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Mike Davis Showed Us What “Old-School Socialism” Looked Like

Saturday 29 October 2022, by [UETRICHT Micah](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2022).

The Marxist writer and activist Mike Davis died yesterday at the age of 76. His astonishing body of work will be impossible for anyone to replicate — but all of us can emulate his example of how to live and fight as an “old-school socialist.”

Writing about Mike Davis is a daunting task. You feel like you’re not worthy to weigh in on the work of such a staggeringly brilliant mind — because you’re not. No one is.

Davis, who died yesterday at the age of seventy-six, would have hated reading such a line about himself. But like it or not, he wrote like no other writer, in powerful prose, synthesizing original, historically grounded arguments about the working class, the weather, colonialism, the city of Los Angeles and cities around the world, war, slums, viral plagues, and much more in an enormous stack of books, essays, and interviews. We at *Jacobin* were lucky to publish him [numerous times](#) over the years.

Davis’s work garnered immense praise. He won awards like the MacArthur “genius grant”; the pope and foreign presidents [sought his audience](#); in a 1995 *New York Times Magazine* profile, a copy of *City of Quartz* showed up in [Bruce Willis’s trailer](#). But Davis never had any interest in seeing himself as somehow apart from the lives of the rest of us simply because he knew how to write a sentence. He devoted himself instead to the life of an “old school socialist.”

His explanation of this concept in a [2018 interview](#) is worth quoting in full:

First, socialism — the belief that the earth belongs to labor — is my moral being. In fact, it is my religion, the values that anchor the commitments that define my life.

Second, “old school” implies putting in work year after year for the good cause. In academia one runs across people who call themselves Marxists and go to lots of conferences but hardly ever march on a picket line, go to a union meeting, throw a brick or simply help wash the dishes after a benefit. What’s even worse, they deign to teach us the “real Marx” but lack the old Moor’s fundamental respect for individual working people and his readiness to become a poor outlaw on their behalf.

Finally, plain “socialist” expresses identification with the broad movement and the dream rather than with a particular program or camp. I have strong, if idiosyncratic, opinions on all the traditional issues — for example, the necessity of an organization of organizers (call it Leninism, if you want) but also the evils of bureaucracy and permanent leaderships (call it anarchism if you wish) — but I try to remind myself that

such positions need to be constantly reassessed and calibrated to the conjuncture. One is always negotiating the slippery dialectic between individual reason, which must be intransigently self-critical, and the fact that one needs to be part of a movement or a radical collective in order, as Sartre put it, to “be in history.” Moral dilemmas and hard choices come with the turf and they cannot be evaded with “correct lines.”

For Davis, there was no higher calling than to live one’s life as an old-school socialist. He was right. The Left needs more thinkers in the streets, more writers who understand their work as a humble contribution to the cause of human liberation rather than testaments to their individual genius, less tweeting and more ego death in service of class struggle.

Davis’s entire life was dedicated to advancing the cause of the working class, both at home and globally. He was born to a working-class family and spent years working jobs like meatcutting and truck driving. He was a product of the civil rights movement and the New Left. He never wrote a memoir, which is a shame, because his tales from those years are uproarious: the time he was working as a tour bus driver and found himself in the middle of a wild strike and his comrades [voted to assassinate a strikebreaker](#); or when he accidentally left his tour bus and watched it roll out empty [onto the Hollywood freeway](#). His first book, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, is a wide-ranging exploration of American labor history, seeking to understand how the US working class became so weak. (He dedicated it to “the combatants of the FMLN,” the leftist Salvadoran guerrillas fighting a US-backed dictatorship at the time of the book’s publication in 1986.)

His work ranged widely afterward, in too many of his books to list out here. But Davis often eschewed the spoils of a successful intellectual career and the company of elites to talk deeply with community activists, artists, and, in recent years, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) members, among whom he is arguably the most influential thinker today. For today’s new generation of socialists, Davis was a link to both the New Left that produced him and the Old Left that he had engaged with as a member of the Communist Party in Southern California in the 1960s.

He was not only a socialist when it was deeply unfashionable to be one but a Marxist who broke through the End of History’s prohibition on leftist ideas in popular culture by the sheer power of his scorching prose and argumentation. But clinging to the old cause of the working class at a time of free-market triumphalism was surely a lonely experience. A small core kept the flame of socialism burning during those tough times, but more than a few of them emerged deeply embittered from their decades-long defensive crouches.

Not so Davis, as [innumerable tributes](#) have [emphasized](#). Scores of activists, thinkers, and average people who interacted with him note how warmly encouraging and generous he was as a mentor. His political commitments were rooted in a love of humanity, and his interactions with humanity were a testament to that love. In addition to his massive writing output, Davis leaves us that sense of love as an example.

In 2021, I wrote an [essay](#) for the *Nation* about Davis. After surveying his life and almost unflaggingly grim reportage, I noted that if you read between the lines of Davis’s final two books, *Set the Night on Fire* (coauthored with Jon Wiener) and *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, a palpable sense of hope seeped through. “Given his longstanding refusal to offer false consolation,” I argued, “that possibility of a better world actually winning out over the forces of darkness isn’t offered cavalierly.”

Davis [hated](#) that readers like me were always prattling on about hope. (“Fight with hope, fight without hope, but fight absolutely,” he [told](#) one interviewer.) But in any case, in his final works

before death, as the excitement of the Bernie Sanders campaign faded and coronavirus ravaged the earth while climate change worsened and cruelty kept winning the day in politics and culture, that window that I had noticed open felt closed.

His final sentences of his [final *New Left Review* piece](#) lamented our miserably stuck political present and, in its celebration of leftist assassins, seemed to slyly pine for the emergence of such figures in our own era: “Never has so much fused economic, mediatic and military power been put into so few hands. It should make us pay homage at the hero graves of Aleksandr Ilyich Ulyanov, Alexander Berkman and the incomparable Sholem Schwarzbard.”

Who else but Davis could go out on these words? And really, who can blame him? He’s only as bleak as the times we live in.

Still, he never fully fell into despair — something I wish I could claim myself. In my darker moments, though, I’ve ironically turned to what he told a *New Yorker* interviewer in 2020:

This seems an age of catastrophe, but it’s also an age equipped, in an abstract sense, with all the tools it needs. Utopia is available to us. If, like me, you lived through the civil-rights movement, the antiwar movement, you can never discard hope. I’ve seen social miracles in my life, ones that have stunned me — the courageousness of ordinary people in a struggle. Eleven years ago, Bill Moyers brought me on his show and presented me as the last socialist in America. Now there are millions of young people who prefer socialism to capitalism.

Mike Davis looked at a world wracked by inequality, plagues, and massive fires and rising sea levels. He told no lies about the miseries he saw. But he also saw the means by which we can dismantle those miseries — and in average people, the foot soldiers who could do the dismantling and achieve miracles. We’ll never be able to replace Davis as a writer. But we can honor his old-school socialism by committing and recommitting ourselves to being those soldiers.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 10.26.2022:

<https://jacobin.com/2022/10/mike-davis-death-socialism-workers-hope>

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