

Book Review

Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory.

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At the close of his *Living in the End Times*, Žižek returns to a concern that theology has become (again) a touchstone of radical political activity. Indeed, the work of socialism has always—rightly or wrongly, positively and negatively—maintained a strongly messianic-apocalyptic character in the hands of its most ardent supporters. Žižek's correct analysis in *End Times* is to remind his reader that such energies ought to be handled with care, because the desire (under the insistently traumatic terms of contemporary life) is that we simply reassert the moral, agential supremacy of the “big Other” who will validate and assure socialism's success. Such a condition leads us then to something that radical activists on the street—as an entity separate from those theorizing capitalism's demise—might do well to call simply class consciousness. Ever the goal of organizational energies, the best version of class consciousness (à la Žižek) exists between the self and group identification, and is infused with an energetic potentiality that transcends the false activity of “struggle” insofar as it sees the raising up of one another's class-based interests as having an actual productive end, and not (in the messianic mode) keeping up the fight in the sense of running in place until the end finally (finally!) comes.

Mike Davis is not immune to socialism's messianic tendencies. Concerned with the rise of capitalism's access to the immense global labor pool used increasingly to pauperize those in gray economies, the apocalyptic vision of the “new Dark Ages” he worries over suggests the need for radical activists to “reignite our imaginations by rediscovering those extraordinary conversations” that come directly from engagement with Marx's texts, but also in the debate about their most significant aspects for working peoples (xxiii). His first book-length direct exploration of Marxist thought in a long career as one of the premier chroniclers of capitalism's ills, *Old Gods* has the potential to do precisely that reigniting at street level, by interpreting the work of socialist transformation into a digestible argument and agenda about how one can develop class consciousness.

Though he has spent his career in the struggle—first as a worker, then later also a public intellectual—Davis admits in his lively personal introduction (available for free on [Verso's website](#)) that his encounters with Marx were for a long time piecemeal and necessarily incomplete. From this vantage now more than 50 years removed from his first forays into labor organizing, the challenge to understanding the Old Man's works were not necessarily just the difficulty inherent in the mode of thought being deployed, but also because of the unavailability and disaggregation of much of what we think of Marx's most important works and those of his respondents.¹ In that regard, Davis's first (and most important) contribution in the book is a long essay that not only gives the collection its title, but pursues a single line of thought in its attempt to recover a usable, activist notion of class consciousness from the accessible and English-translated *Complete Works*. The section is by no means a comprehensive reading of Marx (like,

as just one version, Enrique Dussel's lengthy and detailed commentaries on Marx's manuscripts), but rather an attempt to make an incisive intervention in order to serve a primer on Marxist thought that would be useful to the incipient socialist thinker and activist-organizer. The reading of Marx is additionally appended by a rich collection of supporting interpretive references ranging from more traditional sources (e.g., Lenin, Gramsci), to a wide range of contemporary thinkers, including a conscious effort on Davis's part to integrate the often overlooked contributions over the years of women such as Katherine Archibald and Michelle Perrot.² As such, the essay is an efficient and allusive way into a brambly body of work, and meant less as a theoretical construct, except as Davis deems necessary, and more an overview without the pedantry of a much longer formal introduction.

The focus on action is successful, and for Davis serves to elucidate both the historical and conjunctural aspects of class consciousness in a series of 44 theses divided into seven sections. The status of labor and working peoples consumes his approach, to the extent that Marx is a toolkit for understanding the structures and limits of organization in the face of capitalist hegemony. A relative few theses argue guiding principles. One such structural concern differentiates in Marx's work the working class (a concept) and the actually-existing industrial working class of his time. Such distinctions open up a space for Davis to navigate the sometimes conflicting opinions Marx seems to put forward by using the same term in different cases, and mirrors readings undertaken by others (like David Harvey, as only the most popular example) who remind readers to carefully parse Marx for the difference in logical-argumentative outcomes and historical ones. Other theses explore moments that contextualize Marx's milieu and the world that developed after him during the "Age of Class Warfare" (which Davis defines as the People's Charter in 1838 to the March Action of 1921), as in the one that describes the turn from general strikes on May Day to labor celebrations as a way to stave off violence, leading to competing theories of the mass strike. Still other theses—the seeming majority—are more activist-oriented and explain states of affairs as they would have presented themselves to a worker in the midst of their becoming class consciousness. Many theses, in fact, develop these strands simultaneously. Mixing theory with history and revolutionary praxis as he does is sometimes disorienting, as the essay is organized thematically but proceeds generally chronologically. All the same the overall utility is such that the worker-intellectual looking to immerse themselves in Marxist thought will undoubtedly gain much from re-readings and the generative connections that such a braided form of analysis will make.³

The final thesis affirms to us the dual character of Davis's argument in both the messianic and apocalyptic modes so familiar to socialist critique: "Labor must rule because the bourgeoisie is ultimately unable to fulfill the promises of progress. If the socialist project is defeated the result will be the retrogression of civilization as a whole" (153). One more call to arms, the thesis proceeds from Davis's tracking of revolutionary theory, through the sense that the proletariat (contrary to the usual fanfare capitalism provides for itself) has been the prime mover of innovation, productivity, and social welfare. And, more to the point, we now find ourselves at a particular crossroads of history where circumstances—labor shortages due to technological innovation and population growth leading to intolerable living conditions, sufficient knowledge-making technologies necessary to assess complicated social-ecological problems, and globalized trade's transcendence of traditional economic models as a guide to useful action—suggest an opportunity for a "decentralized economic democracy" Marx himself envisioned. All that is needed is the ingenuity of will (that is, of class consciousness) to awaken and take the reins. Of course, there's nothing particularly new about such a description. However, the historical

embeddedness of Davis's narrative-in-theses provides a refreshing new presentation of how such a state of affairs came to be: in cities, and replicated in international contexts precisely along those lines that Marx (and, increasingly, late in the essay) Engels laid out. For the uninitiated, this is world-expanding.

The subsequent essays append the thinking of the long beginning by providing a selection of essays Davis contributed in recent years to *New Left Review*. Taking up less than a quarter of the book, the expanded essays are a nonetheless welcome addition to the book in the sense that they extend and twist the notions of class consciousness of the opening. In "Marx's Lost Theory," for example, Davis orients his attention to Erica Benner's excavation of nationalism in Marx's work by orienting our gaze on how class-based struggles at various levels advance social interests. Though the book makes no mention of Trump's rise (likely because of the timeline of production) it is all the same impossible to ignore the current U.S. president's shadow looming over such a debate, and will no doubt lead to productive in-roads toward revising our sense of the false (or secondary) class conscious that is populism. To the degree that the U.S. and other countries are experiencing a rousing of certain action-oriented anxieties in Trump's rise, clothed in the nationalist rhetoric of "Make America Great Again," how can such consciousness be re-oriented toward actually existing and wholly central class-based issues such as wage stagnation, inflation, and the nationalism embedded in trade wars based on punitive tariffs? In "The Coming Desert," Davis recovers Kropotkin's polymathic work on aridity in greater Asia that had been coopted by early formal geographers as evidence of life on Mars and—sadly less bizarrely—the basis for racist theories of civilization decline, effectively trivializing what is a forgotten trove of place-based thinking on social realities. Kropotkin's prescient (and ultimately insistently accurate) work on Asian climate change and continental desertification makes for more than a convenient way for Davis to tarry with the Anthropocene—fashionable as the term is within some academic circles as a cure-all for cultural studies. Instead, he reminds us yet again of the costs of not getting things right, and the degree to which such misappropriations effect the stagnation of class consciousness.

The final essay, though, brings the book's purposes into sharpest focus. In "Who Will Build the Ark?" Davis returns to the kind of overtly ecological Marxist eschatology that seems to have driven much of his inquiry for the past few years. To the degree that class consciousness has been diminished by capital's immediate and most intense subsumption of labor, is there reason to hope for the future? Davis's response in the ark metaphor is appropriately grim yet affirming, as ark-based mythologies necessarily kill off the wicked by drowning them in order to save the righteous and allow them to propagate. In Davis's case, we drown in resource overuse. It is also—perhaps not unsurprisingly to those who know his work well—a geographic response in which Davis all the same finds some reason for hope. In the essay as well as elsewhere in the book, Davis continually asserts the spatial relations of labor to consciousness. Throughout Marx and in some of his commentators, he finds the specific energetic quota for labor's resistance to capitalism is met in moments were populations reach peak immiseration, and are (because of their close proximity to one another in cities) made hyperaware of collective woe. There are reasons, in other words, that the center of his long essay in the book pivots on the 15 theses in the sections "The Industrial City" and "Proletarian Culture," about the ways that cities have produced the cruciblic conditions for the development of radical consciousness. For him, the right to cities and the conjunctural realities of shared spaces of concern are the necessary prerequisite to developing the class consciousness he has set out as his project. That particular right, too, is tied to a specific form of environmental apocalypticism that returns the reader to

what has been in its own way the book's all-along jeremiad. Fallen as we all are from our collective power, Davis warns against the stakes of our not unifying our thinking. After tracking some of the most pressing issues spurring on environmental-social collapse—increasing (rather than decreasing) reliance on coal for energy, a certifiable recession on green economic growth across global markets, and the disproportionately ill effects of climate change on the global poor—Davis makes an altogether surprising turn to optimism, back to the messianic impulse. “Only a return to explicitly utopian thinking,” Davis concludes, “can clarify the minimal conditions for the preservation of human solidarity in the face of convergent planetary crises” (221). Those minimum conditions are most assuredly to be found within the writings of Marx and his commentators, as collective consciousness provides the basis for understanding not only the overthrow of capitalism's regime but also the empathic vision of shared need at this juncture in history.

So what began with a conversion narrative ends with the exhortation of one who has been deep in the struggle, seen its worsening conditions, but not lost faith. In this way, it's through old-fashioned, reasoned-but-yet-prophetic sense of class consciousness, gleaned by attending to primary texts, and especially Marx himself, that the precariat can find their way through to liberation from the processes of capitalist oppression. The work, in other words, should always start with *Die Werke*. While one might be right to have their own informed doubts about the role of the city as such within this expression of collective will, it's nonetheless Davis's ardent sense of optimism that infuses the book with enough energy to propel the inquisitive and self-directed young revolutionary to find a starting point for. In this way, “Read Marx!” as he himself now enjoins his reader to do is not everything, but it's the main thing out of which revolutionary consciousness nonetheless still flows.

¹ It is worth noting, too, that Davis also has intact his long-standing skepticism of theory-as-such, which he chides as “obscurantist” (xiii). Perhaps unsurprising coming from someone who has such strong journalistic tendencies, one would still do well to see the extent to which a structural understanding of class consciousness has functioned and could function in the future—both activist and intellectual. I do not, by any means, assert a hard division (or, worse, value judgment) between structural modes of understanding and those informed by his supposed obscurantist foils. To be fair, Davis implies such a judgment in his back-to-basics approach, but he doesn't push this angle beyond this one moment.

² Indeed, in one thesis, Davis notes that “patriarchy was the true Achilles' heel of the labor movement” (51), then as now it would seem. Some socialist thinkers are notably absent: fellow geographer David Harvey's MIA status, for example, is striking.

³ It's perhaps no mistake that Verso has clad Davis's book, under its messianically white dust jacket, in red not in its usual way of signaling radical content, but because it has the power to become the emerging Marxist's new Little Red Book that advances a useful, accessible reading of Marx and his descendant thinkers.