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Mike Davis, Planet of Slums. London: Verso, 2006; trad. it. Il pianeta degli slum. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006, 213 pp.

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For decades urban theory has been moulded around the Western model of city. Cities of the developing world – characterised by a lack of infrastructures and services, inhabited by a mass of people living below poverty standards, unable to offer employment outside the informal sector – have seldom been the focus of interest for urban scholars. The growth rates of urban population worldwide, instead, indicate that this is the everyday reality for the majority of people living in urban areas. Most people in the world live in cities and the largest are to be found in poor countries. Urban traits in these countries are therefore essential in the framing of global dominant urban features. The "global" cities, to which page upon page of scholarly work has been dedicated, instead, account only for a small percentage of the world's urbanity. This book is an attempt to balance this gap and to bring to the fore an interest for the least studied, however more representative, cities of the third millennium. In this endeavour, Davis sets off from the scarce international reaction that followed the publication of the Un Habitat report *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements* in 2003. Slums, in fact, are the major focus of attention of this work.

In the first chapter of the book, Davis introduces his main argument and sustains that the current rise of developing cities can no longer be ignored. After having sketched the general trends of urbanisation in the developing world and accounted for the growing size and importance of African, Asian and Latin American cities, in the second chapter of the book Davis provides a standard definition of slum: a place characterised by overcrowding, shoddy, squalid and informal housing, inadequate access to water and sanitation facilities, unsteady property. Such a definition, Davis recognises, is chiefly based upon the physical and juridical features of slum settlements, largely ignoring their social characteristics. Davis continues his inquest by suggesting a typology of slum, drawing primarily from their position as regards ease of access to employment (i.e. their position as regards the city centre or periphery) and only in a second stage on the various ranges of irregularity or regularity of soil occupation. Such a typology is therefore able to embrace diversified situations such as informal street dwellers in city centres, tenants of illegal peripheral settlements and refugee camps in the outskirts of town. In the same chapter, Davis also traces the historical origin and development of slums, indicating their genesis under Stalinism in Asia and under colonial rule elsewhere, when large masses of people worldwide where attracted to urban areas.

The first two introductory chapters just outlined are followed by a number of individual chapters [chapters 3-8], each addressing specific features of slum areas. The incapacity of local governments to provide expanding portions of the urban with infrastructures and services is outlined in chapter Three, followed by an evaluation of the role played by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank during the 1970s and 1980s, in broadening the growing gap between the urban rich and the urban poor. Chapter Four looks at the political

shift that marked more recent strategies and policies: from slum "eviction" to various attempts of slum "improvement" through the action of NGOs and self-help initiatives. The influence of market forces within the land and housing sector are also analysed in this chapter. Spatial segregation is the main focus of chapter Five: whereas during colonial times separation between rich and poor was strongly marked by race and ethnicity, after independence class and privilege have been the main elements at the basis of the same process. Local elites have taken the place of colonial rulers, fighting against the urban poor and boldly defending their right to large portions of urban territory, while leaving the majority of population to amass in the interstices and other marginal portions of the city. Slum eradication practices have marked the fight over land between the rich and the poor in many developing cities, as an attempt to reclaim urban territory for the exclusive benefit of the rich, foreign investors, tourists, etc. This strategy has often gone hand in hand with combat against crime, informal work and street hawkers, and has been followed by measures for the protection of the rich areas and the creation of gated communities against slum invasions. Chapter Six provides an account of the ecology of slums: within them, the pressure on the environment is such that the ecosystem bursts and cannot absorb all this load, hindering the sustainability of cities. Structural Adjustment Programs are analysed again in chapter Seven, that focuses on their impact on social inequality. A stereotypical interpretation of the informal economy as carrying great potential for the future of slums is challenged in chapter Eight. Too many people have currently crowded into the informal sector, so that it incessantly fragments existing labour into progressively smaller individual tasks, therefore also reducing benefits accordingly. As a result, the informal sector increasingly exposes this surplus humanity to cases of exploitation and abuse of female and child labour. Finally, in the epilogue of the book, Davis forecasts a catastrophic future scenario: initiatives of resistance against global inequalities may very well originate in slums, in these pockets of global marginality. These are the circumstances, Davis suggests, in which global terror and religious extremism have recently seen the light, leading to an increase in the safety and protection measures enacted by the Western world to protect its own wealth and privilege.

The main argument of this book is sustained through reference to illustrative examples drawn, alongside many others, from the cases of cities like Johannesburg and Lagos, Mumbai and Dhaka, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City. While focusing primarily on the current situation of cities in the developing world, the book suggests many parallels between today's slums and the living conditions in the most deprived and popular neighbourhoods of European cities, such as London or Naples, during the last century. This book has the merit of introducing to a reality, the one of developing cities, that is largely under-addressed within the scholarly debate. In this work, Davis also deconstructs many common stereotypes underlying mainstream interpretation of the developing world: he discards the ideas of internal solidarity and of the potential offered by the informal sector as a basis for continuous employment generation, opposing to this romantic image a scenery of war amongst poor in their daily struggle for a livelihood.

The book targets readers within the fields of geography, sociology, economic-policy and development studies. The issues addressed, however, are treated at an extremely general and non-specialist level. As a consequence, this book configures itself as a strongly introductory reading on the subject at stake, that can easily have an appeal among non-

academic audiences. This commercial strategy might also be at the origin of some of the choices made in the selection and presentation of statistical data cited throughout the book. Official sources are not always clearly stated and, when they are, they are indicated in notes at the end of the volume, a choice that offers a smoother reading for non specialists, however that makes consultation unpractical for more attentive readers.

As already stated above, developing cities have been largely under-analysed within urban theory. Differences between cities of the North and cities of the South, moreover, have often been viewed as incommensurable and have therefore generated a veritable divide within this disciplinary field. As a result of the impulse of underdevelopment theories, in particular, urban theory was split into separate areas of specialisation, in which interests were pragmatically defined around issues at stake either in the North or in the South. On the one hand, this book positions itself in between these two areas, as an attempt to overcome such a divide. On the other hand, however, it offers a paradigm that is purely alternative to the one of global cities, therefore making a shallow move towards effectively cutting across the divide between an urban theory of the North and one of the South. While crying out for the impossibility, in the contemporary global age, to continue ignoring cities of the developing world, their features and trends, furthermore, in this work Davis does not go very far beyond providing a mere descriptive picture of cities of the South. What an academic reader might have expected from this book, is that Davis might have attempted to develop an interpretative model of power relations between rich and poor that might bridge across Western and developing cities. A possible cue that would have been interesting to see developed in this book, for instance, is the recognition that, among the outcomes of globalisation, an important part is played not only by the opposition of the two blocks of rich and poor, but also by the exportation of poverty. This book, instead, fails to recognise that globalisation currently produces a number of "pockets" of Third World also in the First: immigrant neighbourhoods, shantytowns, informal squatter settlements, etc. are increasingly to be found also within the Western urban environment. Further considerations on the implications just mentioned would have offered a stimulating reading that could have integrated the apocalyptic future scenario that Davis suggests in the epilogue of his volume and would have left greater incentives for further debate.

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