find much to think about and build upon in each of the communities in which we live. The “new enigmas” of the present basically revolves around climate change, urbanization, and poverty, which Davis shows must remain at the very top of any socialist agenda that is not “complicit in a de facto triage of humanity” (221). Decisive action is required and who is better to take the lead than the proletariat?

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