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Mike Davis (1946 - 2022)

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A tribute to Mike Davis from Haymarket Books editor Anthony Arnove.

What can one say about Mike Davis that has not been said already by so many who appreciated his brilliance, wit, clarity, and uncanny foresight?

Perhaps less has been said about Mike's pugnaciousness, which was not an argumentativeness for the sake of point-scoring or aggressiveness born out of self-importance, but a passion for political struggle and the people he fought alongside.

"Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion, a tenacity, and a success such as few could rival," [Frederick Engels observed](#) of Karl Marx—and the same could be said for Mike.

Admittedly, Mike's combativeness was not only directed at class enemies, though he was masterful when directing his fire at them. Mike was known among friends for letters written in outrage, and even hurt, to comrades he felt had gone astray. I had the displeasure of receiving a few myself. But in all our exchanges, it was evident how much Mike cared. Never once did he exert authority or expect deference because of his intellect or past contributions. He just held those of us in common work to exacting standards and took our politics as seriously as the circumstances require.

Mike's ever-timely emails shared with friends, some of which became blog posts and longer essays, were extraordinary, exemplifying how to engage in conjunctural analysis that is grounded, historically informed, and attuned to what is emergent and requires us to rethink even long-held positions.

In 1843 Marx wrote [a letter to Arnold Ruge](#) that articulates precisely a philosophy Mike lived by: "it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be."

Mike was never satisfied with rote answers, predetermined conclusions, received wisdom. He always insisted on looking at the world anew, being rigorous, undertaking original research, and facing reality as it is, not as we wish it to be.

I recall one small study group with comrades in New York at which Mike argued for a commitment to revolutionary politics even in the face of the genuine possibility that we had collectively reached a moment in human history when revolution could not prevent capitalism's past destruction of our planet from having irreversible, disastrous consequences. Without any guarantees of success, and despite this existential uncertainty, he insisted, we were obligated to forge ahead.

Mike laid out tasks, perspectives, and research programs for the left with amazing dexterity, but

never in a dirigiste fashion or to claim credit for an idea. He simply was always thinking of important work to be done and how to do it. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Y. Davis have cited Mike's critique of what he was among the first to call "the prison industrial complex" for its vital contribution to modern prison abolition. But a full appreciation of the many initiatives and ideas he helped galvanize could fill volumes.

Mike was committed to building a socialism that could thrive in the specific circumstances of the United States, with the many challenges that poses. Any understanding of Mike's political project must begin with [Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class](#), an indispensable book that illuminates the terrain on which socialist politics will have to be rebuilt in the United States.

While being deeply internationalist in his outlook—which is particularly evident in his books [Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory](#), [Planet of Slums](#), and [Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World](#)—and never making concessions to jingoism or centrism, he understood that the contours of national and regional cultures and idioms matter and that we cannot import our politics readymade from other outposts.

I had the great privilege of working for several years with Mike on the editorial board of Haymarket Books. At Haymarket, we took inspiration not only from Mike's own writing but his editorial and publishing work, especially with [Michael Sprinker](#) and others on the Haymarket Series at Verso, with which we shared not only a name but a common vision.

Mike made this commitment to Haymarket Books when we were a ragtag group with some scrappiness but far more inexperience. He contributed ideas that were foundational for our project and have enabled us to have far greater impact than we ever imagined when we first started a new independent publishing project.

Mike patiently joined our editorial board calls, giving razor sharp notes on manuscripts and bringing perspective based on understanding the vital ways radical publishing projects have learned from and in turn inspired social movements. With better resources, we could have started a whole imprint devoted only to republishing out-of-print books he treasured but which had been largely lost to later generations.

Mike approached his work, first and foremost, as an organizer. Speaking at the Socialism conference in Oakland in 2010, Mike called for building "an organization of organizers," a bold, clear thesis he often returned to that clarifies our task and the standard by which we should judge our efforts.

We can pay no better tribute to Mike's lifelong work than trying to build organizations of organizers and renewing our commitment to a socialism that is global and revolutionary in its vision yet firmly planted exactly where we stand.

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Anthony Arnove

P.S.

• Haymarket Books / October 25 2022 :

<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/474-mike-davis-1946-2022>